Classroom Discourse: An Essential Component in Building a Classroom Community

Malinda Hoskins Lloyd, Nancy J. Kolodziej, and Kathy M. Brashears

Abstract

Based on findings from a recent qualitative study utilizing grounded theory methodology, in this essay, the authors focus on the building of community within the classroom by emphasizing classroom discourse as an essential component of instruction in exemplary teachers' classrooms. The authors then provide insights as to how to encourage and support classroom community through discourse, defined as a written or spoken representation of one's knowledge. Specifically, the authors present a progressive approach—the *Facilitate–Listen–Engage* (FLE) model—designed to create a discourse-intensive community of learners. In this model, which can be applied to multiple content areas and across various grade levels, the teacher, serving as the *Facilitator,* intentionally plans lessons, engaging students in discourse. Classroom members then participate in the *Listen* phase in which teacher and students cohesively exchange information through bidirectional communication. In the *Engage* phase, the teacher purposefully provides opportunities for students to engage in rich discussions which stimulate the development of community. Ultimately, this progressive framework is designed to establish a sense of belonging for all students while actively engaging them in the learning process, forging the idea that every member of the classroom is valued. Finally, the authors describe three instructional strategies for promoting classroom discourse, supporting practitioners as they translate theory into practice.

Key Words: classroom discourse, student engagement, active learning, community of learners, teacher as facilitator, facilitate–listen–engage, dialogue

Introduction

Grasping copies of the book, *Across Five Aprils*, a fifth grade teacher and six of her students gather at a round table in the back of the classroom. Responding to the teacher's utterance, "Are these not the most exciting two chapters? Tell me in your own words what happened!," a student says, "My favorite part was…" to which the teacher responds, "Hah! Why was that important?" Without further teacher prompting, other students add to the conversation, looking intently at one another as they acknowledge and expand on each other's comments. At one point the teacher interjects, "What events happened before this that led you to believe this would be the outcome?" Again, without additional teacher direction, the students converse on topic. Listening intently, the teacher comments, "I would never have dreamed that he would get a letter back! I was shocked. Were you?" Repeatedly, each student, independent of the teacher, contributes to the lively conversation.

The vignette described above was captured in the field notes and observational data of a recent qualitative study (Lloyd, 2016). While observing multiple teachers during literacy instruction in exemplary schools, researchers noted several commonalities among the teachers' practices, including creating a community of respectfulness and the extensive engagement of students in classroom discourse. In these well-established learning communities, student discourse, resulting from careful planning and teacher talk, was a part of the classroom culture in which teachers clearly welcomed student opinions and questions and valued a conversation-like approach to classroom dialogue. According to Kent and Simpson (2012), a benefit of such an approach is the opportunity it provides teachers to better understand their students; in fact, they suggest that "allowing students time to discuss, analyze, and reflect on the reading in small groups or pairs...is a great way to facilitate community" (p. 30). Structuring the class to support these rich conversations or community-building activities also helps promote a sense of belonging within the classroom (Chakraborty & Stone, 2010). In these supportive environments, teachers can purposefully promote independent thinking and self-efficacy among their students.

Haney, Thomas, and Vaughn (2011) discuss the complex process of building community within the classroom; we echo their statements by urging teachers to create classroom dialogue and develop communities in which students can "see themselves in others" (p. 55). Additionally, Haney et al. advocate that building classroom community "fosters belonging rather than isolation" (pp.

56–57). Teachers interested in orchestrating classroom discourse may benefit from implementing thoughtful directives and questions such as those shown in Figure 1.

Directives	Questions
• Think (about the topic or question)-Pair (with your neighbor to discuss)-Share (as a whole class)	• What are your thoughts about…?
• Turn and talk to your neighbor about...	• Where would you like to start your explanation about…?
• Pair up with someone by sitting knee-to-knee or shoulder-to-shoulder to discuss…	• How could you add on to what _____ said?
• Find someone in the room who agrees/disagrees with you about…	• Do you agree or disagree with what _____ said? Why?
	• How could we change the conversation by sharing a different view about…?

Figure 1. Directives and Questions to Promote Classroom Discourse. This figure presents examples of directives and questions that facilitate discourse.

Discourse Defined Within the Context of Classroom Community

As defined by Van de Walle, Karp, Lovin, and Bay-Williams (2014), classroom discourse includes "the interactions between all the participants that occur throughout a lesson" (p. 20). Gonzalez (2008) further defines classroom discourse as an essential component of learning that includes teacher–student interactions as well as student–student interactions. Because a healthy exchange of ideas may include opposing viewpoints, it is necessary to create a classroom community that is inclusive and supportive of all its members (Sanchez, 2008). Booker (2008) suggests that this type of supportive environment is reciprocal in nature: "when students are allowed to voice opinions, collaborate…they have more positive views of the class environment" (p. 13).

Although classroom discourse may include students' representations of knowledge through both written and oral forms, for the scope of this article, we will focus on *oral* discourse, also known as dialogue, in the spirit of fostering a sense of community within the classroom.

Approaches to Discourse

Rather than promoting interactive, student-to-student discourse, teachers often use a traditional approach known as the *Initiate–Respond–Evaluate* (IRE)

model (Gonzalez, 2008; Moss & Brookhart, 2009). In IRE interactions, the teacher dominates classroom discussion by determining the topic of discussion, leading the conversation, initiating questions, and providing evaluative feedback to student responses. In this traditional structure of classroom discourse, teachers routinely implement a rapid firing of questions one right after another without providing adequate time for responses or conversation (Moss & Brookhart, 2009). In addition, McElhone (2013) asserts, "For decades, researchers and teachers have known that IRE recitation does not effectively engage students or promote dialogue…but these patterns of talk persist in many classrooms, perhaps because teachers have trouble envisioning and enacting alternatives" (p. 12). Further, because of the teacher's dominant role in leading and guiding the discussion, the traditional IRE model perpetuates teacher-dictated communication. With this assertion in mind, the vignette at the beginning of this paper captures a significant change in regards to a more progressive discourse approach.

The Facilitate-Listen-Engage (FLE) Model

"Although life in the classroom is a social experience, it does not necessarily constitute a community" (Meltzoff, 1994, p. 260). The preceding quote supports the call for enacting an approach more conducive to establishing community in the classroom through discourse. King (1997) advocates for creating "mutual enterprises" (p. 68) to encourage the sense of belonging for a community of learners. Haney et al. (2011) propose the notion of a healthy school culture prompted by "continuous dialogue conducted on mutually constructed ground" (p. 57). Further, Meltzoff (1994) characterizes communication and responsiveness as quintessential components of a classroom community. Based on a study on parental involvement, Bennett-Conroy (2012) asserted that the quality of homework assignments as well as the frequency of completing the assignments significantly increased as a result of at least five minutes of bidirectional conversations with parents. This bidirectional model sets the stage for establishing teacher–student and student–student dialogue as well, thus allowing students to become equal and active participants with their teachers and peers as opposed to a more vertical approach in which students are passive participants who only receive information. Additionally, we echo Haney et al.'s call for establishing a sense of connectedness among students as opposed to having some students remain invisible in the classroom, highlighting "the group's collective mission to learn, grow, and appreciate each other" (p. 69).

In addition, we encourage the enrichment of students' personal competencies within the context of a school culture (Redding, 2014). These competencies

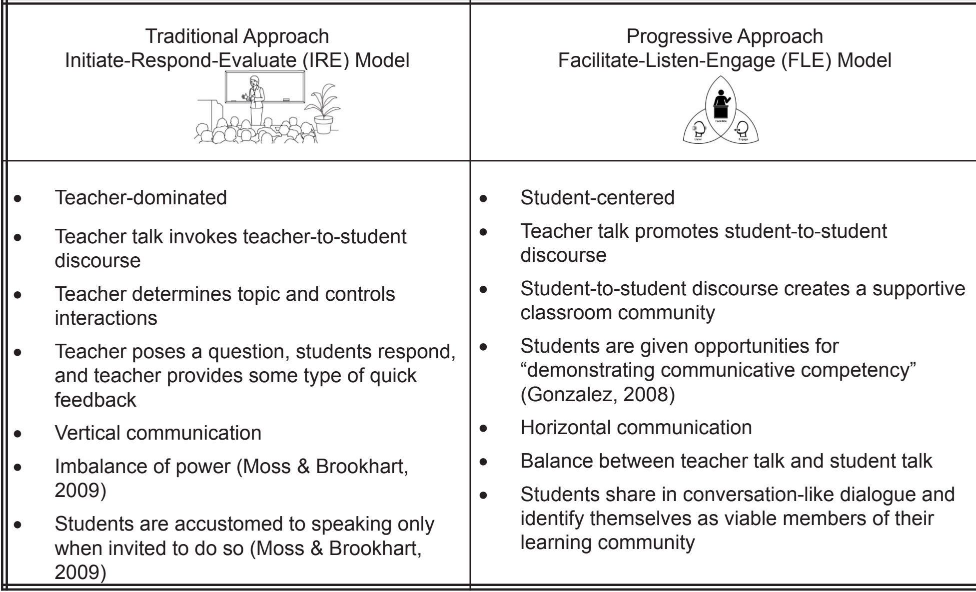
can be enhanced by expanding on a student's potential to grow as a learner and by viewing this Personal Competency Framework as described by Redding (2014) as part of the academic curriculum. Particularly, we emphasize the value of the metacognitive competency through which students think about their thinking and independently apply learning strategies to self-regulate or monitor their learning. With respect to the academic curriculum, Redding argues that self-regulation—viewed as a tool that can be taught, learned, and practiced—is a component of metacognition which can boost the learning process.

As a result, we propose teachers deviate from the traditional *Initiate–Respond–Evaluate* (IRE) model and implement an innovative framework for establishing classroom discourse, the *Facilitate–Listen–Engage* (FLE) model. Imagine the teacher's role in this model as representative of "horizontal communication" as opposed to "vertical communication." For example, using the analogy of horizontal communication, envision a level horizontal plane with speakers, namely the teacher and students, conversing as equal contributors in a cohesive dialogue, independent in their thinking and contributions. In contrast, the traditional IRE model perpetuates vertical communication highlighted by the students' submissive and passive role in classroom dialogue. In our proposed FLE model, the teacher and student engage in a reciprocal exchange of information.

Contrary to the traditional IRE model, the FLE model places students parallel to the teacher, creating a context for a reciprocal exchange of information. Additionally, the members of the classroom community learn to value each others' voices and become active receivers and sharers of new knowledge (Meltzoff, 1994). Although in the next sections we present the FLE model as three separate entities, the Facilitate, Listen, and Engage phases are more cyclical and recursive in nature as the teacher, acting as facilitator, promotes horizontal discourse through these seamlessly interwoven stages. The following quote sets the stage for an approach to classroom discourse which places the learner at the forefront:

> A student's capacity to learn grows naturally through the experience of schooling, just as a rogue stalk of corn will sprout from an unattended seed, stretching toward the sun. Like a plant that is watered and nurtured, however, a student's capacity to learn will burst forth when teachers feed its roots (Redding, 2014, p. 9).

See Figure 2 for a comparison of the traditional approach versus the more progressive approach to classroom discourse.



Traditional Approach Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) Model	Progressive Approach Facilitate-Listen-Engage (FLE) Model
• Teacher-dominated • Teacher talk invokes teacher-to-student discourse • Teacher determines topic and controls interactions • Teacher poses a question, students respond, and teacher provides some type of quick feedback • Vertical communication • Imbalance of power (Moss & Brookhart, 2009) • Students are accustomed to speaking only when invited to do so (Moss & Brookhart, 2009)	• Student-centered • Teacher talk promotes student-to-student discourse • Student-to-student discourse creates a supportive classroom community • Students are given opportunities for "demonstrating communicative competency" (Gonzalez, 2008) • Horizontal communication • Balance between teacher talk and student talk • Students share in conversation-like dialogue and identify themselves as viable members of their learning community

Figure 2. A Comparison of Approaches to Classroom Discourse. This figure compares the IRE model to the FLE model.

Facilitate

The first phase of the FLE model is the Facilitate phase in which the teacher lays the foundation for enacting the Listen and Engage phases. In the Facilitate phase, the teacher veers from the role of a "conduit of information" (Meltzoff, 1994, p. 259) and assumes the position of a community builder. Specifically, the teacher plans strategies and questions with the clear intention of engaging students in discourse and creating a sense of community within the classroom. In this context, the teacher creates groups of learners which are nonexclusive and have characteristics of an egalitarian society (King, 1997). Teachers model for the students and provide opportunities to develop relational skills, which will be used in public sectors later in life. In essence, as suggested by Meltzoff, the teacher acts as a tour guide leading students through an interactive process of learning. Acting as the facilitator throughout each phase of the FLE model, the teacher, through reflection and careful construction of lessons, plans literacy instruction that purposely engages students in topic-related conversations. See Figure 3 for recommendations for implementing the Facilitate phase.

1. Add a section to your lesson plan format that specifically and intentionally plans for classroom discourse.
2. Begin planning for classroom discourse by first reflecting on a lesson you have recently taught. In this lesson plan, highlight specific points at which time you could allow students to engage in discourse.
3. Construct opportunities for classroom discourse that allow students to demonstrate mastery of the lesson's objectives. For example, the teacher might direct students to turn and talk to a neighbor, to "Think-Pair-Share," or to sit knee-to-knee with a classmate to discuss a topic.
4. Understand that discourse does not have to consume extensive amounts of your lesson. Discourse can occur in momentary spurts.

Figure 3. Recommendations for Implementing the Facilitate Phase of the FLE Model. This figure provides recommended starting points for the teacher to implement the Facilitate phase of the FLE Model.

Listen

During the Listen phase of the FLE model, the teacher and the students are committed to listening to each others' comments. As quoted by Bryant H. McGill, "One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say" (2014, para. 1). By creating a community of learners who listen to others, the teacher, a coparticipant, establishes an expectation of respect within the classroom. The teacher's role as listener provides the opportunity for formative assessment as students explain their thoughts, reason critically, justify responses, and "argue" with peers. As teachers actively listen to students' conversations, they establish a sense of shared "voice of authority" (Cazden & Beck, 2003, p. 180).

In addition, while listening, students develop a "dynamic understanding that is collaboratively constructed in discussion among students" (Cazden & Beck, 2003, p. 165). Using a balance scale to illustrate, the teacher and students are equal participants in classroom discourse, with each representing equal "weights" in terms of classroom dialogue. In other words, in both teacher–student and student–student discourse, the participants (teacher and/or students) naturally serve as both speakers and listeners.

Engage

The third phase of the FLE model, which occurs concurrently with the Listen phase, is Engage. Much like Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) assertion that "writing is thinking" (p. 967), engaging in conversation is also a

way students can demonstrate thinking. In fact, engaging in dialogue provides students with opportunities to communicate, giving voice to their thought processes and showing respect for the opinions of others. In regards to a given concept or topic, Moss and Brookhart (2009) further assert that engaging in dialogue, rather than thinking in isolation, helps students assess their own understanding. Students learn by engaging in more authentic tasks, including speaking and listening, which parallel those needed by productive citizens in a global community (Meltzoff, 1994). The Engage phase highlights these benefits of teacher–student and student–student interactions and is an integral part of the recursive FLE model (see Figure 4).

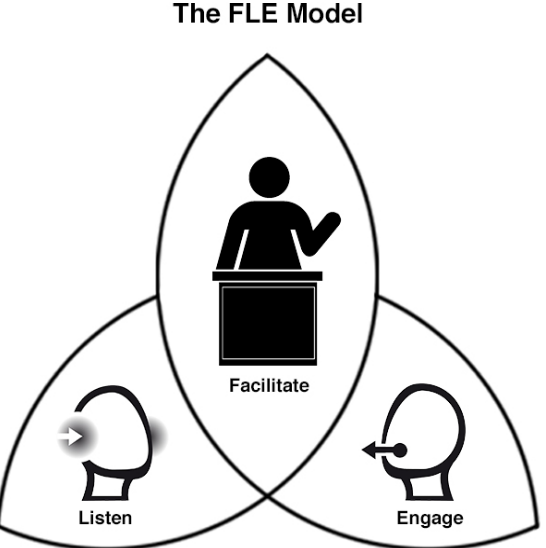


Figure 4. The Facilitate–Listen–Engage (FLE) Model. This figure illustrates the role of the teacher as the facilitator and represents the horizontal communication established throughout the FLE Model.

Community-Building Strategies for Promoting Discourse

Meltzoff (1994) characterizes the role of the teacher as one who skillfully weaves teaching and learning, creates an interconnectedness among lesson concepts, and guides students in developing rich relationships within the classroom. In addition, teaching should be a bidirectional process between students and teachers. While engaging students in discourse, it is imperative for teachers to acknowledge individual differences of students while creating an interconnectedness within the classroom. To do this, we share the following three strategies as practical implementation of the FLE Model and as a way of

promoting community and discourse in the classroom—Inner–Outer Circle, Numbered Heads Together, and Discussion Webs.

Inner–Outer Circle

Inner–Outer Circle is a highly versatile discourse strategy that can be a segment of a planned lesson or that can be spontaneously implemented at any point in a lesson. To facilitate the Inner–Outer Circle activity, direct your students to count off by saying "1, 2, 1, 2," and so on, with the "1s" representing the inner-circle members, and the "2s" representing the outer-circle members. Instruct the 1s to create a circle, with all students facing outward from the circle (see Figure 5). Next, direct the 2s to create another circle outside the first with each student facing an inner-circle member. Pose a question or topic for discussion and provide ample time for students to engage in active discussion. Next, while the inner-circle members remain in their places, have the outer-circle members rotate the circle counterclockwise so that each person will be standing across from a new inner-circle member. Either direct the students to discuss the same prompt or pose a new prompt for discussion.

Inner–Outer Circle promotes active discussion in a secure, one-on-one setting within the classroom community, allowing students to leave their seats and engage in discourse with their peers. Its versatility allows it to be used as an introduction to a new topic, a question-and-answer session, or a review for a lesson or unit. Inner–Outer Circle is an easily implemented strategy and is beneficial as an impromptu activity during those moments when students appear lethargic or hesitant to respond in a whole-class setting.

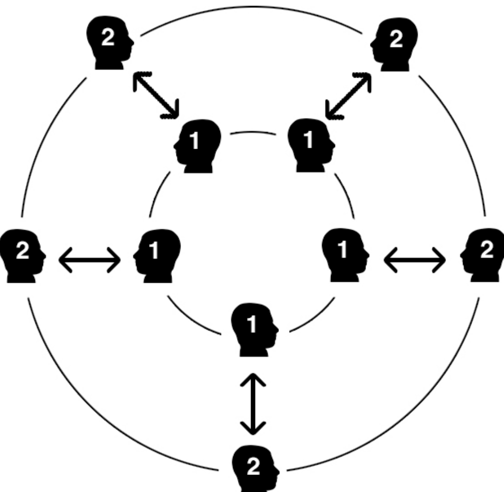


Figure 5. Inner–Outer Circle Formation. This figure illustrates the arrangement of students during the Inner–Outer Circle strategy with "1s" forming the inner circle and "2s" forming the outer circle.

Numbered Heads Together

Numbered Heads Together (NHT) holds all students accountable for responding to a given question or prompt, promoting active student-to-student discourse. Researchers (Maheady, Michielli-Pendl, Mallette, & Harper, 2002) found that an average of 98% of students responded to questions posed using the NHT strategy as compared to 15% of students that replied to whole-class, teacher-led questioning. The teacher acts as the facilitator by preplanning questions and/or prompts for NHT, setting the stage for students to engage in meaningful discourse.

To facilitate the NHT strategy, cluster students into groups of four. Then, assign each student in the group a number from one to four (see Figure 6). Tell students that all group members must put their "heads together" to engage in a discussion about the question, listen to their peers, decide upon the best answer, and verify that each group member is prepared to respond. Present the entire class with the question, and then give adequate time to discuss the response. Next, randomly call on one of the numbers, directing students who were assigned this number to raise their hands. Call on each of these students to respond to the question until a complete and sufficient response is obtained. To maintain an atmosphere of fairness, use a randomization method to choose the numbers, such as pulling popsicle sticks with numbers 1 through 4 written on them or by using a random-number generator app. For example, if the teacher draws the number 2, all students who were a 2 should respond to the question. During the Numbered Heads Together strategy, be sure to vary the numbers so all students have a chance to respond.

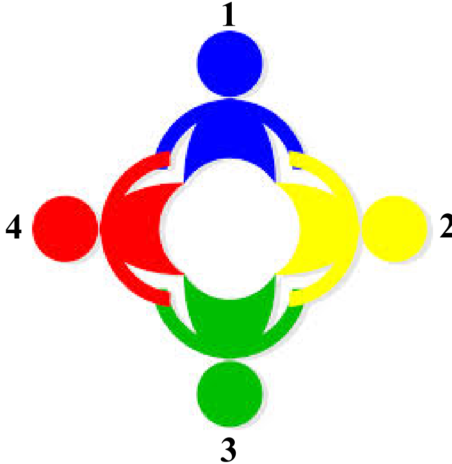


Figure 6. The Numbered Heads Together (NHT) Strategy. This figure represents student roles during teacher-facilitated discussions, with each student being assigned a number and being accountable for participating in the discussions.

Discussion Webs

Discussion Webs are ideal for facilitating opinion-oriented discussions. The graphic organizer in Figure 7 is an example of a Discussion Web activity in which students reflect on a question, discuss opinions with partners, and then present their ideas to the class. For example, after reading the book *Hey, Little Ant* (Hoose, Hoose, & Tilley, 1998), students use this organizer to facilitate discourse and engage in higher level thinking to answer questions from the perspectives of both main characters—the little boy who was going to "squish" the ant and the little boy who pleaded for his life. As advocated in the Common Core State Standards, Discussion Webs promote critical thinking and provide a structure for students to "evaluate others' points of view critically and constructively" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 7).

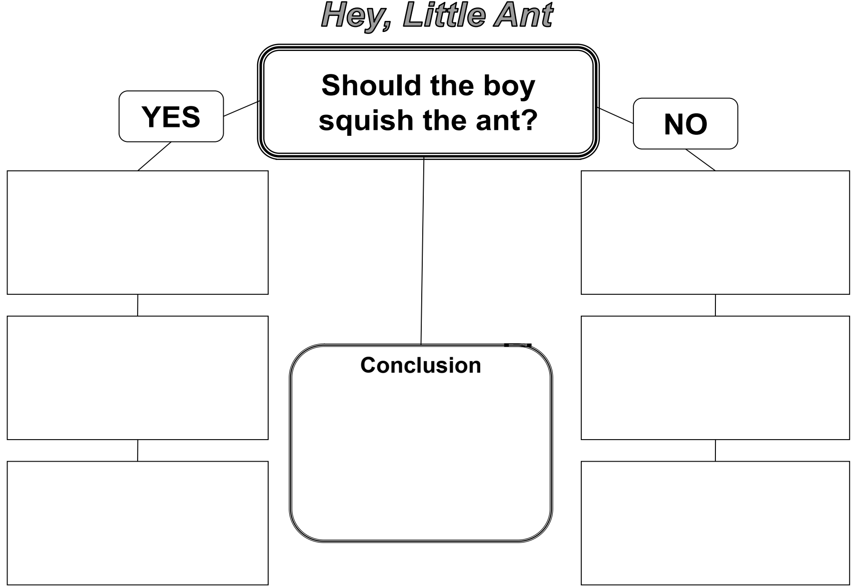


Figure 7. Discussion Web Graphic Organizer. This graphic organizer is a student handout that is used to facilitate the Discussion Web strategy.

To begin the Discussion Web strategy, direct students to independently write their responses in at least one of the "Yes" or "No" boxes on the web. Then, place students with a partner and direct them to fill in as many of the "Yes" and "No" boxes as possible, discussing rationale for both sides of the argument, regardless of their personal stances. Tell the students to discuss, rather than simply read, their responses. Next, combine pairs of students to form groups of four students, and prompt each group to discuss their ideas, adding peers' information to their webs. Afterwards, engage students in a whole-class discussion

about the responses on their webs. Finally, provide a few minutes for students to independently reflect on the input of their peers and write a personal conclusion on their webs. The Discussion Web strategy can culminate at this point, or the completed webs can be used as a basis for a variety of follow-up activities, including a debate, television or radio advertisement, or written response.

Closing Thoughts for Achieving Classroom Community Through Discourse

Without question, the FLE model provides a sound framework for teachers to consider as they establish a classroom environment conducive to student discourse and rich in community. The importance of planning for effective classroom discourse is, perhaps, best highlighted by Gonzalez (2008): "Oral communication is…the single most important vehicle of interaction between teacher and students, as well as among students. It is also the principal way through which learning is demonstrated" (p. 139). Pohan (2003) asserts teacher educators should abandon traditional approaches and strive for community-rich classrooms that equip youth "with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for effective and productive participation in an increasingly diverse society" (p. 370). To scaffold this endeavor, we encourage the implementation of the FLE components—Facilitate, Listen, and Engage. We have identified and described three strategies—Inner–Outer Circle, Numbered Heads Together, and Discussion Webs—that can be utilized with the FLE model, thus promoting rich and thoughtful communicative competency in students.

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