



# Academic Conversations: Classroom Talk that Fosters Critical Thinking and Content Understandings

*Jeff Zwiers*

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Where would we be without conversation? Throughout history, conversations have allowed us to see different perspectives, build ideas, and solve problems. Conversations, particularly those referred to in this book as academic conversations, push students to think and learn in lasting ways. Academic conversations are back-and-forth dialogues in which students focus on a topic and explore it by building, challenging, and negotiating relevant ideas.

Unfortunately, academic conversations are rare in many classrooms. Talk is often dominated by the teacher and a few students, or it does not advance beyond short responses to the teacher's questions. Even certain teaching approaches and curriculum programs neglect to train students how to maintain a focused, respectful, and thoughtful conversation.

To address these challenges, authors Jeff Zwiers and Marie Crawford have identified five core communication skills to help students hold productive academic conversations across content areas. These skills include: elaborating and clarifying, supporting ideas with evidence, building on and/or challenging ideas, paraphrasing, and synthesizing. This book shows teachers how to weave the cultivation of academic conversation skills and conversations into current teaching approaches. More specifically, it describes how to use conversations to build the following:

- Academic vocabulary and grammar
- Critical thinking skills such as persuasion, interpretation, consideration of multiple perspectives, evaluation, and application
- Literacy skills such as questioning, predicting, connecting to prior knowledge, and summarizing
- Complex and abstract essential understandings in content areas such as adaptation, human nature, bias, conservation of mass, energy, gravity, irony, democracy, greed, and more
- An academic classroom environment brimming with respect for others' ideas, equity of voice, engagement, and mutual support

The ideas in this book stem from many hours of classroom practice, research, and video analysis across grade levels and content areas. Readers will find numerous practical activities for working on each conversation skill, crafting conversation-worthy tasks, and using conversations to teach and assess. *Academic Conversations* offers an in-depth approach to helping students develop into the future parents, teachers, and leaders who will collaborate to build a better world.

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