ORGANIZING STUDENTS FOR LEARNING

CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES TO HELP STUDENTS INTERACT WITHIN SMALL GROUPS
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Deana Senn
Robert J. Marzano
With Libby H. Garst and Carla Moore

Learning Sciences Marzano Center
The Essentials for Achieving Rigor series of instructional guides helps educators become highly skilled at implementing, monitoring, and adapting instruction. Put it to practical use immediately, adopting day-to-day examples as models for application in your own classroom.

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Examining Similarities & Differences: Classroom Techniques to Help Students Deepen Their Understanding

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Practicing Skills, Strategies & Processes: Classroom Techniques to Help Students Develop Proficiency

Engaging in Cognitively Complex Tasks: Classroom Techniques to Help Students Generate & Test Hypotheses Across Disciplines


Organizing for Learning: Classroom Techniques to Help Students Interact Within Small Groups
Dedication

I dedicate this book to my nieces, Tara and Lyla. I am so lucky to have the most dedicated, brilliant, athletic, and prettiest nieces on earth. I love you both (equally)!

—Deana Senn
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Introduction

This guide, *Organizing Students for Learning: Classroom Techniques to Help Students Interact Within Small Groups*, is intended as a resource for improving a specific strategy of instructional practice: organizing students for learning.

Your motivation to incorporate this strategy into your instructional toolbox may have come from a personal desire to improve your instructional practice through the implementation of a research-based set of strategies (such as those found in the Marzano instructional framework) or a desire to increase the rigor of the instructional strategies you implement in your class so that students meet the expectations of demanding standards such as the Common Core State Standards, Next Generation Science Standards, C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards, or state standards based on or influenced by College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards.

This guide will help teachers of all grade levels and subjects improve their performance of a specific instructional strategy: organizing students for learning. Narrowing your focus on a specific skill, such as organizing students for learning, will enable you to concentrate on the nuances of this instructional strategy to deliberately improve it. This allows you to intentionally plan, implement, monitor, adapt, and reflect on this single element of your instructional practice. A person seeking to become an expert displays distinctive behaviors, as explained by Marzano and Toth (2013):

- breaks down the specific skills required to be an expert
- focuses on improving those particular critical skill chunks (as opposed to easy tasks) during practice or day-to-day activities
- receives immediate, specific, and actionable feedback, particularly from a more experienced coach
- continually practices each critical skill at more challenging levels with the intention of mastering it, giving far less time to skills already mastered
This series of guides will support each of the previously listed behaviors, with a focus on breaking down the specific skills required to be an expert and giving day-to-day practical suggestions to enhance these skills.

**Building on the Marzano Instructional Model**

This series is based on the Marzano instructional framework, which is grounded in research and provides educators with the tools they need to connect instructional practice to student achievement. The series uses key terms that are specific to the Marzano model of instruction. See Table 1, Glossary of Key Terms.

### Table 1: Glossary of Key Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCSS</td>
<td>Common Core State Standards is the official name of the standards documents developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), the goal of which is to prepare students in the United States for college and career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCR</td>
<td>College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards are broad statements that incorporate individual standards for various grade levels and specific areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired result</td>
<td>The intended result for the student(s) due to the implementation of a specific strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>The act of checking for evidence of the desired result of a specific strategy while the strategy is being implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional strategy</td>
<td>A category of techniques used for classroom instruction that has been proven to have a high probability of enhancing student achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional technique</td>
<td>The method used to teach and deepen understanding of knowledge and skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>The knowledge and skills necessary for students to demonstrate standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>A purposeful progression of support that targets cognitive complexity and student autonomy to reach rigor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending</td>
<td>Activities that move students who have already demonstrated the desired result to a higher level of understanding.</td>
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The educational pendulum swings widely from decade to decade. Educators move back and forth between prescriptive checklists and step-by-step
lesson plans to approaches that encourage instructional autonomy with minimal regard for the science of teaching and the need for accountability. Two practices are often missing in both of these approaches to defining effective instruction: 1) specific statements of desired results and 2) solid research-based connections. The Marzano instructional framework provides a comprehensive system that details what is required from teachers to develop their craft using research-based instructional strategies. Launching from this solid instructional foundation, teachers will then be prepared to merge that science with their own unique, yet effective, instructional style, which is the art of teaching.

Organizing Students for Learning: Classroom Techniques to Help Students Interact Within Small Groups will help you grow into an innovative and highly skilled teacher who is able to implement, scaffold, and extend instruction to meet a range of student needs.

**Essentials for Achieving Rigor**

This series of guides details essential classroom strategies to support the complex shifts in teaching that are necessary for an environment where academic rigor is a requirement for all students. The instructional strategies presented in this series are essential to effectively teach the CCSS, the Next Generation Science Standards, or standards designated by your school district or state. They require a deeper understanding, more effective use of strategies, and greater frequency of implementation for your students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills required by rigorous standards. This series includes instructional techniques appropriate for all grade levels and content areas. The examples contained within are grade-level specific and should serve as models and launching points for application in your own classroom.

Your skillful implementation of these strategies is essential to your students’ mastery of the CCSS or other rigorous standards, no matter the grade level or subject you are teaching. Other instructional strategies covered in the Essentials for Achieving Rigor series, such as examining reasoning and engaging students in cognitively complex tasks, exemplify the cognitive complexity needed to meet rigorous standards. Taken as a package, these strategies may at first glance seem quite daunting. For this reason, the series focuses on just one strategy in each guide.
Organizing Students for Learning

Organizing for learning is a powerful instructional strategy that focuses on facilitating small-group discussions in which students use academic language to talk about content with each other. This strategy can be a formal organization of students as well as informal conversations in small groups and with partners. This strategy does not encompass whole-class discussions, even if students talk to each other during them. While there is a time and place during instruction for teachers to lead whole-class dialogue, this strategy is focused on smaller groups of students interacting with each other rather than the teacher.

When asking students to interact with each other, consider the type of knowledge you want them to learn as they work together. Declarative knowledge consists of facts that students need to understand. If you want students to work with partners or small groups to interact with declarative knowledge during their group work, they can readily discuss information and share ideas at any point during your lesson. However, if you want students to interact with each other to learn procedural knowledge, they will need to first work individually. After they have had opportunities to process their own thinking, they can then meet with their peer(s) to check for accuracy and discuss their own perspectives.

There must be a stated purpose for interaction when you organize students to work together. The purpose might be for students to process new content, practice a procedure, or even revise their thinking. Therefore, organizing students for learning almost always goes hand in hand with other instructional strategies such as helping students process content; helping students practice skills, strategies, and processes; or helping students revise knowledge. When two or more instructional strategies are used simultaneously in a lesson, the combination is known as a macrostrategy. However, no matter which strategy you pair with organizing students for learning, you must first determine how you want students to interact. Students can interact in two ways: collaboratively and cooperatively.
Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is interaction in which students share ideas and consider other perspectives as they are learning. In this type of learning, there is low task interdependence. Students may be asked to share or reminded to stay on task, but their success in completing a task is not immediately tied to their productivity during collaboration. At times, having little or no task accountability is necessary for students to be comfortable with risk taking. Be clear, however, that there are still expectations for participating and learning. The absence of a completed work product does not mean that students can opt out of participating. Put structures in place to ensure that all students participate and that groups remain focused.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific end product or goal through students working together. This type of grouping has higher accountability levels since there is usually a task or a product that the group is expected to produce. This type of group work is also called productive group work. Productive group work can have group and/or individual accountability and is useful when you want students to consolidate their thinking and understanding. When students are expected to complete a work product, plan more extensive periods for interaction in which they can grapple with their thinking and apply what they are learning. Knowing the difference between cooperative and collaborative learning will help you understand how the purpose of each technique determines the manner in which students will interact with one another.

Some students may not have had opportunities in previous grades to work with their peers as an integral part of the learning process. They may have only been asked to work independently or with teacher assistance and not been required or encouraged to share their ideas with peers. Because of this, many students will lack the skills necessary for effective group work. Generally, the skills individuals use to combine what they know with how they feel to better function in society are known as conative skills. These skills are also necessary for group work and should be taught and supported as part of the routines you teach students for how to interact with each other during
learning. Table 2 displays a list of conative skills, and they are discussed in more detail as they apply to each of the techniques in this guide.

Table 2: Conative Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conative Skills</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming aware of the power of interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivating a growth mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivating resiliency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoiding negative thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking various perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacting responsibly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling controversy and conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Marzano, Carbaugh, Rutherford & Toth, 2014.

The Effective Implementation of Organizing for Learning

Positive interdependence results when students recognize that their success is linked to the success of the members of their group and is an essential prerequisite for effective student interaction (Johnson, 1975). When students perceive that every group member is indispensable to achieving their mutual goals and that they are both dependent on and obliged to their peers, conditions are ripe for collaborative learning (Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009). Creating conditions and setting the stage for positive interdependence as students work with peers is a high priority as you organize your students for learning.

Give students a specific purpose each time they interact. Students’ understanding of the purpose for their grouping will facilitate the positive interdependence necessary for effective students’ interactions. Consider the details of when, where, why, and how you want students to interact with each other in advance of the interaction. The techniques in this guide are designed to facilitate this. As you read through the techniques, notice that their order reflects their intentionality for increasing cognitive complexity. When students focus on declarative knowledge by being asked to recall or comprehend, techniques that focus on collaborative discussions will work best. As learning
progresses, you should ask students to interact for longer periods of time and in more extensive ways using more cooperative techniques. The ordering of techniques reflects this, with the techniques ultimately leading to students interacting as they focus on metacognition.

The following teacher behaviors are essential to the effective implementation of organizing students for learning:

- identifying critical content
- planning meaningful tasks
- structuring intentional interactions
- organizing students into groups
- establishing routines
- teaching and reinforcing conative skills

As you prepare to effectively implement this strategy, think first about how to avoid the following common mistakes. These roadblocks can take your teaching, and ultimately your students’ learning, off course.

- The teacher fails to identify the critical content.
- The teacher fails to structure purposeful student interaction.
- The teacher fails to prepare students to interact in groups.
- The teacher fails to stay out of the conversation.

**Failing to Identify Critical Content**
As you plan to group students, you can easily overlook mentally walking through the entire process beforehand. You might think about what you want groups of students to work on or how you want them to interact. However, for interaction to be purposeful, you must intentionally select the critical content you want students to learn, deepen, or use.

**Failing to Structure Purposeful Student Interaction**
Teachers may think that students will structure themselves to work collaboratively or cooperatively, but that is often not the case. Students need structure and guidance for how to purposefully interact with each other. To structure
purposeful student interaction, specify what task students will work on in their groups, and then identify how you will structure students’ interactions with each other.

**Failing to Prepare Students to Interact in Groups**
You may assume that because your students are skilled at interacting in social situations, they will also know how to interact during academic situations. However, students can often be shy about their knowledge or not know how to express themselves in respectful ways when disagreements occur. Prepare students to interact in groups by teaching the routines specific to group work as well as the applicable conative skills they need to be prepared for the emotional aspects of collaborating and interacting with their peers.

**Failing to Stay out of the Conversation**
Taking charge of a group as you approach it is a mistake. The result is quite often a conversation between you and a single member of the group. Or, you may take charge of the entire group and begin talking, simply expecting the students to listen. If you are the person talking, you will miss opportunities to determine whether your students have the knowledge and skills you have been teaching. Although you may well have rich conversations with students in small groups, the purpose of the interactions is for students to have these conversations with each other. If you are not in the habit of taking a back seat as you go from group to group, you will find that your students get quiet when you approach their group because they are used to you taking charge. Instead, simply ask them to continue their conversation. If students are unaccustomed to your listening in on their conversations, they may initially be reluctant. However, with a few guiding questions and a reminder to answer to their group, not you, they will soon begin to talk freely in front of you.

**Monitoring for the Desired Result**
As an essential part of implementation, do more than merely organize students into small groups. During their interactions, you must intentionally monitor to make sure students are enhancing their understanding of the critical content as a result of their interactions. Please do not multitask during the all-important opportunities you have to determine whether students understand what you are teaching them. Walk around and listen. Focus on the
academic language your students use to determine whether they understand the critical content and are able to make connections between concepts. Note any misconceptions that may be widespread among students and be sure to correct them immediately. There are several ways teachers can monitor whether students are interacting effectively to enhance their understanding of critical content:

- Students use academic language to talk about content with each other.
- Students share perspectives about critical content.
- Students know their responsibilities during group work.
- Students share the workload equally.
- Students use small-group interaction to enhance their learning.

**Scaffolding and Extending Instruction to Meet Students’ Needs**

As you monitor for the desired result of each technique, you will likely realize that some students are not as effective in their interactions as they need to be. Others are easily able to demonstrate the desired result of specific techniques. Equipped with this knowledge, adapt the various techniques to meet the needs of students for whom scaffolds or extensions are necessary.

There are four different categories of support you can provide for students who need scaffolding: 1) support that teachers (including instructional aides or other paraprofessionals) or peers provide; 2) support that teachers provide by manipulating the difficulty level of content or interactions (e.g., providing an easier reading level that contains the same content); 3) breaking down the content or interaction into smaller chunks to make it more manageable; and 4) giving students organizers to clarify and guide their thinking through a task one step at a time (Dickson, Collins, Simmons & Kame‘enui, 1998).

Within each technique described in this guide, there are examples of ways to scaffold and extend instruction to meet the needs of your students. *Scaffolding* provides support that targets cognitive complexity, student autonomy, and rigor. *Extending* moves students who have already demonstrated the desired result to a higher level of interaction and understanding. These
examples are provided as suggestions, and you should adapt them to target the specific needs of your students. Use them to spark ideas as you plan to meet the needs of your English language learners, students who receive special education or lack home support, or simply the student who was absent the day before. The extension activities can help you plan for students in your gifted and talented program or those with a keen interest in the subject matter you are teaching.

**Teacher Self-Reflection**

As you develop expertise in organizing students to learn, reflecting on your skill level and effectiveness can help you become more successful in implementing this strategy. Use the following set of reflection questions to guide you. The questions begin simply, with reflecting on how to start the implementation process, and move to progressively more complex ways of organizing students to learn.

1. How can you begin to incorporate some aspect of this strategy in your instruction?
2. How can you structure purposeful student interaction about critical content?
3. How can you monitor the extent to which students share perspectives about critical content?
4. What are some ways you can adapt organizing students to learn that address unique student needs and situations?
5. What are you learning about your students as you organize them to learn?

**Instructional Techniques to Organize Students to Learn**

There are many options for how to organize students to learn with the ultimate goal being their mastery of the learning targets of your grade level or content. The approaches you choose to use during a specific lesson or unit will depend on the grade you teach, content involved, and makeup of your
class. These various approaches are called instructional techniques. This guide provides the logistics, routines, and support you need as you implement the following techniques:

- Instructional Technique 1: Partner Discussions
- Instructional Technique 2: Grouping for Active Processing
- Instructional Technique 3: Paired Practice
- Instructional Technique 4: Structured Grouping
- Instructional Technique 5: Cooperative Projects
- Instructional Technique 6: Peer Response Groups
- Instructional Technique 7: Group Reflecting on Learning

All of the techniques are similarly organized and include the following components:

- a brief introduction to the technique
- ways to effectively implement the technique
- common mistakes to avoid as you implement the technique
- examples and nonexamples from elementary and secondary classrooms using selected learning targets or standards from various documents
- ways to monitor for the desired result
- a scale for monitoring students
- ways to scaffold and extend instruction to meet the needs of students
PARTNER DISCUSSIONS

Partner discussion is often one of the first techniques that teachers use to facilitate peer-to-peer interaction. It requires little prep time and can be an excellent entry point to having your students interact with each other during learning. In this technique, there is limited group accountability. Students may be asked to share their perspectives with the class after their partner interactions, but they are not usually asked to turn in a work product as a result of their interactions.

Sharing perspectives with peers is a key aspect of learning new content. Asking students to respond to prompts and then share information with peers allows them to experience multiple perspectives. Sharing with partners allows students to see how others interact with and process information, enlarging and even changing their own understandings. Shared experiences, such as partner discussions, are essential building blocks of the teaching–learning process (Marzano & Brown, 2009).

How to Effectively Implement Partner Discussions

Recall the six teacher behaviors needed for the essential implementation of organizing students for learning that were listed in the introduction. They are noted here to refresh your memory: 1) identifying critical content, 2) planning meaningful tasks, 3) structuring intentional interactions, 4) organizing students into groups, 5) establishing routines for interacting, and 6) teaching and reinforcing conative skills. The following sections describe each of these behaviors as they apply specifically to implementing partner discussions.

Identify Critical Content

Determining the specific aspect of critical content that you want students to discuss is the first step in the implementation of partner discussions. Use the learning target you have selected to help you identify that content. Student interactions must have a specific purpose and that purpose should be linked
to the learning target. If you are vague about what content you want students to discuss with their partners, your students will be confused regarding the point of their interactions.

**Plan a Meaningful Task**
Answering questions the teacher poses is one of the most common ways to facilitate partner discussions. To maximize the quantity and quality of your students’ interaction, develop questions that require more than a single-word response. Single-word responses foster choppy interactions that interfere with the flow or give and take during conversation. One way to introduce quality questions is to periodically embed an open-ended response question during direct instruction. Frame questions that are cognitively complex and require extended responses. Open-ended response questions have two advantages: 1) they give your students opportunities to be active learners and 2) you are able to listen in as students talk to each other, immediately knowing whether students are learning what you want them to gain from the lesson. Rich conversations result when students discuss their complex thinking. If students do not have previous experiences interacting with one another as they learn and process content, they may be nervous about sharing ideas with their peers. Teach your students how to engage in productive conversations by modeling how to carry on rich conversations.

**Structure Intentional Interactions**
After you have identified the critical content and determined the question or prompt that will spark a conversation about the critical content, decide how you will structure student interaction during partner discussions. Structure which partner talks first and how long each partner talks. Instruct students in how to take turns talking and responding to their partners’ statements. Routines are essential during intentional interaction to prevent individual students from grabbing the spotlight from their partners.

If you want to rearrange partners periodically without moving desks, seat students in groups of four, and then direct them to talk to either their side or across partners. Figure 1.1 illustrates a desk arrangement for designating side and across partners.
A variation of partner discussion is Think-Pair-Share (Kagan, 2009) in which students think about their response to a prompt before they pair with another student to share their thinking. The teacher asks students to share their thinking with the class. A second variation of partner discussion is Read-Write-Pair-Share in which students read, write a response, engage in partner conversation, and then share their ideas with the whole class. This type of partner sharing allows students to record or represent their thinking before sharing it with others, giving them additional time for individual processing. If you use this variation, allow adequate time for students to read and formulate their responses.

A less formal variation of partner discussion is a simple turn-and-talk. Students turn to someone near them and answer the question or prompt you posed. Turn-and-talk is not structured as to who goes first or how long each partner will talk. Many times this form of partner interaction comes about once routines are in place and students are used to engaging in academic conversations with each other. If your students are new to interacting with each other, use one of the more formal variations of this technique. If your students have mastered the logistics of partner discussions, you can relax some of the routines and try variations.

Organize Students Into Groups
Think ahead about how you plan to partner students. A common approach is to partner students heterogeneously, assigning academically stronger students to work with students who may be struggling. Use assessment data from a unit pretest or results from previous units to help you make your decisions. Use more than just the total number of right or wrong answers as you analyze data. Focus on which concepts students have mastered and which ones still
need more instruction or practice. Students who struggle with different types of foundational knowledge might comprise a good pair because they can lift each other up. Partnering two students who struggle with the same concepts might help you target your time when you help students. Place two students with exceptional backgrounds together to give them both incentives to excel. Be intentional as you make decisions based on the data you use.

Establish Routines
Classroom routines are often second nature to experienced teachers, and if you fall into that category, you may have forgotten how much time and effort you spent initially thinking about and establishing routines in your classroom. If you are new to asking your student to interact with each other as part of the learning process, think about which rules and procedures specific to partner interaction that you want to establish. The routines you presently use, such as raise your hand to be called on and do not talk to each to each other, are not applicable in this technique. Carefully select the rules and procedures you want to establish with students such as how to wait your turn, when to listen respectfully, and the necessity of keeping conversations focused on critical content. Teach and model those routines until students understand precisely when and how they apply.

In classrooms where collaboration and cooperation are the norm, students will usually go into and out of partner discussions several times during a lesson. Therefore, arrange your seating chart and desk configurations so that students can easily work with the partners you have selected for them. Thinking ahead about how students will be grouped and desks will be arranged can save precious instructional time. Establish routines around group work; for example, which direction the seats face, which partner moves, and what students should do if their partner is absent. The time you spend establishing these routines from the onset will help ensure that students interact responsibly and productively from the beginning and help to create a culture of collaboration and cooperation in your classroom.

Teach and Reinforce Conative Skills
Take time early in the year to teach students good listening skills to include the skill of active listening. Listening skills are behaviors such as looking at the person talking, not interrupting, and not getting distracted. Elementary teachers often teach these skills in the early primary grades, but teachers at
upper grade levels sometimes forget to reinforce them. While the language used to describe and teach listening skills might change as students mature, the desired behaviors for good listening remain the same.

In addition to the common listening skills previously mentioned, teach and model for students how to take listening one step further to become active listeners. Active listening involves not only hearing and understanding what the speaker says, but also helping the speaker articulate thoughts and find solutions to the stated problems. Demonstrate active listening to your class by modeling the roles in three steps:

1. The speaker answers the prompt.
2. The active listener restates the answer in her own words.
3. The active listener elaborates on the original answer.

Once students have observed active listening modeled for them, provide positive feedback when you see this behavior in action.

Common Mistakes

There are several common mistakes teachers can make when facilitating partner discussions:

- The teacher does not provide a specific question for students to answer.
- The teacher asks questions that do not require discussion.
- The teacher gives students answers to the questions instead of listening to their answers.
- The teacher allows students to lose their focus on the critical content of the lesson.
- The teacher does not teach, model, and regularly use routines for which partner talks first or how long each partner should talk.
- The teacher calls on every student to share after the discussion.
Examples and Nonexamples of Grouping for Partner Discussions

Following are two sets of examples and nonexamples (one elementary and one secondary) of how you can use the partner discussion technique in classrooms. As you are reading the examples, keep in mind the common mistakes that you can make while implementing this strategy, and also consider how an example teacher might monitor for the desired results.

**Elementary Example of Partner Discussions**

This example features a first-grade teacher facilitating a partner discussion related to the following learning target: using observations, explain how young plants and animals are similar but not the same as their parents. This learning target aligns with the standard: Make observations to construct an evidence-based account that young plants and animals are like, but not exactly like, their parents (NGSS 1-LS3-1).

The teacher uses partner discussion often in his classroom, so students are comfortable with the routine of talking to their peers. The desks are arranged in groups of four so that students have quick access to two different partners. He prepares for the lesson by printing class sets of two photos. One photo is of a young and mature oak tree and the other is of a man and his baby boy. He ensures that each set of partners has the two photographs at their desks. He has also made sure that each set of partners has blue and red crayons or pencils.

Class, today we are going to observe how young babies and plants are like, but not the same as, their parents. To do this, I want you to all look at the picture of the baby and the father. Think about how they are the same. Think about things they both have. For instance they both have two hands. Now, you can’t use that example, because I did. But, what else do they both have? Think about it. It’s not time to share with your partner yet.

After giving students a moment to compose their responses, the teacher continues his directions.
When I give the signal, turn to the person beside you, your side partner, and explain what you saw in the picture that is the same for the baby and the father. When your partner is talking, listen with your entire body like we’ve practiced. After you both speak, agree on what is similar about the baby and the man and circle those parts of the picture with blue. Remember that you both can’t talk at the same time. On my signal, I want the person closest to the front of the room to speak first. When you are done, please let your partner explain what he or she sees that is the same between the pictures.

The teacher rings a bell on his tablet to signal that students can begin their explanations. The teacher walks quickly around the groups listening for descriptions of the pictures as he goes. He stops to help a student get started by pointing to the eyes and asking what they are and whether both the man and the baby have them. He moves on as the partners start discussing other things that both the man and the baby have in common. The students quickly explain the similarities, but some partners forget to circle their photo when they agree on their answers, so the teacher reminds them to circle the similarities after their conversation.

After all the partners have circled a few similarities, the teacher once again gets the students’ attention. He asks them to explain to their partner how the man and baby are different and circle those parts of the photo in red. The students notice things like leg length and wrinkles to explain the difference between the baby and the man.

When the students have finished, the teacher then says:

Now that you have identified how a baby and father are similar but not the same, let’s do the same with the picture of the baby oak, called a sapling, and a mature oak tree. This time I want you to work with the person across from you, your across partner. To start the discussion, I want the person closest to me to go first.
The teacher then walks around as he did before, listening and intervening only to get partners back on track.

**Elementary Nonexample of Partner Discussions**

This teacher has the same learning target and also prepares photos for the lesson but hits a roadblock when giving directions. This teacher has tried asking his students to talk with partners in the past, but without much success. He does not have routines in place for smooth student interactions. When it comes time for directions, he simply says:

> I want you and your partner to talk about what is the same and different about the baby and the man that you can see in the photo.

Given the lack of routines for who will talk first and how to appropriately listen, one student in most groups takes the lead and talks during the entire time the teacher gives them to discuss. Routines are key to effective partner discussions. Without established routines, groups are usually not as effective as they could be.

**Secondary Example of Partner Discussions**

This example is from seventh-grade math in which the learning target is: *know the formulas for the circumference of a circle and use it to solve problems* (CCSS Math 7.G.4). The lesson is focused on teaching students the formula of a circumference. The teacher partners the students and designates A and B partners. Here is how she begins the lesson:

> The distance around a circle is called the **circumference**. Partner A, demonstrate for Partner B where the circumference of your circle is for Partner B. Partner B, give Partner A a thumbs-up if you agree. If you don’t agree, show them what you think the circumference is, and then come to an agreement by asking the partners near you.
The teacher pauses and watches as students do this. She continues to explain:

The distance through a circle at its center is called its **diameter**. Remember that we already talked about the diameter, and the diameter of a circle is twice as long as the radius. Partner B, show Partner A where the diameter is on the circle. Partner A, give Partner B a thumbs-up if you agree. If you don’t agree, show your partner what you think is the diameter, and then come to an agreement by asking the partners near you.

The teacher pauses and watches as students do this. She then continues:

The formula for the circumference of a circle is: $$C = \pi \times d$$, where $$\pi = 3.14$$. Partner A, state what you think the C stands for in the formula. **<pause>** Partner B, state what you think the d stands for in the formula. **<pause>**

The teacher once again listens and observes as partners interact. The teacher continues this process for the remainder of the lesson: presenting a sentence or two of critical content, and then asking students to demonstrate this content to their partners.

**Secondary Nonexample of Partner Discussions**

The nonexample teacher has the same learning target and explains the same critical content but does not feel that her students can interact with each other responsibly. So, when asking the questions, the teacher expects students to answer silently in their heads rather than responding to partners. Her approach deprives students of opportunities to share their thinking and hear what other students are thinking during their learning.
Determining If Students Can Engage in a Partner Discussion

As your students discuss critical content with partners, walk around and listen. Notice trends in student thinking. In addition to noticing whether students are talking to their partners, be sure to assess the content of their discussions. Students need to use academic language to discuss their thinking and perspectives about the critical content. If you do not get to all of the groups, ask the groups you missed to share their answers with the whole class.

Some suggestions for helping you know if students are effectively engaged in partner discussions include:

- Listen for specific academic language related to the critical content.
- Resist talking to groups; listen to the interaction without interfering.
- Read over students’ shoulders if you have asked them to write during the discussion.
- Call on students you did not hear when partners were discussing to share with the class so you can hear their thinking.

Table 1.1 is a student proficiency scale for partner discussions that you can use and adapt as necessary to determine how students are progressing in their ability to engage in productive partner discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging</th>
<th>Fundamental</th>
<th>Desired Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students talk about the critical content.</td>
<td>Students share their perspective of the critical content.</td>
<td>Students actively discuss multiple perspectives of the critical content, listening to each other and adding onto each other’s ideas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Students listen as their partners talk about the critical content. | Students listen and respond as their partners discuss their perspective of the critical content. | }
Scaffold and Extend Instruction to Meet Students’ Needs

Despite your best-laid plans, partner discussions are not always as beneficial as you would like them to be. You may need to scaffold or extend this technique to target the specific needs of some students.

Scaffolding

Some suggestions for scaffolding include:

- If there are students who struggle with reading, have students read to each other.

- Use a bulletin board to list ideas for students who may not know what to say. You may also choose to tape a copy of the chart to student desks for easier access. Figure 1.3 is a sample to use or adapt.

Extending

Some suggestions for extending include:

- Ask students to explain to their partners the connection between the critical content they are discussing and the unit as a whole.

- Ask students to create questions that would help other students discuss the critical content.

- Have students explain perspectives that differ from their own.

**Figure 1.3: Anchor Chart for Partner Discussions**

1. Restate what your partner said.
2. Add to what your partner said.
3. Be specific.
4. Explain why you think that.
5. Ask questions.
6. Explain what may make your thinking incorrect.