

Can't They Get Quiet?: Student Talking Issues

By Emma McDonald

Nothing is more frustrating than to have a beautiful lesson planned, one that you know students will eat up, only to have them talk throughout the whole thing. Why do I even try?, you may wonder. Why can't they just be quiet?

Student talking is a huge issue for most teachers, but it is one that you can control if handled properly. There are several elements you need to consider when trying to curb student talking.

1. Talking is natural

For the majority of human beings, communicating with others is vital. It keeps us in touch and connected with those around us. Talking helps us get to know and understand other people. It also helps us express our thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

Think about the last teacher in-service you attended. As soon as the presenter offered a neat idea or unique thought, what did almost every teacher in the room do? They most likely turned to their neighbor and started whispering. Why? As soon as an idea catches our attention, we immediately want to talk about it and share our thoughts on the subject with others.

Talking is a way for us to not only share our ideas with other people, but it is also a way to formulate and organize thoughts. Research done with small children shows that youngsters who are constantly talking are also constantly thinking. Because young children cannot control their thought and speech patterns, the two are very closely connected. Therefore, a chatty class of 3-5 year olds should be welcomed as a sign that everyone is using their brains.

So, perhaps your lesson is captivating their interest after all and the talking is a result of students thinking about the issues you are presenting. This certainly can be one way to look at it. As a workshop presenter, I schedule talking pauses after important concepts are introduced. This allows the participants, whether they be students or teachers, to discuss their thoughts on the topic with a neighbor or with the other people at their table. I don't just stop teaching, but instead say something such as, "Now I'd like you to turn to a friend or neighbor and discuss what I just presented to you. Write down any new thoughts and ideas you generate so that you won't forget them later." Then I give everyone several minutes to talk while I walk around listening and monitoring the individual discussions.

2. Students are bored

Have you ever noticed that when you are not interested in something your attention tends to wander? As teachers, this can result in grading papers, planning units or lessons, or filling out paperwork during in-services or meetings. Our students don't have nearly the responsibilities that we do, so they naturally turn to talking about subjects that do interest them.

Keeping student interest is an important way to curb talking. If your students are conversing during a lesson, take a moment to consider why. Are they talking because they are interested or because they are bored? If your students are bored, you need to stop what you are doing and surprise them. For example, one year I was teaching a lesson to a group of 8th graders on sentence elements. I had attempted to make it as interesting as I could, but after the fifth time of asking students to stop talking, I realized that I had not captured their attention at all. So, I stopped in the middle of a sentence, faced the board and wrote a couple of gibberish sentences on the board. I mixed up the nouns, verbs, adjectives, left out punctuation, and used capital letters in various places within words. Then I announced to the class that these were the directions to their class assignment. All assignments were do at the end of class. Everyone who turned in the assignment would get an automatic "A" and everyone who did not would get an "F". The I said, "Get started. You have 20 minutes left."

You can imagine the shock on their faces. The classroom exploded in noise, and I let them. They were talking about the instructions on the board. Many complained loudly, a few took out pieces of paper, and some raised their hands to ask me further questions. I let the class go like this for a couple of minutes before I used my quiet signal. "What is the problem?" I asked them. "The assignment is on the board for everyone to see." "But Mrs. McDonald, we can't understand it," someone said aloud. "What do you mean? I wrote it out didn't I?" "But you didn't write it so that we can read it." We went on like this for a while with me asking them questions of "Why not and what do you mean" until they finally realized that the stuff I was teaching them about sentences was important after all. We unscrambled the sentences together, which took the rest of the class period, and I gave the assignment as homework. I took my boring lesson, threw it out the window and taught on the spur of the moment. Sometimes we need to do the unexpected to capture our student's attention.

3. Consider your attitude about talking

A teacher who demands absolute silence is one who is asking for disaster. The more you require silence, the less they will actually quiet down. Take a moment to think about the times when you absolutely expect students to be quiet and attentive. To me, direct instruction, giving directions, or addressing the class for whatever reason are the most important times for quiet. Therefore, I try to schedule times throughout the class period or day for students to talk. It is important to explain to the class ahead of time that they will be given an opportunity to talk. This makes it a give and take situation for you and your students. At this point talking is now a privilege you offer to your students and it can be taken away if it is abused.

Talking in class is just like anything else. The more you deny something, the more a person wants it. The more you deny talking, the more they will want to talk. If you give them times to talk, then they won't want it as much. You'll find that even during the "okay" talking times, your class is much more quiet than it ever was before.