Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, March/April 2026

"Putting children at the center of learning."

Sometimes I Think We Talk Too Much

Sometimes I think we talk too much. With so much to teach and so many children to reach, we may fill our classrooms with tons of words, leaving little space for children to think and respond on their own. What if we took a step back and waited to see what children could share about their understanding or interests? We can also minimize the words and use nonverbal cues to elicit responses, prompting students to exercise their language and problem-solving skills.

Recently, I've been thinking about my time in a British school. Several years ago, I (Dana) had the opportunity to spend a school term at a British primary school in Wiltshire, in the West Country of England. I was assigned to an early primary classroom with teacher Mary Murphy, who was an amazing teacher. I learned so much from observing her work. One of her gifts as a teacher was the ability to communicate with her students (ages 5- to 7-year-olds) without saying a word.

Let me share an example of Mary's skill in communication without words. In most schools in England, a content-area topic is selected as the focus of study for the entire term. During my visit, the topic was the human body, and teachers created projects based on the topic. One small group in Mary Murphy's room was challenged to build a working arm using recycled materials. I watched a little boy (about 6 years old) work diligently, using three toothpaste boxes and wire to attach them together so they could bend. He had created an arm of sorts, but it had three equal sections with two elbows. He took the "arm" to Mary, who was seated in a low chair, and handed his creation to her. Mary looked very intently at the boy's work. She picked it up, holding it with both hands, and moved the two elbows back and forth, all the time with this very intense look on her face.

Of all Mary Murphy's gifts, the one I still admire but cannot duplicate is her ability to raise one eyebrow in extreme inquisitiveness. While holding the funny arm, she did just that. She then laid the toothpaste box arm in her lap, pushed up her sleeve, and examined her arm as if seeing it for the first time. Then Mary folded the three-part arm, bent it,

and studied it, while the little boy watched silently. Finally, the boy reclaimed his creation and said brightly, “I’ll give it another go!” Mary replied, “That’s it. Give it another go.”

This was one of the most magical interactions between a teacher and a child I’ve seen, and almost no words were spoken. With only her clear expressions, Mary communicated all she needed to, while the child had the space and time to think about where he had gone wrong and what he needed to do to correct it.

Sometimes I think we talk too much, and this limits students' opportunities to process their own thoughts. Like Mary, what could we communicate without words so students can use their own voices, clarify their understanding, and make their learning visible? If we talk less, will students have more space to think, reflect, and express themselves? Our intentional silence and nonverbal strategies may lead to richer student engagement and insight.

Early in my career, I learned about Wait Time through Mary Budd Rowe’s research. Wait Time is the purposeful pause after asking a question, allowing children to think. Rowe found that when teachers wait longer, student responses improve. Increasing average wait time from under one second to three-five seconds can lead to:

- ➔ longer, more detailed student responses,
- ➔ higher levels of student participation,
- ➔ more student confidence in expressing their ideas and understanding,
- ➔ more meaningful student-teacher interactions.

Using Wait Time helps students think through academic, social, and emotional situations, making them more engaged members of the classroom community.

Like Mary Murphy, we can use nonverbal communication to encourage students to address the situation. When a student is rude, we can be directive or give them a look that says, "Was that a kind thing to do to a classmate?" The "look" allows the child to show you they knew they didn't do the right thing and make the correction on their own. If they don't pick up the signal, a one-on-one conversation is a good next step to help the child understand that corrective action is needed (e.g., an apology).

Nonverbal communication is useful in small groups, too. If a child deciphers a new word while reading aloud, you can give them a look that says, "I see your effort and I'm proud of how you tackled a difficult word," even while working with another student. This gesture acknowledges the child's achievement without disrupting others, letting them know you noticed and they are on the right track.

When a child helps a classmate, a smile or a quiet wink communicates appreciation, encouraging the child to continue positive behavior without interrupting the class. We all have our "teacher looks". These little nudges recognize what the child is doing and hand over control and responsibility to them, sometimes with little follow-up needed.

Consider a goal of balancing teacher talk and student talk throughout the day at 50/50. By intentionally talking less and using nonverbal strategies, we invite students to participate more and become active meaning-makers in their own learning. Remember, our main goal is to foster student thinking and independence by communicating purposefully—sometimes with words, sometimes without.

Sometimes I Think We Talk Too Much **Reflection Questions:**

What "teacher looks" do you use to support and redirect students?

Think about a time when you talked too much and left the lesson unsure where the students were in their understanding. What can you do next time?

Think about a time when you facilitated a discussion among students without inserting yourself more than necessary. What did you learn about the students' understanding?

We want to hear from you!

Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **Sometimes I Think We Talk Too Much,** *here.*

Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

Q: At this point in the school year, I still have some students who talk incessantly and have difficulty "sharing the air", and I have other students who rarely say a word. I know that the person doing the talking is the person doing the learning. How do I balance the amount of talking so that all students use their verbal skills and contribute to the classroom conversations?

A: This is such a common occurrence! For the really chatty students, consider whether their talk is on-task or off-task. If it's off-task, that is a conversation to have with them. Share that off-task talking distracts the class from learning what is at hand. Give your best effort to ignore off-task talking so the child knows that if they want your attention, it will need to be on topic! If off-task talking disrupts learning, more specific consequences may be needed. On-task talkers just need some tweaking for when they speak.

For the really quiet students, use talk structures regularly to help them get into the habit of using their voices to share their great ideas. Use turn-and-talk or think-pair-share to help the student feel comfortable sharing with a smaller audience first. Then, when you call on them, they've already practiced their response once.

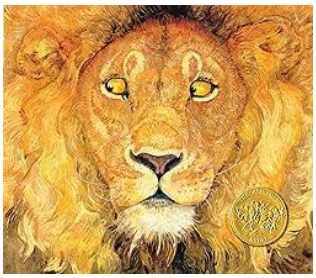
Try "a trip around the circle" to get everyone's ideas on a topic. In this way, no one is left out; each child shares. Students who want to share multiple times can clearly see that everyone gets a chance to speak before speaking again. Those students who would rather not share can prepare, knowing they will share at least once. You can facilitate small groups using "a trip around the circle" too, making sure each child has their turn before someone has a second turn.

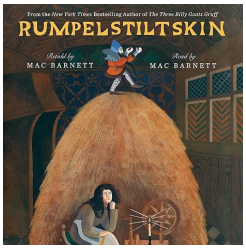
Adding these types of talk structures, along with a possible series of class meetings about the importance of hearing each other's ideas, and then possibly brainstorming steps that can be taken as a class, should help to balance your students' airtime.

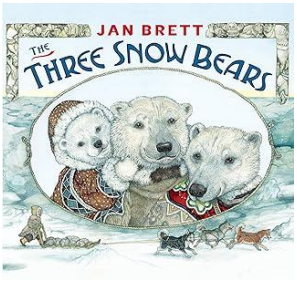
Teaching with High-Quality Children's Books

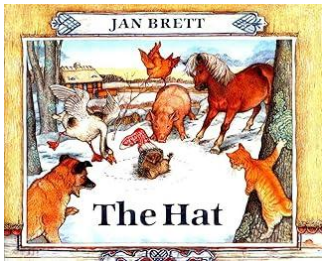
We find that this is the time of year when children get weary of our regular routines and lessons (maybe teachers do, too), so it's a good time to shake it up with classic

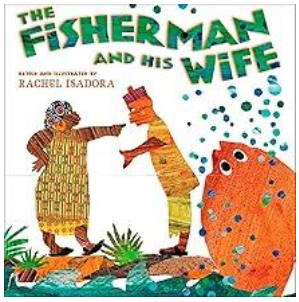
tales - tall tales, fairy tales, folk tales - tales that have been shared over hundreds of years and just keep getting better. I love the original tales as much as the "fractured" ones - maybe more, because I find many contemporary authors who are retelling the original tales in very creative ways. Here are some of our favorite classic tales to use at this time of year to spice up the reading block. We'd love to hear what your favorites are!

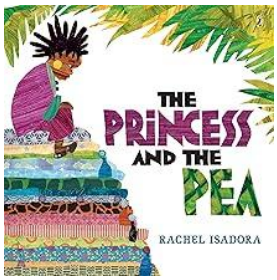


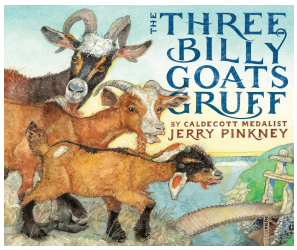












Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit here!