

# **Learning How to Talk: How Teaching Middle School Girls the Steps to an Academic**

## **Discussion Impacts Motivation and Anxiety**

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### **Abstract**

This action research explored how standardizing the academic discussion process in a middle school English classroom enhanced girls' confidence and developed their voice in meaningful ways. I utilized a method called R.E.A.L. Discussion (Relate, Excerpt, Ask, Listen) that focuses on students' preparation before a discussion, their actions during a discussion, and their reflection process afterward. The participants were 30 Eighth Grade girls. Data were collected before the implementation of the R.E.A.L. method in the classroom by first engaging in "normal" classroom discussion and a survey. Then, I taught my students the R.E.A.L. discussion method, both in the classroom and utilizing the R.E.A.L. video training program. Once the girls completed a discussion using R.E.A.L., I again asked them to complete the survey and a reflection based on the new discussion style. Data were collected utilizing a mixed-method approach including teacher observation journals; pre, mid, and post-surveys; student discussion journals; and reflection responses. Analysis indicated that using the R.E.A.L. Discussion method in the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade English classroom increased the girls' confidence during discussion and decreased their anxiety about future academic discussions in the classroom. The results of this action research project have interesting applications for schools that are exploring how they can support students in having civil and critical dialogue inside and outside of classrooms.

## Introduction

The topic for the 2022-2023 Global Action Research Collaborative Fellowship was The Global Reset: New Opportunities for Educating Girls. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic and the geopolitical and social events that followed, gave schools new perspectives on the “how,” “why,” and “what should we change” questions of education (Styslinger, et al., 2019, p. 9).

As a middle school English teacher during the pandemic, I watched as our usual ability to form a class bond was taken away by Zoom rooms and the girls’ refusals to turn on their cameras. The girls got their schoolwork done, but there was no joy, no energy or camaraderie, or ease that usually defines an all-girl, middle school classroom (Hart, 2015).

The Zoom room classrooms also worried researchers who, very early during the pandemic, began to sound the alarm that children were at increased risk of becoming addicted to technology and would need to be taught how to “sustain attention in normal interactions without getting a reward hit every few seconds” (Richtel, 2021, p. 8). As COVID-19 kept us from one-on-one conversations and in-school classes, it also served to illustrate the cracks in our global and local communities to hold political discourse and contemplate controversial topics (Ziegler & Winthrop, 2022).

Combined, these two challenges became a focus of change in my own classroom: a discussion-based class that taught the girls the how and why of civil discussion. Akin to the old idea of the computer lab class in which students were trained how to use computers, the conversation lab class teaches students the discrete tools of academic discussion. Thus, my action research project was inspired by what I witnessed daily in my classroom and a desire to know if teaching middle school girls the discrete steps of discussion would support their growth, lower their anxiety, and positively impact their ability to converse with one another in the classroom.

Action research was an appropriate methodology to examine how girls engage in discussion because of its reliance on qualitative information in the classroom setting. I utilized techniques such as written reflections and teacher observations to draw conclusions, and I was able to learn alongside the girls as to what they needed before, during, and after discussions.

## **Research Question**

How does using R.E.A.L. discussion strengthen girls' voices and build their confidence in an 8<sup>th</sup> Grade English classroom?

## **Literature Review**

### **Research on Discussion Skills**

We assume that, as humans, we are capable of discussing topics and ideas, knowing how to engage others, and when to agree or disagree. After all, speaking is a distinctly human skill that children do not need to be explicitly taught, unlike reading and writing (Moats & Tolman, n.d.). However, COVID-19 has turned that thinking on its head: students need to be taught the discrete skills involved in academic and respectful conversations. There needs to be a “scaffolding” of discussion in the classroom and there is clearly a “gap between what [a] child can do independently and with assistance” (Pierce & Gilles, 2020, p. 386) based on age in classroom discussions. Discussion, just like reading and writing, needs to be broken apart into specific strategies that allow students to know their importance and how to assess “what they do well and what they need to work on ... [thereby leaving the student] empowered to improve” (Moss & Brookhart, 2008, p. 2).

Historically, discussion has been a staple of the educational experience in humanities classrooms. However, students are not often taught the important distinction between academic conversation and everyday conversation. Similarly, students need to know that they are also “responsible for bringing unique perspectives, for speaking, and for listening” (Meston, et al., 2020, p. 410), rather than merely performing for a teacher. Many girls are typically compliant and eager students (Jones & Myhill, 2004). They follow directions and want to please their parents, their teachers, and even other students in the classroom. Similarly, the online classroom allowed students the space to create “perfect” responses to questions (Adams, 2015). But what do we lose in education when we are always scripted?

The theory that verbal communication is an integral part of the English classroom is not new. Louise Rosenblatt became an iconic researcher and writer on English language arts in the classroom when she wrote her 1938 seminal text, “Literary and Critical Theory.” She theorized that literature and the

meaning to be found in it does not merely come from reading and writing, but from the verbal “transaction” that “changes both the reader and the potential of the text” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 385). Rosenblatt (1978) wrote in her groundbreaking research that “each reader brings to the transaction not only a specific past life and literary history, not only a repertory of internalized ‘codes,’ but also a very active present, with all its preoccupations, anxieties and aspirations” (p. 144). Similarly, “each reader engages with a text in a particular way, bringing unique background experiences and connections with prior experiences” (Pierce & Gilles, 2020, p 385).

### **Research on Middle School Girls and Learning**

The transition to middle school is difficult for girls as they begin to have “self-esteem problems and anxiety stemming from the pressures of social conformity,” (Hart, 34). The all-girl environment, especially in the middle school years, allows schools and individual teachers the ability to arrange their classes in meaningful ways that engage and meet girls where they are emotionally and developmentally at in this crucial stage of life. Social conformity at this time is especially prevalent, and Francis McMullen writes in *And Then They Stopped Talking to Me* that for middle school girls, “what ‘everybody’ does, thinks, and wears shakes the world. The crowd is critical, and it can be cruel” (p. 5). Thus, it is important that schools and classrooms focus on how girls see conformity and the act of joining in, in the classroom.

The researchers and authors of *Teaching Girls* write that girls are best served by a “curriculum that emphasizes the importance of girls as experts about their lives and the world in which they live - and prioritizes the real-life application of the material - is vital,” (Kuriloff, Andrus & Jacobs, p. 12). Girls need space to discuss “realities, and interests... and creat[e] a space for social and communal exploration of texts,” (Park, p. 196). Park also writes that “the nature and quality of literary conversations depend on what text, under what condition and circumstances, with whom, and where one reads,” (p. 206). Therefore, the teacher in the all-girls classroom plays a very important role in building a classroom culture and community that is open to discussion and disagreement. Girls especially value the chance to have “increased levels of class discussion” in their classrooms (Hart, 38).

With these two building blocks of research into discussion and the needs of girls, I was able to move forward in the action research project about creating a safe and welcoming atmosphere in which my middle school girls could hold academic discussions.

### **Research Context**

Duchesne Academy of the Sacred Heart is a Catholic, independent PreK-3 through 12<sup>th</sup> Grade school in Houston, Texas, United States. The school has about 750 students in total, and about 250 in the middle school. I have been a middle school English teacher at Duchesne for the past 5 years, having taught 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> Grades over that time. While Duchesne is a Catholic school, our girls and faculty and staff come from many different faith backgrounds. Duchesne benefits from membership in the Schools of the Sacred Heart Network which promotes five criteria and goals for living as a Sacred Heart student and educator.

This action research project took place over 10 weeks in the fall semester of the 2022-2023 school year with two sections of my 8<sup>th</sup> Grade English course, which had 35 students between them. Many of the girls have been in my English class since 6<sup>th</sup> Grade, so I had well-established connections and trust built with them.

The idea to measure how specific discussion skills served to develop the girls' authentic voices and develop confidence came about as a result of the COVID pandemic; these particular 8<sup>th</sup> Graders had faced a great deal of disruption in their middle school years. Anecdotally, I noticed that the girls struggled with speaking well together and were very distracted by their computers. In Summer 2021, I was introduced to a structured academic discussion template and program known as R.E.A.L. Discussion (Garonzik, 2022). After using it in the 2021-2022 school year, I wanted to more formally assess how the girls felt the process was helping them and developing their confidence.

The parents gave permission for the participation of their child in this action research study. I was able to introduce the project and the goals at the beginning of the school year during a back-to-school night, where I also let the parents know that all 8<sup>th</sup> Graders would be learning the R.E.A.L. method. They

were also told I would only be using an anonymous subset of the data collected. I appreciated having the support of the parents, my principal, and head of school.

### **The Action**

Over the years, I have utilized a variety of different discussion methods, including Socratic circles, silent discussions, gallery walks, and fishbowls. Depending on the topic, the strength of the discussion ranged from great to poor. I felt like each time I wanted to have the girls do a structured discussion, I was reinventing the wheel regarding how they should prepare, what they should work on or produce during the conversation, and what they should reflect on or create when they had finished.

In the summer of 2021, I participated in a professional development week for a new program called R.E.A.L. Discussion that my principal suggested I attend. In that week, I learned the R.E.A.L. methodology and how to set up the structures within my own classroom. I was interested in R.E.A.L. for a few reasons: it standardized the wheel-creating work I had previously been doing by formalizing the discussion process into discrete steps, and it standardized the work of a discussion for my students.

For this action research project in the 2022-2023 school year, I wanted to learn how the use of R.E.A.L. formalized discussion for my students and how it impacted their confidence in the classroom and developed their voices. I had already utilized R.E.A.L. in the 2021-2022 school year, so I was interested to see what the girls themselves said and thought about the process.

Before teaching my students the R.E.A.L. method, they participated in a “normal” classroom discussion where they were given a question and told to show up and discuss the next day. There were no supports or structures given besides this. After they completed this, the students answered a ten question survey and then completed a short reflection on how the process felt, how they felt during the discussion (how prepared, anxious, etc). Once this pre-R.E.A.L. phase was completed, I taught my students the R.E.A.L. discussion method, both in the classroom and utilizing the video training program developed by R.E.A.L. that took them through all the steps.

## Data Collection

To truly measure the outcomes of teaching middle school girls the discrete skills of academic discussion, I made sure to collect data in a variety of ways that would effectively triangulate any findings (Mertler, 2020). I used the following qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data throughout the project:

- Student journals and written reflections
- An anxiety measure using a Likert scale
- Teacher observations and field notes
- Questionnaires with a qualitative focus

At the beginning of the academic year, I explained to the students that academic discussions were one of the cornerstones of their 8<sup>th</sup> Grade English class, and that I would teach them the discrete skills they would need to be successful. Before introducing the R.E.A.L. discussion method to my students, I had them complete a “pop” discussion that matched how discussions are frequently accomplished in secondary schools: the students were given two topics and ten minutes to prepare. I did not give them a particular method or rules other than the very standard “let others talk and share time.”

After the “pop” discussion, I had the girls do two activities. First, they answered an eleven-question anxiety scale which I adapted from Cassidy and Johnson’s (2002) Cognitive Test Anxiety and Academic Performance scale. I introduced the scale to my students as a tool I was using to gather information about their thoughts and feelings around discussion, and assured them that their answers were not graded, and would remain anonymous. The data were effective in presenting a numerical baseline for how students felt about discussion. At the same time, I also had the students respond to a series of free-write reflection questions to get a more qualitative understanding of their thoughts and feelings about classroom discussions.

Once the students had been taught the R.E.A.L. method, we did two things. First, students prepared for a discussion with a few days’ notice and used the excerpting techniques they had been taught. After having a R.E.A.L. discussion, I had the students complete another free-write reflection with the same

questions given in the pre-discussion. The data comparison gave me a qualitative insight into how the girls felt before and after being taught the R.E.A.L. method and the steps to a successful academic discussion.

During the girls' academic discussion using R.E.A.L., I was able to take field notes to examine how well they utilized the skills they had been taught. Because R.E.A.L. gives the power to the students, I was able to take a subsidiary role and freely move around the classroom, observing and taking notes without also having to lead the discussion.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the data were collected, I was able to organize my findings with inductive analysis (Mertler, 2020). I organized both the qualitative and quantitative data and responses and developed a coding structure to effectively analyze the information. This served to identify themes that were common among the girls' responses both pre-R.E.A.L., during R.E.A.L., and post-R.E.A.L.

### **Discussion of Findings**

After analyzing the responses and reflections generated throughout the process, I identified four themes that served to answer my research question as to how the R.E.A.L. method might strengthen voices and build the confidence of 8<sup>th</sup> Grade girls in an English classroom.

### **R.E.A.L. Discussion Strengthened Girls' Voices and Developed Confidence Through Deep**

#### **Listening Skills**

In their reflections of the R.E.A.L. discussion method, the girls felt that their listening and responses to their peers were stronger. In a typical English class discussion prior to using R.E.A.L., I would watch girls jump into the conversation early, make their points, and then completely lean out of the conversation, assured that they had earned their "A" by stating their two to three points. Others would dominate the conversation but would often get distracted by tangential ideas or thoughts. In a scene typical of unstructured classroom discussions, many girls would start to tune out once they had participated or lost interest in the current discussion. As a classroom teacher, one of the aspects about



R.E.A.L. that I appreciated was the organization that it provided to the students' preparation work, discussion, and post-reflection.

After being trained in the R.E.A.L. method, I could see that the girls were more prepared and followed along in their discussions better than before. They were focused on listening to others because they had to write down one or more things that they heard others say AND they were tasked with taking notes on why they agreed or disagreed with this other student's statement. This added layer of responsibility meant that they not only had to pay attention, and closely enough to quote their peer, but that they also had to think about what was being said. This structure gave them the confidence to listen, and think, deeply.

In their reflections, a majority of the girls disagreed with the statement, "I have a hard time following along when we have class discussions." Student C stated that she liked when "I had to follow along to get the information, but it also wasn't just for a grade – I wanted to know what she had to say."

#### **R.E.A.L. Discussion Strengthened Voices and Developed Confidence by Decreasing Anxiety**

An overarching theme of the pre-R.E.A.L. discussion training was a general anxiety about discussion and what that meant in different classroom settings. All of my 8th Grade girls have had experience with discussions, but they expressed that these discussions often look different depending on which classroom they are in - different teachers with different discussion rules.

So, while a majority of the girls stated that they were not nervous or anxious about the idea of a discussion per se, what they *were* nervous about was what it would look like in a different classroom. They expressed anxiety at learning each teacher's methods for discussion: preparation, grading, and the format of the discussion itself. Our middle school girls are very bright at becoming attuned to what each teacher wants and grades them for, and it is a lot to balance! Until they have figured out each teacher's own unique style, they feel deeply anxious. In the pre-survey, most of the girls agreed with the statement that, "I don't know how to prepare for a class discussion." For the girls, it felt like a great deal of work to decipher what preparation looked like for each of their classes.

After I had trained the 8th Grade girls in the R.E.A.L. method at the beginning of the school year in our English class, they used it as well in their social studies classes. This utilization of the same method in two of their core classes astonished the girls. Some responses to this were, “this is so easy!”, “I know exactly what to do, so I’m not worried,” and “why didn’t we do this before?” Rather than focusing on learning their social studies teacher’s discussion method, they felt confident in spending their time on what really mattered: reading, researching, finding textual evidence, and preparing for the discussion itself.

### **R.E.A.L. Discussion Strengthened Voices and Developed Confidence by Reducing the Stress of Peer Judgment**

The defined preparation of the R.E.A.L. model gave girls the ability to increase confidence and decrease impact of peer or teacher judgment. Before we began to use the R.E.A.L. discussion method, the girls were particularly attuned to their peers. They admitted to wondering what other girls were thinking about them when they spoke or if a disagreement arose during the discussion. This fear of judgment would often lead them to agree with each other or downplay their own ideas in the face of disagreement. One girl (Student F), claimed that she would only speak up “if I have evidence proving my opinion.” The majority of the girls agreed with the statement that “I worry that others will judge me based on what I say in a discussion.” This fear, beyond how they are being graded and what their teacher thinks, added an extra layer of anxiety to what was already a stressful situation. Middle school girls are highly attuned to what their peers are thinking and saying, and this extra tension made most of the girls claim that they did not enjoy discussions - at least not formal ones where they felt on display.

After learning the R.E.A.L. method, the same girl who claimed that she would only speak up if she knew for a fact that she had concrete evidence, stated, “I like that there is an actual way to prepare my evidence before the discussion. Now I know that I can speak up because I am already prepared.” This meant a lot to a majority of the girls who agreed after the training that “writing down exactly what I will say in a discussion makes me feel better.” The defined preparation in the R.E.A.L. model gave them a

way to feel ready before they headed into a discussion, rather than fearing that they had to come up with points or facts on the spot.

One of the girls (student D) reflected that, “before R.E.A.L. when I disagreed, I would just let it go, but now I feel more aware of what I want to say so I might not always disagree, but I think I will start to.” Her confidence boost after learning R.E.A.L. came from the feeling that her preparation gave her the strong basis for talking with the other girls in her class. Another girl (Student O) stated that before R.E.A.L., “when I would disagree, I felt like my sometimes my ideas can be stupid if no one else agrees,” but after utilizing the preparation methods for R.E.A.L., she then felt more confident that “it makes me feel good to know people are having the same thoughts as me.”

The 8th Grade girls felt more confident after being taught the R.E.A.L. method because they had clear and direct boundaries. They knew what to prepare (they had two discussion questions), and they had a template for how to answer those questions and their sources before the discussion even began. The discussion was less about getting out an idea quickly, but more about listening to others. The chance to prepare ahead of time for the discussion made them more confident.

### **R.E.A.L. Discussion Reduced Student Anxiety and Increased Risk Taking by Clarifying Grading Expectations**

Very similar to the anxiety over different standards for discussions in different classrooms, the girls also admitted to some level of anxiety about unclear grading standards. While they might intuitively know what their other teachers expected of them during a class discussion, they were still unclear about how that directly translated into a grade - especially an “A”!

A vast majority of the girls agreed with the statement before being taught the R.E.A.L. method: “I worry that when I speak, I won’t say something good enough.” They felt at a loss in their own preparation for how they could come to the classroom with a significant amount of “important thoughts” as one student called them. The lack of standardized grading standards among their core classes for discussion meant that the girls had become attuned to differences: “in English the grading is usually harder, but like in science as long as we say something we get an A.”

After learning the R.E.A.L. method of discussion, the girls overwhelmingly agreed that they felt very confident in how they were asked to prepare for the discussion. The standards were clear for preparation and they also understood what they were being graded on.

One of the features of the R.E.A.L. program that I appreciated as the teacher is the ability to change my rubric for each discussion – it does not have to look the same each time. For example, in their first discussion after learning R.E.A.L. I focused my rubric on just their preparation and the strength of their textual evidence for the discussion questions at hand. However, by the girls' third implementation of R.E.A.L. discussion, my rubric changed to incorporate more focus on their speaking and analytical skills in that moment during the discussion. As long as the rubrics maintained a standard look, even if the content changed, and were given to the girls ahead of their discussion, they felt confident in how they would be graded.

After working with the R.E.A.L. method for a month, most of the girls reflected that they agreed with the following statement, "I know what to do to make an A with R.E.A.L.". One girl (Student W) also stated that "before [learning R.E.A.L.] I would say what I needed to say to get an A and then I would zone out, but now I have to think more deeply about what I am saying because I know you're not grading me just on talking now." This is a very powerful transformation!

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the act of explicitly teaching the steps of a good discussion from preparation to behaviors while listening, is just as important as explicitly teaching the steps of writing an essay. Our students inherently understand what teachers are looking and listening for when they have academic discussions, but if we do not teach them the skills behind the discussion, they will continue to see classroom conversations as a performance rather than a meaningful way to dialogue with their peers. As mentioned in the literature review, our female students are typically eager to please and inherently know how to act to receive good grades. But the act of teaching them the how and why of academic discussion gives them the power to develop their own skills in conversation outside of a performance for a grade.

Much like learning to write, our students need to know the basic building blocks of discussing: preparation, finding evidence, supporting their own ideas, listening, responding, and reflecting, before they can break the “rules” and take on Socratic seminars and other types of discussion that value independent thoughts and ideas.

R.E.A.L. Discussion lays the foundation for students in middle and high school to build their confidence and develop their voice so that they can enter college, and the wider world, being able to speak clearly and thoughtfully and back up their opinions with facts and evidence.

As for Duchesne Academy, the 8th Grade team at my school is hoping to expand the use of the R.E.A.L. discussion method to religion and science classes, allowing all of our teachers to “speak the same language” around classroom discussions. We are excited about what this could mean for our 8th Grade girls’ continued growth as speakers and debaters.

### **Reflection**

This action research project has been a very difficult yet rewarding experience. Although I have implemented pieces of the action research process, such as researching academic studies and trying new strategies, into my previous work as a middle school English teacher, this is the first time that I have been able to conduct all of the steps and formally reflect on collected data. This process has taught me that classroom teachers have the ability and capability to make small and meaningful changes in their classrooms that can have a big impact. I wish that all teachers had the chance to conduct such projects in their classrooms and to share their findings.

While finishing the GARC fellowship, I also completed my Masters in Education at the University of Virginia and both experiences gave me the confidence to apply to PhD programs in education. In the fall of 2023, I am looking forward to continuing my growth as an education researcher!

I would not have been able to do this fellowship without the support of Duchesne’s Head of Middle School, Suzy De Leon and the Dean of Students, Colleen Lofton, as well as former Head of Middle School and current Head of Academics, Innovation, and Student Services, Dr. Amy Witten, and Duchesne’s Head of School Patricia Swenson. I also was supported in so many ways by the Founder and

CEO of the R.E.A.L. Discussion program, Liza Garonzik and the Director of Program, Emily Gromall. I am excited to see how they continue to expand the reach of their program to schools across the world! I am also very thankful for my research team members and my research leader Dr. Carolyn Mak who is consistently kind and caring, but also no-nonsense and driven. Her motivation to support teachers in all-girls schools is truly inspiring. I am also extremely grateful to the International Coalition of Girls' Schools for providing this opportunity to me, and to everyone in my cohort and the cohorts to come. The chance to come together and learn with girls' school educators from across the globe has been an incredible experience and I am looking forward to seeing the reports from future cohorts!

Through this fellowship I have discovered that not only is it okay to genuinely enjoy reading academic literature, ask big questions, and in general be a nerd for education, there's a world of people out there just like me!

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