Using Seminars to Teach the Common Core’s Speaking and Listening Standards

By Terry Roberts and Laura Billings
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As educators, we know the importance of teaching reading and writing, but we often overlook speaking and listening skills. We believe that if we have class discussions on a regular basis, students are naturally learning to speak and to listen. However, that is not the case. On the contrary, speaking and listening skills are ones that must be explicitly taught—now, more than ever, as we prepare students for 21st century careers. The jobs of the future will require collaboration, discussion, and problem-solving as never before. The Common Core State Standards indicate the necessity of teaching speaking and listening:

**College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening**

To become college and career ready, students must have ample opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations … built around important content in various domains. They must be able to contribute appropriately to these conversations, to make comparisons and contrasts, and to analyze and synthesize a multitude of ideas in accordance with the standards of evidence appropriate to a particular discipline. Whatever their intended major or profession, high school graduates will depend heavily on their ability to listen attentively to others so that they are able to build on others’ meritorious ideas while expressing their own clearly and persuasively. (p. 48)
So how do we teach speaking and listening? We recommend using a seminar approach in K-12 classrooms. In particular, we suggest implementing Paideia Seminars—collaborative, intellectual dialogues facilitated with open-ended questions about a text. (Note that a text can be a book excerpt, a painting, a problem, an experiment, or more. Texts are not limited to print materials, and seminars are not limited to English class but can be used in all content areas.)

The literacy cycle of the Seminar includes five steps: pre-seminar reading, preparation for speaking and listening, the dialogue per se, a post-seminar reflection on speaking and listening, and a post-seminar writing assignment. The goal of practicing reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills together is to become more clear, coherent, and sophisticated in our thinking and to contribute to the quality of our lives (Roberts and Billings, 2011).

During early seminars, it is common to see participants struggling with speaking and listening.

**Characteristics of inexperienced seminar participants:**
- participants who dominate while many individuals passively observe (or mentally check out)
- participants who don’t make eye contact with the person who is speaking
- participants who engage in “sidebar” conversations
- participants who miss key points, either in the text or in the comments of others
- participants who offer barely audible comments
- participants who make unrelated or repetitive points
- participants who draw their conclusions about the ideas under discussion from a single perspective
- participants who don’t ask questions or build on earlier statements

All of these behaviors limit thinking and communication and restrict the potential for the conceptual understanding of both the individual and the group. Yet, they are perfectly familiar in conversations of all kinds, both formal and informal.

Faced with behaviors like these, it is easy to see why we often give up on teaching a classroom full of students to speak and listen thoughtfully. As Mortimer Adler points out in the Prologue to his 1983 book *How to Speak How to Listen*, what makes this lack of attention “so amazing and extraordinary is the fact that the two generally untaught skills, speaking and listening, are much more difficult to acquire and more difficult to teach than the parallel skills of writing and reading” (p. 5). Part of the reason why they are so difficult to teach is because, as Adler points out, they “are transient and fleeting,” and “a given performance, once it is given, cannot be improved” (p. 9).

As daunting as the task may be, learning to speak and listen well is truly basic to learning any subject and fundamental to learning how to think. The goal of any effective school, then, is to help everyone involved practice the habits of skillful speaking and listening. Let’s examine what teachers can do to coach individual and group behaviors toward meaningful dialogue.

Before the seminar, teachers can have students identify and practice specific listening and speaking skills. The following table shows suggested seminar process goals for students. Students should be asked to choose one or two goals to work on during the seminar.
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These goals serve two main purposes— to help participants focus on listening with purpose, and to help less talkative participants speak out and with purpose. Note that these goals are very specific. They don’t just say “be respectful,” for example. They give more precise indications of what being respectful looks like. Teachers should have students choose goals, and then they should coach students on specific strategies to help them reach those goals.

### Coaching Listening

Teachers can coach listening through a role play game called “Show Me Listening.” Here’s how one teacher put it to her students:

> It’s not enough for you just to listen. You have to let your friend who is speaking know you are listening. You have to show them by looking directly at them, by nodding and by asking them questions nicely when you don’t understand.

Teachers can have students practice “Show Me Listening” by having someone read part of a seminar text, and asking students to show they are listening. In the beginning, students might over act, but after a while, they settle into natural listening and are prepared for the text discussion. After enough seminar practice, the game changes from “Show Me Listening” to “Show Me Understanding.” Teachers can have students explain at least one thing they learned from another participant, naming them by name. In addition, teachers can have students take notes during the seminar, which helps them listen for understanding.

### Coaching Speaking

Teachers can coach speaking skills by giving students practice reading the text aloud, before the seminar begins. One teacher we worked with has students take turns reading the seminar text out loud in the seminar circle, coaching them to speak loudly and clearly. She then has the entire class draft a written response to a core question she intends to ask in the seminar, so that when the time comes, she can call on certain quiet students to read their response to the question. Finally, as the year progresses, and it becomes increasingly clear who among her students is having the most trouble expressing themselves in seminar, she begins to differentiate even more. She describes her methods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representative goals for listening</th>
<th>Representative goals for speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Look at the person speaking.</td>
<td>• Speak loudly enough so that everyone can hear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Paraphrase what you hear someone say.</td>
<td>• Speak voluntarily x times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respond to what someone else says.</td>
<td>• Make clear and accurate statements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ask a question.</td>
<td>• Use appropriate grammar and vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wait your turn to talk. (Don’t talk while another is speaking.)</td>
<td>• Use relevant vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Give way. (Be quiet if you begin talking at the same time someone else does.)</td>
<td>• Use a collaborative tone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Disagree agreeably or in a neutral tone.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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My favorite strategy is to talk with them individually in advance of the seminar and give them hints about questions I intend to ask, so that they can practice saying an answer and even practice delivering it to me or to a few other students before having to speak out in front of the whole class. Over time, it’s a master of working up the courage to speak comfortably before larger and larger groups of people. And always, always, I emphasize how important what they have to say is to all of us. “We can’t completely understand the story until we’ve heard from everyone”—I must say that ten times a day leading up to a seminar.

Another strategy teachers can use is to assign seminar partners. Partners work together in response to a variety of reading, speaking, and listening challenges.

Assessing Speaking and Listening

During the seminar, teachers use a seminar map (seating-chart format) to take notes on talk turns. After the seminar, teachers can use the map to analyze who spoke the most, who was quiet and needs more practice speaking, etc.

Of course, teachers are not the only ones who should reflect after the seminar. Students should also think about how it went. Teachers can have students go back to the goal(s) they identified before the seminar and rate themselves on a scale from 1 to 5 in relationship to their goal(s). Students should explain their ratings. We also recommend that teachers use a rubric for speaking and listening skills (see Roberts and Billings, p. 60).

After consistent seminar experience, it is not unusual for a group of participants to exhibit individually and collectively many of the following attributes.

**Characteristics of experienced seminar participants:**
- participants yielding to another as a way of sharing talk time
- participants paraphrasing the comments of others
- participants making clear and accurate statements, using appropriate pace, volume, vocabulary, and grammar
- participants offering relevant and detailed comments in terms of sequence, purpose, and point of view
- participants referring regularly to the text or another relevant source
- dialogue that is more nearly balanced in terms of the talkative and the quiet participants
- dialogue in which more participants look at the person speaking and rarely talk while another is speaking

Through Paideia Seminars, students can learn to master speaking and listening skills. These skills are both social skills (in that they enable successful social relations) and thinking skills (in that they inform and sharpen the individual’s thought process) (Roberts and Billings, 2011). Teaching students to become more effective speakers and listeners will help them to succeed academically and beyond school doors.
References


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