



What If Students Have Nothing to Say?

Many Kagan Structures are designed to promote student discussion. Kagan Structures encourage students to share information about the curriculum and about themselves. There are many benefits of giving students the opportunity to share information.

Benefits of Sharing Information with Others

- Students are actively involved in the lesson
- Students make personal connections with the curriculum
- Students remember what they share
- Students practice sharing information
- Students develop oral communication skills
- Students practice active listening



These are all great benefits, right? But what happens if students don't share as we intend them to? Take a look at these scenarios:

Students are in pairs. The teacher announces: "We're going to do a Timed Pair Share to share what you know about reptiles. Partner A, you have thirty seconds, please begin." Partner A in one pair has no shortage of things to share. He can go on and on about the different types of reptiles, reptiles he owns at home, and the characteristics of reptiles. This is exactly what you hope to happen in every pair. But it's not... Partner A in another pair is completely silent. Her partner waits patiently as the time ticks away. She doesn't make a peep the entire time.

Partner A in another pair shares: "Reptiles are animals like snakes, lizards, and turtles." That's all he can think of about the topic or thinks that's sufficient and stops talking. The rest of the time is silent.

Partner A in another team crosses her hands. While she knows plenty about reptiles, she just doesn't want to participate.

More often than not, students share exactly as we hope. Yet there are those times where participation is sub par or students just don't participate at all. There are many possible reasons: Maybe they know nothing about the topic; maybe they feel uncomfortable speaking about the topic; maybe they haven't had enough time to formulate their ideas; maybe their partner already shared all their ideas. Let's look at some tips to promote sharing and to eliminate that awkward and unwanted silence in peer discussion structures.

Tips for Boosting Talk in Sharing Structures

Think Time

Sometimes students simply need to give the topic some thought before they are ready to share their ideas. Research on Think Time or Wait Time suggests that a mere 3–5 seconds of think time after the teacher question or prompt helps students elaborate their ideas and promotes more varied responses and more elaborate and thoughtful responses. Don't forget to add a think time after each your question. For example: "We're going to do a Timed Pair Share to share what you know about reptiles. Think about everything you know about reptiles. (3–5 second think time.) Partner A, please share for 30 seconds."



Write Time

Write time, like think time, gives students the opportunity to formulate their responses. Many people don't know what they are really thinking about a topic until they write it down. That's often why journaling and diary writing are so powerful. Writing enables many of us to fully examine what's on our minds as we think through the topic and write down our ideas. Think-Write-RallyRobin and Think-Write-RoundRobin are two great structures to have students first think and write about the topic before they share. When you use a write time, students can either read their writing during the share time, or you can have them set their writing aside and share now from top of their heads. It's amazing what a little write time can do for the quality and quantity of student interaction.

Teacher Guidance

Sometimes it is helpful for the teacher to provide a little more guidance with the prompt. The teacher can often "pull" more out of students by making the prompt more specific. For example, the prompt may begin the same way: "We're going to do a Timed Pair Share to share what you know about reptiles." Then, the teacher may tack on some prompts for students to think about: "Think about any reptiles you have or have seen...Think about what they look like...Think about their characteristics such as their skin, blood, reproduction... Think about what makes them different from other animals." These additional prompts will surely stimulate more student ideas.

Ditto

One problem teachers may encounter when pairs share information during a pair interaction structure is the prior speaker may "steal the thunder" from the next student. The student may respond, "hey that's what I was going to say," or say "ditto, or "me too" and have nothing more to add. There are a few ways to handle this scenario. The first is to prevent it. To prevent this from happening, change the question substantially between speakers. For example, the prompt for Partner A may be: "Describe what a snake and lizard have in common." The prompt for Partner B may be: "Describe how a snake is different than a rat." A different prompt avoids the possibility redundancy.

Another way to handle the "ditto" situation is to inform students that just because someone shared a similar idea, their idea is perfectly valid and equally worth sharing. They will share it in their own words and in their own way. Tell students that even if it sounds redundant, I want to hear what you were planning to share as if your partner hadn't said anything at all. Plus, if it is similar, redundancy just makes it more memorable.

Multiple Options

Sometimes we know a lot and have a lot to say about a particular topic, yet know or have very little to share about another topic. Give students multiple options so they can select the option that they have the most interest in or knowledge about. You can give students multiple options verbally. For example: "You can share what you know about snakes, lizards, or turtles." Or, you can display multiple questions or topics for students to share on. For example:

Pick One

- 1) Share what you know about reptiles.
- 2) Share what you know about amphibians.
- 3) Share what you know about mammals.

Refuse to Share

If a student refuses to share or participate during student interaction time, that is a separate issue altogether. In that case, you have a 'Refusenik' and may have to deal with the student on an individual basis.

Teambuilding and Classbuilding are great preventative strategies that lay the foundation for increasing the likelihood of sharing by creating a cooperative and caring learning environment that removes the threat of sharing openly. Also, regularly using student discussion and participation structures such as RoundRobin, Talking Chips, and Three-Step Interview encourages active engagement by all students. This helps the student get accustomed to frequent sharing. But if these preventative measures don't do the trick, we suggest teaching students to use the Encourager role and gambits to "bring in" the student. "We would really like to hear your opinion on..." Teaching students positive reinforcement is also helpful: "Thank you so much for

sharing your ideas." And finally, if the student still refuses to participate, he or she can always work independently (on a much less fun task, of course!).

Everyone Silent

What do you do if you ask a question, and listen in dismay to the sound of crickets chirping? No one has anything to say. Students either 1) don't understand the question or 2) don't know anything about the topic. If you know your students know the content, then they probably were thrown off by the question. Try to re-word the question to make it more comprehensible. If students don't know enough about the topic, consider re-teaching.

Top Information Sharing Structures:

- Timed Pair Share
- Mix-Pair-Share
- RoundRobin
- RallyRob
- Timed Pair Interview
- Three Step Interview

Laurie Kagan