

Chalk Talk



Purpose

A Chalk Talk is a written protocol in which students respond in writing, in a central place (such as a piece of chart paper), to an important, open-ended question—silently. It is a way to promote discussion and awareness of issues, perspectives, or academic challenges and to demonstrate knowledge of a topic. Chalk Talks bypass the social roadblocks that often impede classroom communication and ensure that all voices are heard. A Chalk Talk is also an excellent way to promote awareness of patterns and problems, as students reflect on the information they have shared.

Materials

- Chart paper
- Markers (to write questions in bold letters on chart paper)
- Colored writing utensils, one per student
- Optional: sticky notes
- Anchor chart for protocol norms

Procedure

1. Formulate one or more important, open-ended questions that will provoke comments and responses.
2. Write the questions or topics on separate pieces of chart paper in bold marker. Post the charts on the wall or on desks so that all students have ready access to them.
3. Give each student a different-colored pencil or marker.
4. Explain the Chalk Talk protocol and answer any student questions.
5. Set up norms for the Chalk Talk:
 - This technique works only if everyone is writing and responding throughout the designated time period and remains silent throughout.
 - Make it clear that everyone is responsible for writing a comment, reading others' comments, and responding to at least one to three comments on every chart paper.
 - No one should sit down until the time period is over.
 - Opinions must be freely expressed and honored. No personal attacks are allowed.
 - Comments should be thoughtful and further the discussion.
6. Allow 10 to 20 minutes for the Chalk Talk. It's helpful to walk around, read, and gently point students to interesting comments. All writing and responding is done in silence.
7. Search for patterns. In pairs, students should read through all the postings, search for patterns and themes (or "notice and wonder"), and record those patterns on a piece of paper. This part takes about 5 minutes and is not silent.

continued

8. Conduct a whole-group share. Pairs should report out patterns and themes, round-robin style, until all perceptions are shared.

Variations

- Have students write on and post sticky notes instead of responding directly on the chart paper, so chart paper can be reused for multiple classes if needed.
- Adding an element of optional text coding (e.g., students placing a star next to comments they agree with or a question mark on comments they don't understand) can deepen the written discussion.
- Have students respond to the questions in collaborative groups, with each group using a different color marker. In this variation, students do not work silently—discussion among group members is key.
- Technological versions of Chalk Talk (such as commenting on a teacher-owned blog) may further students' interest and engagement. However, bear in mind that switching the format of Chalk Talk to a technological forum will require different guidelines, routines, and piloting to proactively plan for possible challenges.

References

Adapted from: Original by Hilton Smith, Foxfire Fund; adapted by Marylyn Wentworth