

## Building Students' Skills for Engaging in Productive Academic Conversations (Breakout Session)



**Jeff Zwiers**

COSA State English Learners Alliance Conference

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[jeffzwiers.org/March10](http://jeffzwiers.org/March10)

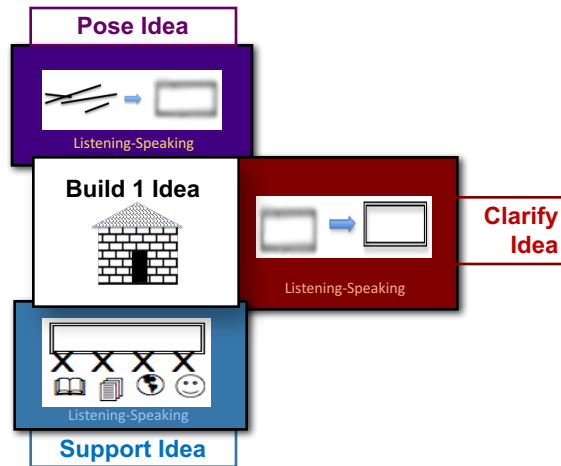
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### Session Objectives

1. **Review Constructive Conversation Skills**
2. **Practice with tools for developing conversation skills**
  - Argument Balance Scale
  - Math Paired Conversation Protocol
  - COAT Self- and Peer-Assessment
  - Conversation Support Cards
3. **Improve our abilities to construct effective prompts**
4. **Plan next steps**



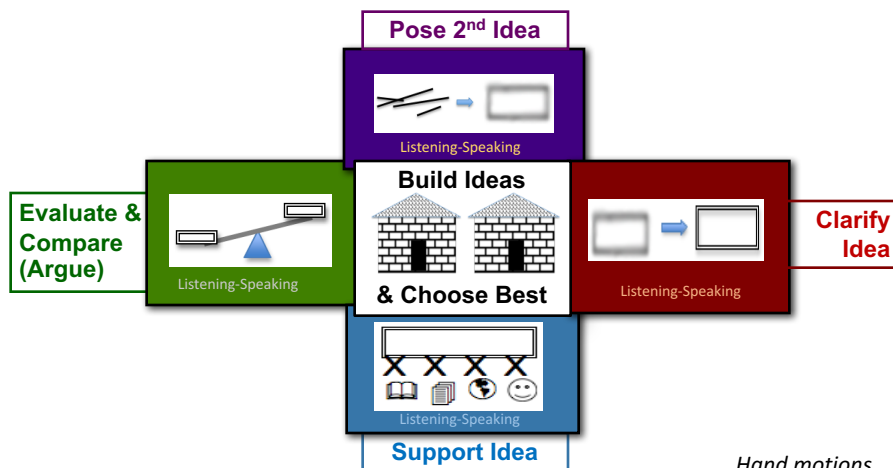
## REVIEW: Constructive Conversation Skills



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*Hand motions*

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**TOOL 1:  
Argument Balance Scale**



**Structuring Collaborative Argument Conversations:  
*Argument Scale***

**Claim**

vs.

**Opposite or  
Different Claim**

Which claim's reasons, evidence, and  
explanations weigh the most?

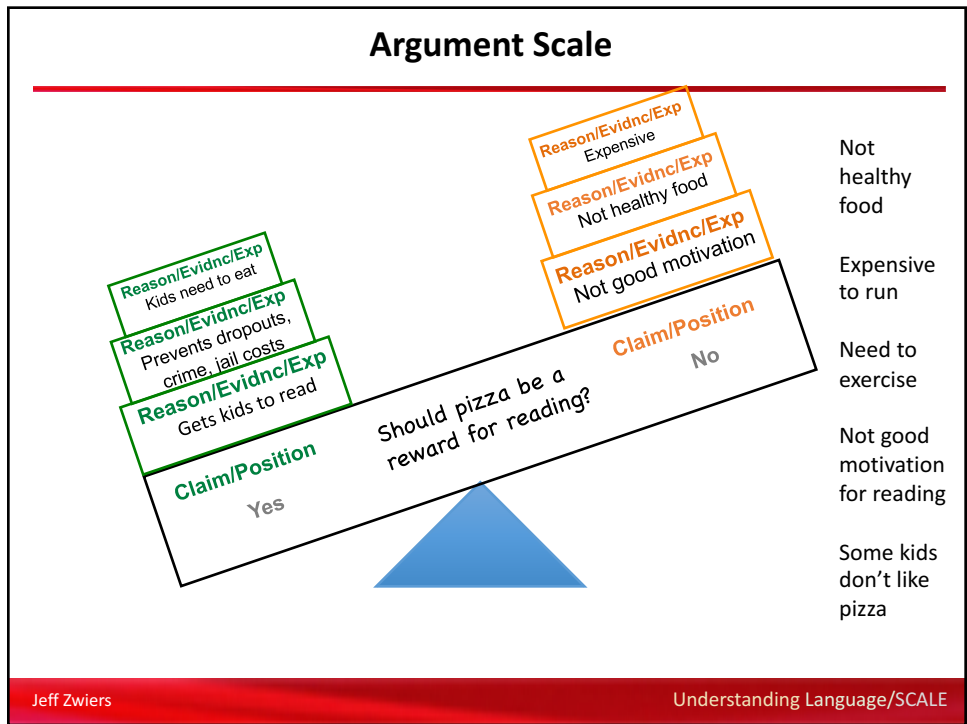
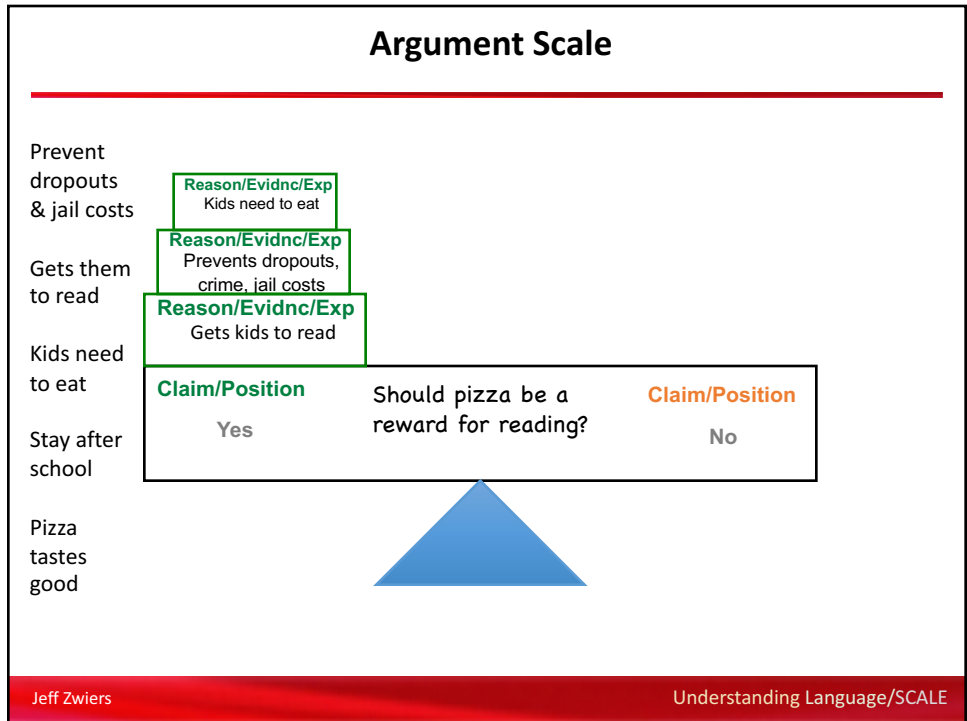
**Claim/Position**

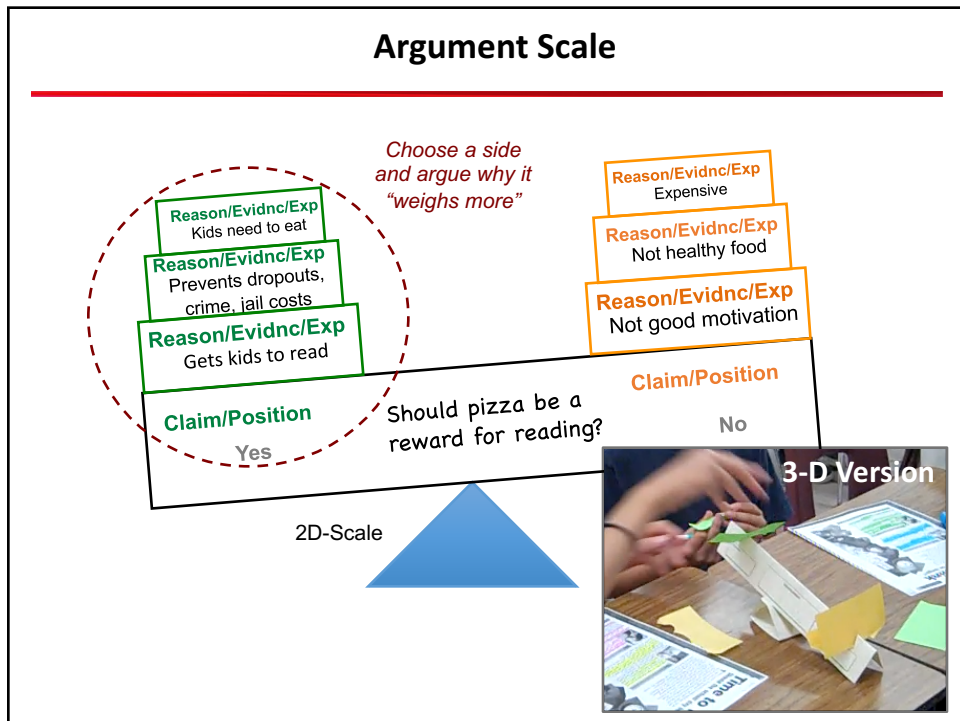
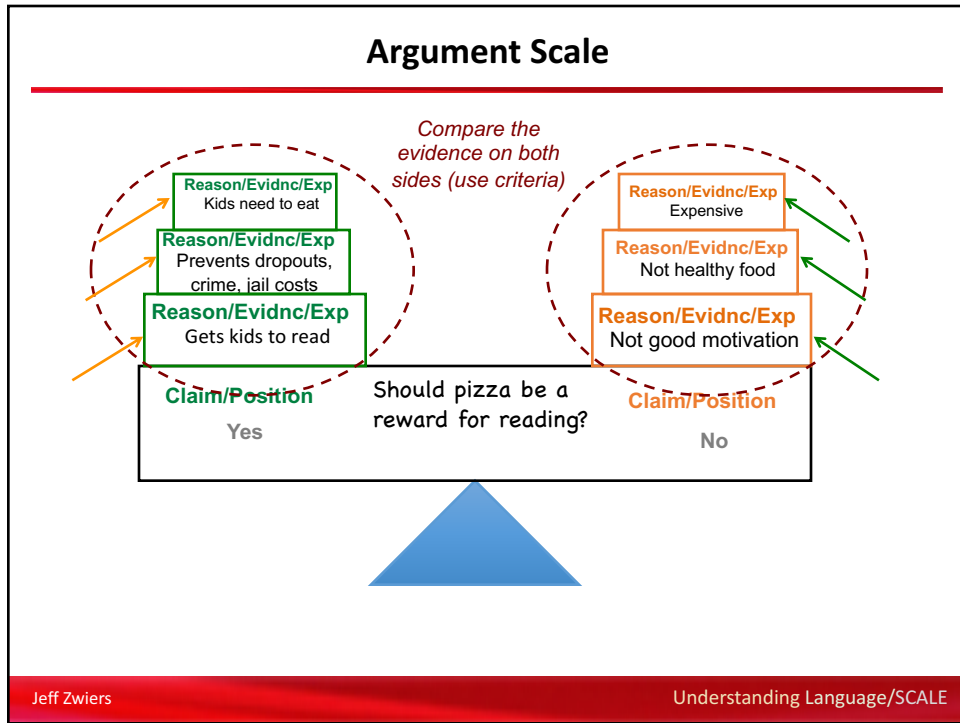
Good

Are humans good  
or evil?

**Claim/Position**

Evil





## Video Example

### CONTEXT

5<sup>th</sup> grade  
Language  
Arts/ELD class  
Advanced and  
early advanced  
partners.

After reading an  
article on a  
program that  
gives pizza as  
reward for  
reading,  
students discuss  
their opinions  
on the issue.



### THIS CLIP

- Watch for supporting opinions, building on ideas, and clarifying
- Notice if and how the balance scale helps students to extend talk
- Consider next steps based on this conversation

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## TOOL 2: Math Paired Conversation Protocol



### Math Paired Conversation Protocol

Suppose it takes the Almond River, by itself, 3 years to fill a reservoir, and Belfair Creek, on its own, 6 years to fill it. If both are flowing into the reservoir, how long will it take to fill it?


PROBLEM:

|  |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <p><b>Paraphrase and clarify problem for one another (in pairs)</b><br/> <i>(Talk about what is asked; what is given; what happens; what the units are, etc.)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/> TALK</p> |   |   |   |
| <p><b>Estimate the answer</b><br/> <i>(Each partner generate and justify your own estimate; then compare them)</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/> TALK</p>  |   |   |   |
| <p><b>METHOD A</b> <i>(name it)</i></p>  | <p>Justify method<br/><input type="checkbox"/> TALK</p>           | <p><b>METHOD B</b> <i>(name it)</i></p>                               | <p>Justify method<br/><input type="checkbox"/> TALK</p>           |
| <p>Visuals, Drawings, Charts,<br/>Symbols, Calculations, Solution</p>  | <p>Justify what you do<br/><br/><input type="checkbox"/> TALK</p> | <p>Visuals, Drawings, Charts,<br/>Symbols, Calculations, Solution</p> | <p>Justify what you do<br/><br/><input type="checkbox"/> TALK</p> |

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## TOOL 3:

### Conversation Observation & Assessment Tool (COAT)



## Conversation Observation & Analysis Tool (COAT)

### Prompt

### Quantity

### Quality

- Effective listening
- Clear speaking (+ use of language asked for in prompt)
- Academic thinking (+ use of thinking asked for in prompt)
- Academic content (+ talk about content asked for in prompt)
- Nonverbal communication

## Conversation Sample (6<sup>TH</sup> ELA)

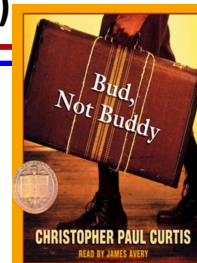
### *Before the conversation*

**Conversation skills:** Teacher used a Stronger-Clearer Grid to focus on clarifying and getting partners to clarify important ideas.

**Content Focus(s):** Teacher read a portion of the story *Bud, Not Buddy* aloud and modeled, thinking aloud, how to make summaries, predictions, inferences, and questions.

**Language:** Teacher put a graphic organizer up front that showed how to support ideas with evidence. Then she modeled language used for supporting, such as “What evidence supports that?” and “Why?”

**Prompt:** Build up an idea for an important theme in the story.





## Conversation Sample (6<sup>th</sup> ELA) (Using the COAT)

- 1A. Do you have a theme?
- 2B. Maybe racism.
- 3A. What do you mean by racism?
- 4B. It's like when you are mean to people cuz of race. Like you don't pay them enough or like...I don't know, like when they hit you.
- 5A. Or like the KKK and slaves.
- 6B. And this book, what's racism in it, like evidence?
- 7A. Like Mr. Callway. He always has a white person in the band.
- 8B. Why?
- 9A. Something about having land. Like black people couldn't have land, I think. He needed a white person to sign things.
- 10B. So (looking up at board), why did the author write this?
- 11A. Maybe to tell how hard life was then, like with racism?

| Prompt   |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relevant & Engaging Purpose   | <input type="checkbox"/> Need to talk (info gaps) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clear Expectations (language to use, thinking, content)   |   |
| Quantity   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> # of turns  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Length of turns   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Equity of voice   |   |
| Quality  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use conversation skills to co-construct & argue ideas   |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Turns build on previous turns</li> <li>— Students pose or choose a relevant initial idea(s) that is focused on learning objective(s)</li> <li>— Students clarify idea(s) (by paraphrasing, defining, elaborating, asking questions, negotiating, etc.)</li> <li>— Students support ideas (using evidence, examples, explanations)</li> </ul>  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— <i>If there are two or more competing ideas (argue/decide):</i> students build up both ideas and                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) evaluate the strength/weight of the evidence of each idea</li> <li>(b) compare the strength/weights and choose the "strongest/heaviest" idea</li> <li>(c) explain and/or negotiate final decisions &amp; conclusions</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Effective listening   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clear speaking (+ use of language asked for in prompt)  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Academic thinking (+ use of thinking asked for in prompt)   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Academic content (+ talk about content asked for in prompt)   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nonverbal communication   |   |

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## Conversation Sample (6<sup>th</sup> ELA) [Use the Support Cards]

- 12B. Yeah, but maybe also to, like, tell how people are good. Bud met nice people. And he only did one mean thing, like putting that kid's hand in warm water//
- 13A. //to make him pee in the bed. That was funny, but he deserved it. Lo mereció. So what now?
- 14B. The teacher said to build up ideas. Like my idea of people can be good. Like examples.
- 15A. Oh. Like the guy who picked him up and drove him. The guy with the blood.
- 16B. Yeah. I thought Buddy could live with them. They were nice.
- 17A. And the band was nice, too. Especially Miss Thomas. She was like his mother.
- 18B. How?
- 19A. She tucked him into bed and...I don't remember

| Prompt   |   |
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**TOOL 4:  
Conversation Support Cards**



**Conversation Support Cards (Pair w/ Observer)**

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|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Ask for an (another) example to support the idea          | Paraphrase what your partner said              | Ask your partner to clarify (Why...How...) |
| Show that you are listening with your eyes, nods, posture | Pose a competing idea and start to build it up | Stay focused on the conversation prompt    |
| Encourage your partner to talk more                       | Summarize the conversation up until now        | Ask for criteria used to evaluate evidence |

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## Practice Using the Cards to Support Conversations: Triads

### Identity (by Julio Noboa Polanco)

Let them be as flowers,  
always watered, fed, guarded, admired,  
but harnessed to a pot of dirt.

I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed,  
clinging on cliffs, like an eagle  
wind-wavering above high, jagged rocks.

I'd rather be unseen, and if then shunned by everyone,  
than to be a pleasant-smelling flower,  
growing in clusters in the fertile valley,  
where they're praised, handled, and plucked by greedy, human hands.

I'd rather smell of musty, green stench  
than of sweet, fragrant lilac.  
If I could stand alone, strong and free,  
I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed.



How might the ideas  
in this poem help  
some of our  
students?

## Improving Conversation Prompts

- There is an engaging purpose** for conversing that (a) **connects to lesson objectives**, and (b) **requires thinking & doing something with ideas** (e.g., create, clarify, argue (=>consensus), decide, rank, solve, evaluate, combine, compare, choose, fortify, build, & transform) (+ Agency)
  - ELA Literature: Collaboratively**
  - ELA Expository: Engage in a**
  - Math: Work with your partner to**
  - Science: In your conversation,**
  - History: With your partner, decide if Lincoln was more interested in abolishing slavery or more interested in preserving the Union. Use evidence to support the claims on each side and evaluate the value of the evidence, along with any bias that might exist in the sources. Use historian language such as "This is strong evidence because..."**
- There is a need to talk** (info gaps; bring unique ideas)
- There are clear directions** for how to converse (language use, thinking, content concepts...)

## Putting it All Together: Sample Lesson(s) Plan (ELA)

- I. **Objectives:** Infer and support themes in short stories.  
Argue the most important theme for students your age.
- II. **Stronger-Clearer Each Time:** Read same story, share theme, support
- III. **Modified Jigsaw:** Think-Pair-Square: Read different stories, share theme and evidence with partner, then w/ other pair.
- IV. **Transition Improv:** Two Differing Themes (e.g., 'Two Brothers')
- V. **Academic Conversation Model:** Emphasize skills of supporting and evaluating evidence and importance, and arguing for one theme over another.
- VI. **Argument Balance Scale Conversations:** Choose 1 of 2 Themes



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## Create a Model Conversation

Think of an upcoming (or past) lesson and write a conversation between two students that shows their learning.

A:

B:

A:

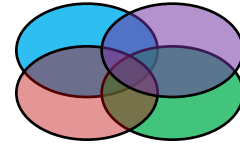
B:

- 1) You analyze the conversation for the skills and language you will need to teach.
- 2) You use the model conversation with students to show them what you are looking for when they have conversations.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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[ell.stanford.edu](http://ell.stanford.edu)



### References

- Mercer, N. (2000). *The Guided Construction of Knowledge: Talk amongst teachers and learners*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Zwiers, J. & Soto, I. (2016) *Academic Language Mastery: Conversational Discourse in Context*. Corwin Press.
- Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard (2014) *Common Core Standards in diverse classrooms: Essential practices for developing academic language & disciplinary literacy*. Stenhouse.