“Let’s Talk”

Building a Bridge Between Home and School

Catherine Humphrey

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Pick up your socks.” “Turn down that music.” “Get home at a reasonable hour.” These may all be necessary demands when a parent is instructing a teenager on the nuances of reasonable social behavior, but imperatives like this hardly qualify as what the socio-linguist Maria Montano-Harmon labels “quality verbal interaction.” According to Montano-Harmon, quality verbal interaction is talk between young people and adults about ideas. When a parent or teacher asks a question that begins with “What do you think about . . .?” the adult has initiated an opening for this kind of conversation.

According to Montano-Harmon, the average quality verbal interaction in the United States today between parent and child is seventeen seconds per day. She argues that extending the time of an idea exchange for twenty minutes per day would make a substantial difference in a youth’s critical thinking skills. She claims that this exchange does not even need to be twenty consecutive minutes, but can be in five- or ten-minute increments.

My own connection to Montano-Harmon’s thinking came while I was working on the portfolio entry, “Outreach to Families and Community,” for my National Board for Professional Teaching Certification last year. I realized that parents were an untapped resource for both my students and me as we established a learning community based on the exchange of ideas. As a teacher, I savor these exchanges with my students, and now I wanted to invite parents to join in the conversation.

Working with my two senior classes, I selected a thought-provoking editorial from the January 29, 2000, Los Angeles Times. The essay, “Hold Parents Liable for Learning” by David E. Kahn, an English teacher at Fremont High School in South-Central Los Angeles, made the argument that “poor parenting” is the “key factor” in our “educational crisis” and “tragic failure rate.” The class and I read and discussed the essay’s key points. I asked my students to take a position in agreement, disagreement, or partial agreement with the author. Kahn’s radical suggestions included mandatory parent orientation sessions and ongoing parent participation—at least three hours per month—lending assistance in campus beautification and repair, tutoring, or yard and hall duty. Parents would pay for children’s missed school and/or failure. “School would be free only as long as Johnny is attending and passing.”

Students’ pens flew as they summarized and responded to Kahn’s argument. In self-selected groups, they shared their written work aloud with each other, agreeing and disagreeing with Kahn, making assertions, backing up their opinions with examples and evidence, coming to conclusions. I wanted them to take home some of the energy we were generating. What would their parents think of Kahn’s proposals? I asked students to discuss his arguments with their families and bring their parents’ ideas back to class.

I was delighted when many students arrived in class the next day with stories of lively and thoughtful conversations with their parents. Amy’s mother surprised me
by writing her ideas as an "essay" and giving it to her daughter to bring to class. Her mother wrote, "I agree wholeheartedly with Mr. Kahn, even though some of his suggestions are off the wall. But he does have the basic concept... Parents, take responsibility for your children and stop passing the buck." She concluded her paper with a plea for her two daughters to have "good, strong, responsible" teachers, "to help me in my goal of raising well-rounded, educated girls." I made comments (not corrections) on the paper, inviting Amy's mom to continue the dialogue, and sent it back home with Amy. This exchange particularly pleased me because, based on high absenteeism, missed assignments, and incomplete written work, Amy had just finished the first semester in our senior English class with a D-. Now in our first week of the second semester, Amy finally seemed interested in writing a paper of her own, after observing her mother sending an "essay" to school.

Encouraged, I sent a second editorial home with all my seniors, "A Martinet Helped Us Learn," by ninth grade teacher Gail Saunders, (Los Angeles Times, January 29, 2000). When Amy's mother responded again with an essay, Amy was hooked. In Saunders's opinion piece, she argues that the mean "Marquis de Sade of physical education" teacher she had as a student in school did her and her classmates a favor by "making" them participate. "As long as you were not comatose or in the hospital, you would be in class participating." The student with the note from home and a finger in a splint was still "seen dribbling a ball around the court that day." With a series of examples, Saunders demonstrates that in her student experience "no one questioned authority... none felt abused," and "none of the parents ever complained," because students and parents knew "it was good for us... we learned not to be wimps, and we learned not to blow small incidents out of proportion. We didn't whine about our rights because the teacher didn't talk to us like the maître d' in a five-star restaurant, and we didn't try to get her fired because of it. We simply learned to tough it out." Saunders concludes that learning to "swallow our lumps and move on" builds character instead of encouraging whiners.

Students and parents had a lot to say in responding to Saunders' argument. Perhaps surprisingly, most agreed with her. Amy, working on her own essay, armed with her mother's response and their conversation, said to me, "We'd all get better grades in here if we did this kind of writing workshop more often." Amy was finally writing more than a few simple sentences and trying to pass them off as an essay; she began to write paragraphs, and, for the first time, she filled an entire page. Amy discovered for herself that writing is the communication of ideas, and by June she passed her senior English class with a C.

I learned from this experience that for Amy to become interested in participating in writing assignments she had to believe that the writing she did was "real." When she saw the example of her mother's engagement, she became engaged. She particularly enjoyed watching me write comments on her mother's papers and then acting as messenger between us.

Not every student shared the essays with a parent. Some even put up an intellectual argument against their parents' involvement. Daniel, for example, gave feisty reasons for his parents' lack of participation. A longhaired transfer student from out of state, Daniel argued against Kahn's suggestion of making parents liable for their student's academic performance. Daniel wrote that "students must take responsibility for and take the consequences of their own actions." In a carefully reasoned essay, Daniel argued for abolishing grades and for establishing small, individualized study groups where students "graduate themselves as soon as they think they are ready to use their education in the outside world." In keeping with this line of thinking, he refused to take the editorial home, stating his education was his own responsibility, not his parents'. Nevertheless, he contributed positively to the discussion in his small group when other students described conversations with their parents.

The reluctance of some other students to share these essays with their parents was based more on family chemistry than on intellectual conviction. Jason asked me if he could stay after class because he wanted to tell me his mother's reaction to a particular article. He added that he hates asking his...
father’s opinions because his father “always has too much to say.” In fact, many students wrote that their parents talked too much or talked “at” them rather than “with” them. And not all parents were willing to contribute. Brian’s mom said, “Go ask your neighbor.” Cory’s mom said, “Do your own work.” However, my hope remained that if I encouraged an exchange of ideas at home, parents and students would learn to more often engage in “quality verbal interaction,” a process that I believed could increase students’ abilities to think critically and to articulate well-reasoned opinions.

Since something new and valuable seemed to be happening as a result of the “bridge building” in my two senior English classes, I decided to take another step: I would involve my ninety-one junior advanced placement composition students in an assignment of “quality verbal exchange.” My assumption was that the parents of these students would be eager to talk about ideas with their bright, highly motivated children. I sent home the same kind of prompts that students would experience when they took the AP composition exam. One of these was the following aphorism from Henry David Thoreau:

“Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.” In a well-thought-out essay, examine the accuracy of this aphorism in modern society. Concentrate on examples from your observations, reading, and experiences to develop your ideas.

I asked students to talk about this statement with their parents and to write a non-graded narrative in class about their experience. Then, several days later, students would write a graded essay on this prompt. In this first attempt to send a “talk” assignment home with AP students, more students than I expected wrote that they did not share their prompts with their parents because their parents didn’t speak English, were too busy, or (in the student’s opinion) wouldn’t be interested. Many others, based on their own narrative reports, did not have a positive experience, and some of their reflections were heartbreaking. Several parents did not understand the prompt or became critical of the student’s response. The following two student narratives reveal very different outcomes:

I was very disappointed when I talked to my parents. They never went below the surface to see the true meaning. I did not benefit from the experience. As I became angry my parents became furious, and I got nowhere. They weren’t willing to listen to my ideas. They still think I can’t write even after I have shown them my improvements. The final results included a weak essay, upset parents, and a week indoors without privileges.

—Charlotte

At first I was reluctant to share the AP prompt with my mother who was home at the time I began my homework. This was because I assumed that she would not understand the prompt because English was not her first language. Yet when I interrupted her watching television to discuss Thoreau’s quote with her, I was pleasantly surprised to see her turn off the blaring television and direct her full attention to me. I had never realized or even dreamed of how much attention she would give to me. We discussed the prompt and she at first didn’t understand Thoreau, so I gave her my interpretation of it, and we built upon that. She talked about setting well thought out goals instead of working foolishly and impulsively toward it. It was a different, yet interesting experience to discuss my homework with my mother.—Joanne

Joanne’s comment that she had never “realized or even dreamed how much attention” her mother would give her made me realize that there was more going on in this interaction between parent and child than I had originally planned for. While my initial motivation had been to elicit parental support for their children’s academic performance, I was beginning to see an unanticipated—and possibly more valuable—outcome. These discussions were building bridges not only between home and school but also within families.

For example, Stephanie writes:

I told my mother and step-dad that for homework I had to talk with them about two essay prompts from English. They said okay, but as the weekend went by they were busy and I was busy. Then yesterday I told them we had to talk about it. First my mother questioned why and isn’t that my job to think of ideas on my own. So I read the prompt. At first my mom said she didn’t know and that her brain hurt and that is the reason why she doesn’t want to go back to school. But after awhile we started thinking and came up with some good ideas. My step-dad kept asking what an aphorism was, but he gave me ideas too. It was fun bonding with my parents. I don’t get to do that at all, which makes me sad, but I got to show my parents how hard this class is and how I think. It was a priceless moment.

Some students came away with a revised respect for their parents’ intellectual ability.
I thought over the prompts with the help of my mother. She was an incredible help. I had no idea my mom was so smart.—Melindal

To my shock, my mother responded with a thoughtful and reasonable answer... I turned to my father now, hoping to stump someone with this question... I could not believe my father even had a reasonable response to the prompt...”—Jason

This newfound enthusiasm for parents' abilities was only slightly offset by a few students who reached an opposite conclusion.

"In discussing the Thoreau quote with my parents, I came to a harsh realization. I realized that my parents would fail AP English."—Krisante

In general, it was clear that many students were returning from these discussions with ideas for fresh ways to approach the prompt.

"At first (my father) applied the quote to his occupational background. This confused me, but only because it made me think he misunderstood. I allowed him to continue though, and the more I listened the more sense he began to make. I felt bad for undermining him, which taught me a valuable lesson."—Casey

That night at the dinner table I happened upon a break in conversation in which to introduce the question, and I did. My mother slowly finished chewing her food and followed it with a brief pause. She then made what I believed to be a wondrous and insightful interpretation in the context of various forms of literature and movies in popular culture. —James

I shared my prompt on Thoreau with my grandmother. My parents happened to be very busy this weekend so I brought Thoreau up when I was talking to her. Thoreau was very interesting to my grandma; she had never read anything by him before but seemed intrigued. She is a very spiritual and religious woman and was very much in agreement with Thoreau and added her own religious tone to it as well. Talking to her helped me think of different ways of approaching this prompt.—Heidi

Parents as well as students grew from a discussion of Thoreau's aphorism.

When I showed my dad I expected him to not get it. My dad is very bad in English, but extremely smart in the maths and sciences. He took a few minutes to read them and said, "Well I can't write on many things but this would be easy for me." I just looked at him because I thought maybe he was being sarcastic (as he is a lot of the time) but he was very serious. He said he could do it because he has had many experiences with things that relate to the prompt. Now he wants to copy down the question so he can take it to work.—Jen

I was concerned, however, about some of the students who, like Charlotte, had trouble approaching their parents and those whose

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**Call for manuscripts**

**Writing About the Unfamiliar**

For the winter issue of *The Quarterly*, we are looking for accounts of students writing about a world they are experiencing for the first time. Under the theme, “Writing About the Unfamiliar,” we hope to discover examples such as that of a professor of English who traveled with a group of his students to Yorkshire and the Lake District in England to explore the world of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Brontës. Delving into an environment that they had previously experienced only in literature, the students’ explorations peaked their senses and inspired their writing.

The adventures covered by this theme need not be anything as exotic as a trip to the English moors. “Writing About the Unfamiliar” may grow out of a group visiting a college campus or a writer exploring a neighborhood that he or she hasn’t visited before. And while we want to see student writing, we also want to learn what techniques teachers use to push students to greater perception of and reflection about new experiences.

The deadline for submissions to the winter issue of *The Quarterly* is November 16, 2001. Please email your submissions to editors@writingproject.org, or mail them to:

Editors, *The Quarterly*
National Writing Project
University of California
2105 Bancroft Way #1042
Berkeley, CA 94720-1042
parents, for whatever different reasons, responded negatively. Kevin told his mother he needed help on something.

She asked what I needed help on, and when I told her that I needed her help on English, I saw the life drain from her. I explained that I needed to engage in “quality verbal interaction” on the Thoreau quote. At this moment she cringed and closed my door and walked away. About an hour later she came back and tried to help. My dad wouldn’t even let me ask him for help.

I came to realize that some parents were truly baffled by the concept of suddenly joining our classroom discussion. I saw that we needed practice in setting the stage for meaningful student/parent talk. So the next year I started “training” the parents in September at back-to-school night. I discussed my desire to extend the conversation of ideas from the classroom into the homes. Hearing it from me, parents were excited. They want to help their teenagers learn, and they know that the question “Have you done your homework?” does not go very deep, but parents often don’t know what else to say or ask. Talking with parents, I explained some of Montano-Harmon’s research about the value of “quality verbal interaction,” about her view that students need more conversations with adults on an idea level as they develop language and critical skills. Despite a positive response, I was aware that not all parents attend back-to-school night. I also wrote a series of articles about reading and then talking about ideas in the home, that was published on the front page of our parent newsletter, The Eagle Eye. This newsletter is mailed home every six weeks with a graded progress report to the parents of all our students (3,200 students this year). I explained my idea of sending

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**Tips for Quality Verbal Interaction**

1. Prepare parents if possible through parent newsletters, notes home, and back-to-school nights. Let parents know that the goal is “quality verbal interaction,” not being “right” or being “wrong.” These conversations about ideas may be only a few minutes at a time and still be effective.

2. Prepare students for a variety of parental responses. The goal is conversation about issues and ideas. Even if a parent doesn’t want to talk at a particular time, it is worth the attempt.

3. Give a several-day window for “conversation”—even a week is not too much time, as parents and students both keep very busy schedules.

4. It does not matter what language parents and students use for quality verbal interaction. Conversation does not have to be in English to be effective.

5. Do not “grade” students on their parents’ responses. Allow students to discuss their experiences in small groups and have students write a description, reflection, and/or analysis to the teacher.

6. Keep a sense of humor.

7. Praise students for making an attempt and reporting what happened.

8. Praise parents for responding.

9. Provide several opportunities for “take-home” conversations throughout the year.

10. Use prompts that encourage discussion of ideas and issues, not “right” or “wrong” answers.
Let's Talk

prompts, editorials, or topics home for "talk," and summarized Montano-Harmon's research on "quality verbal interaction" and my desire to build a bridge between classroom ideas and talk in the home.

I took some additional steps to make this process more comfortable for parents and for students. First, I allowed more time—two weeks—for conversations between parents and students to take place. When students had not been able to talk with their parents, it was often because they had little time together. I wanted to take the pressure off.

I also prepared students for the possibility that they would not necessarily get a positive response. I assured my classes that their responsibility was to give a conversation a try. I let them know that they would not be graded down if for some reason parents were unable to talk with them.

At this point, parental response remains mixed. In some families it is understandably difficult to get a foot in the door.

Instead of an explanation I have received a tired look and explanation of tiredness. I persisted (in) my inquiry and was yet again received by glazed eyes and "I don't know, I'm too tired." I whined "but mom..." and again repeated my question and attempted to initiate a conversation. Once again to no avail. It's not a lack of communication or a dearth of family love, but my parents really were exhausted and intellectual conversation after their already mentally strenuous day would have been impossible.—Jason

Other conversations took the student and the parent in directions neither I nor they would have guessed.

It could be that my mom has such a deep connection to Thoreau's quote that it has a painful meaning. She sounded like an Amy Tan Joy Luck Club mom. Indeed, she told me that she had not found what she was looking for in the U.S., and may choose to move back to Taiwan when I enter college. The quote from Thoreau is insightful in developing the idea about one's search for his or her role in society. Even a failed attempt to talk with my mom about Thoreau's meaning opened up a new perspective in my life as I try to find what my purpose is.—John

However, since I have been providing more direction for parents and for students, there has been a general change for the better.

Now that I allow a window of two weeks for conversations between parent and student and the "freewrites" that describe what happened, these narratives are much more extensive. Last year, not one of my ninety-one students wrote more than half a page. Last year's formal graded AP essays written in class on the Thoreau prompt were not particularly stronger than their essays had been on AP prompts they had not discussed with their parents. However, this year, when I asked students to explain to me in a freewrite what happened when they shared the Thoreau prompt with their parents, all students wrote at least a page, some two or more pages, and almost all described analytical discussions. I attribute the marked difference in the quality of shared discussion to my clearer explanation, to the students and parents, of what I was hoping for, as well as the two-week window that I accompanied with reminders of the upcoming deadline. Even students unable to connect with parents now seemed to have a lot to say.

Molly began:

Talking to my parents is one of the hardest things. We usually do not have a normal conversation without arguing. So, upon having to discuss this prompt with my parents, I was praying we were not going to break out in an argument about who was right.

Her narrative continued for two and a half pages and included comments made by both parents and her commentary on their ideas. Although Molly saw herself as "suffering" through the discussion, she and her parents were holding a discussion at an idea level. As with other students, she narrated her parents' responses—even if negative—analyzing and synthesizing their ideas.

I continue to send ideas home for discussion. The results suggest that students do want to talk with their parents about ideas, are pleased when their parents will listen to their ideas, and are fascinated by the discoveries of family stories they have never heard before. In addition to building a valuable bridge between our classroom and their homes, idea-based discussion strengthens the bridge between parent and child.

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