



Breaking Discussion into Teachable Skills:

A Case Study of R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion
at Nativity Preparatory School

R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion

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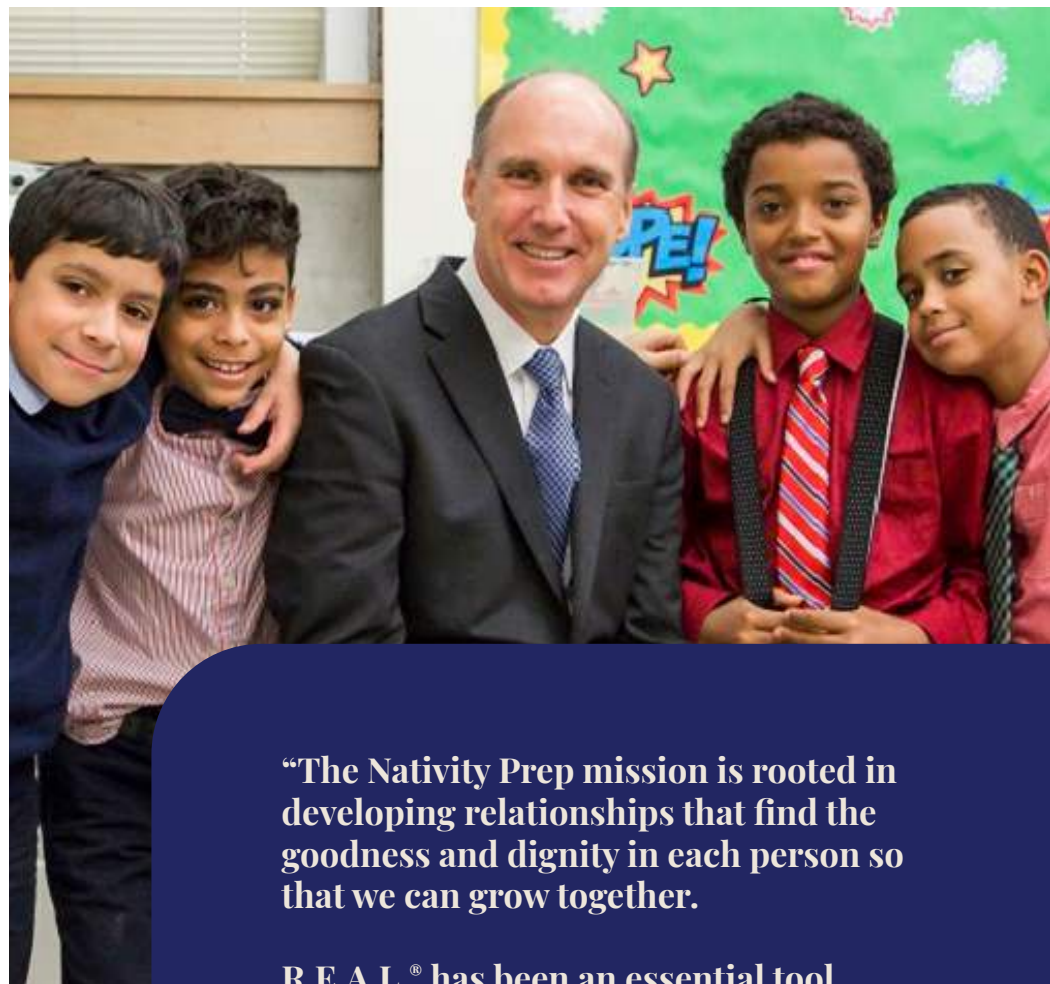
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About the School

Nestled in Jamaica Plain, Boston, Nativity Prep provides a transformative, tuition-free Jesuit education to boys from low-income families. Its intensive academic, after-school, and graduate programs empower young men of color to break the cycle of poverty, to thrive in high school, college, and career, and to become compassionate “men for others.”

The School is well-known and respected – and for good reason! Nearly 55 young men in 5th-8th grade learn, grow, serve, and pray at the school each day, guided and supported by a professional faculty, dozens of skilled volunteers, and hundreds of committed benefactors. The school’s 350 alumni currently study at the area’s best independent high schools and colleges, work in a vast range of industries, and contribute to their neighborhoods through civil and community service.

President Brian Maher realized that achieving Nativity Prep’s mission – in which students grow in character, deepen their faith, and develop transferable academic skills – required a foundational skill set: **the ability to express oneself and listen deeply to others.**



“The Nativity Prep mission is rooted in developing relationships that find the goodness and dignity in each person so that we can grow together.

R.E.A.L.® has been an essential tool that gives our students the skills and confidence to both listen and be heard.”

–Brian Maher, President



*Francisco Castillo-Fierro,
Nativity Assistant Principal*

“At Nativity, we are called not to take the easy path. We believe that just as you work hard on the sports field to practice each element of a winning play, so too do you need to work hard to develop the communication skills you need to get through moments of disagreement. That’s why this year, we are teaching R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion in your 6th grade English classes.”



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The Vision

Francisco Castillo-Fierro, Assistant Principal, and Patrick Farmer, Middle School Humanities Lead, understood the urgency – and power! – of explicitly teaching discussion skills. “At Nativity Prep, we believe in the power of everyone’s voice,” explains Francisco. “We also know that in today’s world, it can be hard and scary to have conversations that include everyone’s voices – especially when you disagree or feel as if you can’t connect with someone else’s perspective. It’s easy to get angry, or quiet, or feel alone when you’re the only one who knows a certain experience or thinks a certain way.”

Though they remained sensitive to the struggle today’s students may face when embarking upon challenging in-person conversations, Francisco and Patrick had a clear vision for what they knew their students could achieve with the right training.

Patrick had come to Nativity Prep from another leading independent school, where he had been trained in the R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion method. He saw R.E.A.L.[®] as the perfect tool to “demystify discussion” for his students and break the art of discussion into teachable, practice-able, transferable skills that boys could name, practice, and use in and beyond school.

“R.E.A.L.[®] breaks the mystery of a ‘good discussion’ into teachable, learnable skills,” says Patrick. “And that allows students to set goals and grow. It deepens discussions and gives greater access to everyone in our classroom to participate.”



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The Strategy

Patrick introduced R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion to his sixth graders through a winning metaphor: discussion, he posited, is just like basketball! Patrick explained that in discussion, you have choices about what “moves” to make each time you talk – just as in basketball the ball-handler asks himself: should I dribble, pass, or shoot? And, like basketball, discussion is fundamentally a team sport, not something an individual can win or lose.

A successful discussion is like a basketball game: the whole team works together to answer a question or advance the ball down the court, and individual players make real-time decisions about how to help their teammates achieve that common goal. The expectation is that at the end of the game, the coach offers the team feedback, and the players debrief how it went.

Using the R.E.A.L.[®] framework, Patrick explained that discussion comes with a similar selection of “moves” from which a speaker can choose: should I Relate, use Evidence, Ask, or Listen right now? Likewise, he positioned himself as a Coach rather than a referee or a star-player – both roles he had found himself squeezed into when using other discussion methods. Patrick wanted his students to realize right away that discussion isn’t something an individual can “win”; rather, it is the consummate team sport.



“I tell the kids: there’s not always a right or a wrong move for a speaker, but each move does have a different effect. It gets them thinking: how can I set up the next person? Just like in basketball: how can I set up the shooter down at the net when I’m way back at the half court? Introducing discussion as a menu of discrete moves - relate, excerpt, ask, listen - makes it feel achievable.”

–Patrick Farmer, Middle School Humanities Lead



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The Strategy

Once he had introduced his students to this interpretation, what did class discussions look like in practice? Patrick spent two class periods orienting students to R.E.A.L.[®] Skills (Relate, Excerpt, Ask, and Listen) and Routines (student-led rituals for preparation, facilitation, goal-setting, note-taking, and reflection). Then, throughout the year, students used R.E.A.L.[®] to discuss a range of texts. As they applied the skills they had learned to various texts with disparate themes, students saw first-hand that they could use these skills to talk about different topics.

Discussions in Patrick's classroom aren't always easy – and they can be chaotic. Patrick knows he needs to let the boys grow into their discussion skills. It is his job to facilitate, advise, and make suggestions – not offer solutions or lifelines – alongside their natural learning curve.

“The first R.E.A.L.[®] discussion can be messy,” says Patrick. “But the R.E.A.L.[®] action / reflection cycle positions me as the coach, which allows me to bring students back together after the discussion and say, ‘hey, how did it go?’ The kids are so real. They’ll say, ‘that was a mess, Mr. Farmer.’ They know this. R.E.A.L.[®] helps them name it, and together we solve for it. We get a list going of some of the problems the groups encountered, and we talk about how some choices didn’t benefit the whole team.” In each class discussion, Patrick’s students practice their newfound skills, and over time routines that were once foreign become second-nature. Just as it is when learning a new sport, practice is instrumental in learning how to engage in dynamic class discussion.



“If you want to try out for president, you need to discuss how and what you’re gonna change.”

– Student on real-life application of the R.E.A.L.[®] skills in his future

“And that’s when we return to the four skills: R,E,A,L. I help them imagine what paths might have led to other outcomes – and next discussion, they make different decisions...and they can’t wait to talk through that in the next debrief!”

–Patrick Farmer

The Results

Every Student's Voice, Every Discussion

Patrick reflects that an increase in equity and student agency is perhaps the most visible impact of R.E.A.L.® Discussion. “By breaking the mystery of a ‘good discussion’ into teachable, learnable skills, R.E.A.L.® invites all students - not just the extroverts - to set achievable goals, participate intentionally, and grow. It gives greater access to everyone in our classroom to participate. It never gets old hearing every kid’s voice, every discussion, and watching them make space for each other,” he says.

Student notes in their Discussion Portfolios confirm that they, too, delight in having a way to make space for each other. As one student reflected: “It’s just good when everyone talks!” Another said: “I used to be scared to talk because I didn’t know what to say or that anyone would listen. That is not true anymore.”

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–Student

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Teacher as Coach

R.E.A.L.® shifts agency to the students rather than allowing them to rely on Patrick to lead discussions and highlight revelatory ideas. “With R.E.A.L.®, it’s no longer me upfront telling the boys something they need to understand,” says Patrick. **“They generate that understanding for themselves, and that’s where learning happens. That’s where learning sticks.”**

When he’d enacted other discussion methods, Patrick found himself too involved in the actual discussion, too likely to point out a core theme or interesting close read, too loud a voice among his students. R.E.A.L.® enables him to serve as coach rather than lead participant by empowering his students with the tools they need to make their own “moves” in discussion.



Click the [link](#) to watch Nativity Prep sixth graders learn to use R.E.A.L.®. See what growth you can spot across two different discussions.

The Results

Discussion as Practice for Writing

The independence students build through this process prepares them for longer writing assignments. Students leave discussion ready to write – with ideas about themes, takeaways from the book, and topic sentences prepared.

Patrick uses the R.E.A.L.[®] model to align discussion with his writing assignments, so his students understand how the work they do in discussion prepares them to write essays. Like many R.E.A.L.[®] teachers, Patrick has noticed that R.E.A.L.[®] skills transfer directly to writing: particularly students' ability to articulate connections across texts (relating) and incorporate textual evidence (excerpting).

Discussion as Practice for the “Real World”

Students find yet another purpose in R.E.A.L.[®]: they are quick to explain how these skills impact their lives beyond school and imagine how they will prepare them for success in the future. As one sixth grader predicted: “discussion skills will help us in jobs, like whenever we have a conference we will need these skills.” Another noted that in discussion, “you learn about new meanings and how to pay attention to what people say.” A third reflected, “I think discussion skills can help me in the future because I can use these skills to talk in important meetings and get into good-paying jobs. Doing this could get me a raise in income.”

Reflections like these show the power of purpose for students: by giving children space to articulate their dreams for the future, classroom work and activities like R.E.A.L.[®] can take on deeper meaning – even for eleven-year-olds.

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–6th Grader

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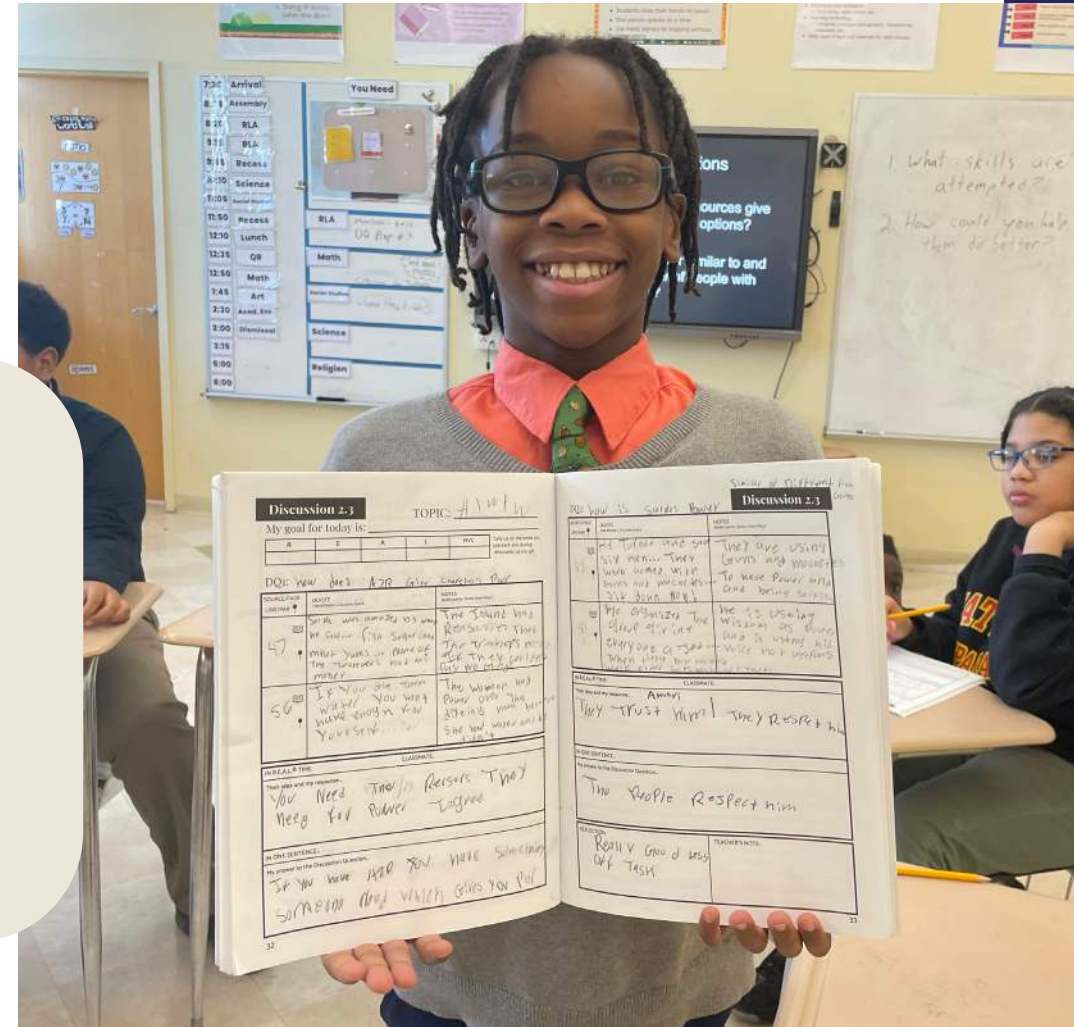
–6th Grader

The Results

Cultivating Interdependence

Patrick relishes how R.E.A.L.® Discussion helps students begin to recognize both the power of their individual voices and the utility of collaborating to create something bigger than themselves – especially as they grow up in a competitive and polarized world.

He remembers: “In our final debrief, the kids started to realize that wait...all these themes are connected! They couldn’t have gotten to that point of understanding without each other. And they were so excited – jumping out of their seats. They were so into it. **And that’s the ultimate goal of R.E.A.L.®, right? The thrill and excitement and joy of building an idea together, thinking together, and reaching a new understanding together. In today’s world, that’s powerful.**”





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Building Foundational Life Skills with R.E.A.L.®

Nativity Prep prides itself on cultivating “men for others,” who are prepared to thrive both in academic environments and in their communities. By deploying R.E.A.L.® in humanities classrooms, the school demonstrated its commitment to building foundational life skills that help students live the school’s mission.

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–Patrick Farmer



R.E.A.L.® partners with schools to teach, measure, and celebrate the live discussion skills students need for school and life.

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