Academic Conversations Tip Sheet

**Take Turns** - It is helpful to involve the students in establishing some standards for turn taking and for generating ideas as to why taking turns is important. As students learn to understand the importance of balanced turns, teacher may move to encouraging self-selected turn-taking.

**Stay on topic** - Having students stay faithful to a topic is a critical aspect of effective academic discussions. Providing a purpose for the discussion, a product that is the result, and a fixed time, are important. Further, teachers must circulate and listen to the discussions.

**Express ideas clearly** - This is one that students (even adults) work on all their lives: conveying our ideas unambiguously to a conversational partner. Incorporation of language frames provide a scaffold for helping students express themselves clearly.

**Listen actively** - When students are actively engaged in academic discussions, they are listening closely to their classmates’ comments and they are weighing how these already been said. The may add to a comment or refute it. What we want to avoid is students just waiting for an opening in the conversation or their turn to talk without following what already has been shared.

**Build on others’ comments** - Students need to realize that if a member of the discussion group has made a comment highly similar to what they planned to say, they need to adjust. (“I agree with _____ and would add____.”) Similarly, if they disagree or have another example, they can provide some transition (“I disagree. My idea is __________.”)

**Be respectful** - It is important for students to learn that being respectful of one another is paramount in academic discussions. If they disagree, they must do so politely. If they are surprised by a comment, they may say so, but politely.

**Initiate Comments** - Students should not be passive during an academic discussion. Everyone should contribute ideas or ask questions. To make this happen successfully teachers may need to prepare the students- making sure they
have background knowledge of the topic, know vocabulary words related to it, have practices different language frames, and most importantly have some time to gather their thoughts before engaging others.

**Allow for wait time**- Just as we work with teachers to provide wait time for their students to respond, we want to teach students to wait for their classmates as well. Students must learn not to hem and haw. However, students who struggle to share an idea benefit from supports, such as having a peer who can interpret the idea from a native language into English or being given the opportunity to sketch or act out a response. Sometimes students will just not have anything to contribute and so giving each student a “pass” token may be one way to keep the discussion on track.

**Generate Multiple Exchanges**- Ideally a teacher will have demonstrated some productive academic discussions to the class. These models will show that a good discussion involves multiple collaborative comments among the participants. Through back and forth interaction that includes many of the points raised already, students can deepen their knowledge of a topic, test and accept or reject hypotheses, and even let their imaginations soar as they suggest solutions to problems.

**Play your assigned role**- If the teacher has allocated roles for group members, students should play their roles as best as they can. In some cases, teachers may need to review the roles and responsibilities.

**Be prepared**- For some academic discussions, students will have to prepare information in advance. They may need to read some text, interview some people, conduct some Internet research, and learn new vocabulary and language frames. When they get together with their group mates, they need to be ready to actively participate, whether they will be debating, planning a TV talk show, or presenting a report on a science experiment.