Talk About Understanding: Rethinking Classroom Talk to Enhance Comprehension


At a time in education when discussion is centered on Common Core Standards and high stakes testing, the question often arises, “How can we help our students understand more deeply?” Ellin Oliver Keene’s new book, Talk About Understanding, explores this question by focusing on classroom talk as the fundamental tool to build this understanding. She wonders, “What does it mean to understand deeply?” (p. xv) and “How do we know if we understand deeply?” (p. xv), questions she admits have occupied her mind for over a decade. The easy-to-use text in Talk About Understanding provides descriptors to measure students’ depth of understanding pertaining to strategy use, as well as an investigation of the common discourse within classrooms and minor modifications which can be made in order to enhance students’ understanding and to help them understand more deeply.

Part I, “Ideas that Last,” begins with a focus on what it means to understand by looking at strategy instruction, and proposes how to extend strategy use to deepen comprehension and understanding for students. Keene introduces “The Outcomes of Understanding” model, a list of ten cognitive outcomes for readers which indicate students’ deeper levels of understandings. Included is a convenient two-page table that includes cognitive outcomes for readers and learners, and explains all ten of the outcomes which indicate deeper understanding. Outcome 4, for example, states, “We ponder—we feel a desire to pause and dwell in new facets and twists in the text. We may want to reread in order to think more about certain ideas” (p. 23). In subsequent chapters, Keene explores the outcomes and explains how to integrate the outcomes within
strategy instruction. Classroom examples, templates, and “try this with your class” sections make this text incredibly user-friendly to navigate and understand the outcomes.

In following chapters, Keene explains how to utilize the outcomes in both narrative and informational text in classrooms and even provides an example of her step-by-step lesson where she is integrating strategy instruction and narrative outcomes in a second grade classroom. Videos, titled “From the Inside,” accompany Chapters 3 and 5 and reveal Keene implementing the strategies and outcomes in action, almost as though the reader is in the classroom. Even without the video accompaniment, there are small snapshots of the lesson to visualize the lessons to maximize engagement.

Part II, “Words that Matter,” investigates common oral language patterns in classrooms and teacher talk, which are more or less effective for comprehension. Part II is highly transferable to all classroom discourse and therefore makes this valuable for teachers at any grade level and across any content area. Keene affirms, “I have come to believe that the way we speak to children, the questions we ask, and the way we encourage them to interact with each other have everything to do with the depth and staying power of their comprehension” (p. 81). Keene suggests that with recognition of our common talk with children and through minute adjustment, teachers can “inspire a very different level of thinking in children” (p. 81). Keene developed the “Talk About Understanding Principles” as a tool for teachers to adapt oral language patterns in an effort to create deeper understanding and comprehension amongst students.

“Initiating Talk with Children”, Chapter 6, provides five steps to take when informally speaking to students to enhance understanding; while Chapter 8, “Responding to Children’s Talk,” provides five steps for responding which should enhance student understanding. Principle
8, for example, states “label one child’s ideas with language you want all children to use.” The principles are clearly labeled, explained, and modeled in another “From the Inside” look in a real classroom with a third video to observe.

One concern when navigating Part I of *Talk about Understanding* is having the background knowledge from Keene’s prior texts in order to better make use of the “Outcome of Understanding” model. She relies heavily on her previous books, particularly *Mosaic of Thought*, and comprehension strategies as she examines increasing student depth of understanding through oral communication. The strategies are included and outlined briefly, but it is rather quickly assumed that the reader has adequate knowledge of the comprehension strategies in order to make sense of the newly outlined Outcomes of Understanding: indicators of deeper comprehension.

Despite this issue, *Talk About Understanding* succeeds at providing the skills to easily identify levels of deeper understanding and principles to guide classroom discourse to deepen students’ understanding. With extensive practical tools, glances inside real classrooms via the snapshots within the text, as well as the DVD inclusion of Keene modeling narrative and informational text lessons, the new information can be implemented immediately.

When focusing on deepening our students’ understanding we must look at what we as teachers can do and change, and *Talk about Understanding* is an opportune and well-timed resource.