We have all hopefully experienced the exhilaration of designing and delivering instruction which engages learners and results in significant, in-depth learning. Participating in such engagement, perhaps, is the goal motivating most of us in classroom teaching. It is, however, neither accomplished easily, nor consistently. Engagement in learning requires a combination of skilled and artful orchestration of certain qualities of teaching and classroom management. This Bulletin examines these characteristics of oral engagement in the form of an instructional strategy called Instructional Conversations. There are conversational, as well as instructional characteristics of this strategy.

CONVERSATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS
1. A challenging but non-threatening atmosphere.
   Learning must be challenging, yet occur in a positive, affective environment. Ideally, the goal is not to pose "known answer" questions, but to engage in inquiry, in which the teacher is a collaborator in the discussion, in an atmosphere of negotiation centered around meaning.
2. Responsivity to student contribution.
   Consistent, specific attention to students' background knowledge underlies teacher's efforts at recasting and expanding upon what is being taught and learned. Rather than neglecting students' efforts in favor of strictly pursuing a curriculum agenda, the teacher incorporates student knowledge along with new content.
3. Promotion of discussion.
   Discussion is based on open-ended questions, for which there may be more than one answer or more than one perspective. Students are allowed the risk-free opportunity to explore different perspectives in these discussions in a risk-free environment.
   There are multiple, interactive, connected turns building upon each other. There is active listening and speaking taking place, guided by the teacher's focus and lesson goals made known to all students.
5. General participation, including self-
The teacher allows for participation through varying group arrangements, volunteered responses, and participation by everyone.

**INSTRUCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS**

1. **Thematic focus.**
   
   The entry point for discussion is a theme or idea that is meaningful to students. The teacher orchestrates greater understanding of the theme through exploration of different chunks of information in the discussion.

2. **Activation of background knowledge.**
   
   A “hook” into a student’s background knowledge relevant to the development of a theme is the key to bridging familiar knowledge with new learning. In this process, the teacher provides appropriate clarifying information, such as new vocabulary terms and paraphrasing so that knowledge can be presented in a variety of ways.

3. **Direct teaching.**
   
   When applicable and appropriate, the teacher provides direct teaching in the context of comprehending the larger lesson. In addition, the teacher knows when not to deliver direct instruction and to allow for more constructive, independent or collaborative problem-solving.

4. **Promoting more complex language and expression.**
   
   Questions, restatements, pauses, and invitations to expand responses are techniques for promoting more complex language. Modeling by the teacher is also an important technique. In effect, the teacher is strategic in moving along discussion without inhibiting student contributions.

5. **Promoting students’ ability to support statements, hypotheses, and conclusions.**
   
   The teacher promotes students’ use of text, pictures, and reasoning to support an argument, develop a hypothesis, or derive a conclusion.

**WHAT IT’S ALL ABOUT: ESTABLISHING FLOW TO ENHANCE MEANING**

Meaning is at the heart of engagement in learning. "Flow" is the term used to describe this dynamic. It requires "engagement on the part of the student that involves searching, evaluating, constructing, creating, or organizing some kind of learning material into new or better ideas, memories, skills, values, feelings, understandings, solutions, or decisions."

Instructional conversations can promote "flow" in the following ways:

1. **Use of metaphors and stories to deepen relevance and meaning.**
   
   Stories and metaphors tap into a universal tendency to relate to narrative and to encapsulate wisdom with attention-getting provocative human interest themes in any content area. They are wonderful "hooks" through which students can begin deeper level associations and construct more complex use of language.

2. **Use of thought-provoking questions and critical thinking.**
   
   There is a general tedium in responding only to closed (yes/no) questions. Engagement involves being cognitively challenged through comprehensible, meaningful questions related to students’ lives in an environment conducive to exploration.

3. **Use of relevant problems, case studies, simulations, and imagination to enhance meaning.**
   
   These are examples of applications of content to real-life issues or creative applications. They connect content with reality, preparing students for the world outside the classroom.

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Positive engagement in learning through Instructional Conversations is one useful way to meaningfully engage students.

**SOURCES:**
