

Chapter 15

The 4Cs of Academic Language and Literacy: Facilitating Structured Discussions in Remote Classrooms

Salika A. Lawrence

The College of New Jersey, USA

Tiffany Labissiere

Literacy Network, USA

Monique C. Stone

Literacy Network, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how teachers have used structured discussions and digital tools to transition from traditional classrooms to remote, online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. With emphasis on culturally and linguistically diverse students, the chapter includes examples of how teachers reinforce literacy while supporting 21st century skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity. Tools and strategies are presented along with examples teachers can use to facilitate student learning across content areas in virtual classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

The P21 Framework for twenty-first century learning indicates that students are expected to demonstrate creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving, communication, and collaboration (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009; Thoughtful Learning, 2021). These practices suggest that students should demonstrate learning, literacy, and life skills (Thoughtful Learning, 2021) needed to navigate the information-rich environment we live in today. Twenty-first century skills enable students to use

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7222-1.ch015

their background content knowledge and skills to engage in real-world experiences that prepare them to work in a global, technologically driven economy (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). However, many students from underrepresented groups including economically-disadvantaged and some second language learners (Johnson, 2009), face challenges when working with content area texts because these texts use unfamiliar “language patterns that differ from the more everyday ways of using language” (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010, p. 588). Transitioning to remote learning can magnify linguistic differences that pose academic barriers particularly for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

With the shift to remote learning caused by worldwide lockdowns prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have had to rethink how they teach and engage students virtually. Prior to the pandemic, some challenges teachers may have faced when using student-centered classroom discussions include, ensuring there was shared space for all students to engage (quiet vs. students who don’t talk back), keeping the discussion focused, making sure students are prepared for the discussion, finding time within the traditional middle and high school 45 minute classroom period for discussion and negotiating the importance of talk given the demands of high stakes assessment outcomes such as performance on interim and final standardized tests. In addition, for some teachers no matter how effective their classroom management, the admonitions to students, or classroom structures and procedures they put in place, students were going to find ways to communicate with each other about topics outside the curriculum. Whether it is passing notes in class via paper, texting each other under the desk, or instant messaging (IM) each other on their technology device, students, particularly adolescents are social and want to communicate with peers. Many teachers perceived these behaviors as off-task discussions between students and some educators consider it to be disruptive. In many instances, students have been reprimanded for off-task behaviors and discussions.

Despite the in-class challenges with student-centered talk, for about two decades much of the K-12 students’ virtual discussions outside-of-school have occurred via social media, texting, email, chat rooms and discussion boards. These spaces allow students to stay connected across space and time, sometimes with people they never see or meet in-person. Many of these outside-of-school digital practices have traditionally differed from experiences in school. One reason is that technology use in face-to-face classrooms may have been limited because some teachers struggle to seamlessly integrate technology and many teachers stop teaching content to teach technology (Kjellsdotter, 2020). In contrast, seamless technology integration is evident when teachers and students use technology in a myriad of ways to communicate, problem-solve, create, and build content knowledge in authentic ways to enhance teaching and learning (Florida Center for Instructional Technology, 2021). Transitioning from a face-to-face class to a virtual/remote class means bridging the gap between students’ outside-of-school literacy practices and their in-school expectations by using multimodal tools, many of which were previously used socially.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted significant shifts in classroom practice, and opportunities for engaging, student-centered discussions was paramount. Now that most classrooms around the world are currently remote, teachers are seeking ways to better engage students in meaningful discussions. In a remote, virtual classroom, teachers need to be strategic when planning and making instructional choices. Teachers have had to be intentional about providing opportunities for students to talk and share with peers. For instance, when planning and designing learning experiences, teachers must consider the multimodal tools, the structures and formats for using those tools, and the purposes for class discussions as a pedagogical approach. These kinds of intentional teaching (Epstein, 2009) decisions include explicit instruction and engaging experiences in academic literacy which according to Johnson (2009) places focus on

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