

Help! I Can't Shut Up!

by Cheryl Sigmon

In an in-service program in Liberal, Kansas, recently, I asked teachers to write on index cards any issues, concerns or questions they had about their implementation of Four-Blocks. I spent my lunch hour that day reading through the note cards to prepare a Q and A session for the afternoon. I admit to bursting hysterically into laughter with one card in particular. This teacher wrote a simple comment in the section regarding Guided Reading Block: "Help! I can't shut up!"

After regaining my composure, I begin to think about what she had so genuinely and insightfully shared in her exclamation. In fact, I would say that this is probably THE major issue that teachers face as they implement this block. It's one of the critical differences between traditional guided reading instruction and Four-Blocks guided reading instruction—stepping back and turning the learning over to the students.

For so long, teachers saw their roles as that of the all-knowing dispenser of knowledge. I even go back to the days where students were neatly lined up in rows and expected to listen, often quite passively, to the teacher for the majority of their day. Now, we realize that students need to be actively engaged in learning. We need to keep our instruction in briefer, more powerful "sound-bytes" of time. We need to spend preparation time finding authentic contexts for the learning so that students understand immediately how this new knowledge will benefit them. Then, we need to let students have a chance to try their wings as they practice and apply what they're learning.

Just what are the times that we need to be most guarded of in encouraging our mouths to close? Let's walk through our day block by block to find these important times to zip our lips...

During Self-Selected Reading Block, we start this block by reading aloud to the students. If we're tempted to take the "teachable moment" during our read-aloud (unless it's, perhaps, a slight reference to a connection

we want to make), we need to stop and use our reading voices and not our teacher voices.

During the middle segment of SSR block, the only voices talking aloud should be the teacher and the student as they chat together about what the student is reading. The teacher's goal here should be to "shut up" as much as possible and let the conference be child-centered and as much child-directed as possible. One example of how that can happen is by using the Take-5 method of conferencing (See the chart in the Fun Stuff section of this website). The student will have prepared for the conference by placing VIP strips (a sticky note snipped 4 times towards the sticky end to form 5 fingers that can be detached easily and placed on the pages of a book) in various places throughout the book he's bringing to discuss. He has made choices of things to mark that he found interesting, something that he already knew, something new he learned, a new word, something that made him wonder, and something that left him with a question, among other reasons for marking a word, phrase or section of text. All the teacher needs to say is, "Tell me what you marked in your book today that you wanted to share, and tell me why you marked it." Then, the teacher can zip his/her own lips as the child takes responsibility for the conference.

The closure to Self-Selected Reading Block is another time that the teacher can remain silent as students share in whatever format has been designated. This is a time that students "bless the book" (using Linda Gambrell's words) just as the teacher blessed a book in the read-aloud.

Next, to start the Guided Reading Block, the teacher has approximately ten minutes of "me time" to connect students to the text and to teach the comprehension mini-lesson directly and explicitly. The spotlight here is on the teacher—a good time to talk, so take full advantage of it. But, remember to keep it short and sweet. They might sit beyond the ten minutes. They might even be looking at you beyond the ten minutes, but the quality time when they'll really be concentrating on and absorbing the information is lost. Practice condensing your introduction so that it is short. Remember to find a narrow focus on a valuable skill or strategy that can be transferred beyond this particular text. Integrate all that you can to make it short. Sometimes I can use a Rivet activity to teach my vocabulary as well as to establish prior knowledge and to make predictions. All that's left then

is teaching my mini-lesson and setting a purpose for reading. Remember, too, that you have about 180 days to teach the skills and strategies. You don't have to do it all with this story on this day!

The middle segment of *Guided Reading* might require a teacher's voice if the teacher chooses to work with an individual child or a small group. Or, the teacher might choose to read with or to the whole group if that level of support is necessary. But, on some occasions, the teacher really needs to "shut up" during the during reading time and let the kids take responsibility for practicing and applying what they've learned. Trust that they'll grow to appreciate this opportunity.

At the closure of *Guided Reading*, the teacher's voice might be heard, but usually this is a time for the teacher to be gathering data informally about how successful the students have been at applying the skill that day. How can we gather the information we need if we're the only one talking? So, let's "shut up"!

In the *Working with Words Block*, the teacher's voice is heard often. This is what Pat Cunningham refers to as a "bossy block"—one where the teacher directs what's occurring. You'll need to use your eyes and make mental notes throughout the block about how students are able to respond. So, this is a block where you can take advantage of talking!

In the *Writing Block*, it's "me time" again as the block opens—where the teacher is modeling, thinking aloud, and teaching something directly and explicitly. Again, remember that you have about 180 teaching days, and you don't have to teach everything at once. Focus on something in your writing today that will grow your students as writers and that will transfer into their writing. If the piece you want to write is too long for a ten minute timeframe, then break it apart and only write an appropriate chunk that will fit comfortably into your ten minute lesson.

During the middle segment of the *Writing Block*, the only voices talking aloud should be the teacher and the student conferencing together unless you also have students who are peer editing or revising at the same time. Just as with the *Self-Selected Reading Conference*, you want to give as much responsibility as you possibly can for the conference and for the

decisions to be made about the composition to the student. Learn to ask leading questions such as, "Tell me how you came up with your lead and whether you feel it's a strong lead." Or, "How do you think you've grown so far this year as a writer? How does this composition demonstrate that?" Teaching students to talk like writers goes a long way towards building their total confidence as writers.

At the closure of the Writing Block, the students should have a chance to continue to talk like writers. The teacher's voice might be heard encouraging this conversation as students share, but the main voice should be that of the student.

Now, are there times in Four-Blocks that students must learn to "shut up"? Of course! Don't get me wrong. They must learn to listen, be respectful of adults and others, follow directions, and absorb what's being taught. But, one of the most beneficial social skills students must learn is how to interact with each other, how to negotiate and compromise, and how to work together. In Four-Blocks classrooms, we teach that well! We put them in cooperative groups, and we learn that facilitating their discussions and applications can be far more beneficial than having them listen to us. In other words, to coin someone else's infamous words, we give up being the "sage on the stage" and become the "guide on the side." So much more powerful during many portions of our classroom day.

The first tip in achieving the shift from "sage" to "guide" is taking the time to teach procedures, routines, and expectations. Do this from the very beginning of the school year. For example, take the time to teach students how to read with a partner during Guided Reading—How do you know who your partner is? How do you read with that partner? How do you take turns reading? Where do you go to read with them? What do you take with you? What do you do when you've finished reading? All of the details need to be taught and modeled many times before students have true independence with that format. The more time you take early in the year to teach these procedures, the smoother your year will go. Although you'll feel that you're off to a slow start, it's time well spent!

From my observations in Four-Blocks classrooms—or actually in all classrooms around America—I believe that the most successful teachers are

those whose voices are heard the least. But, when they do speak, they are heard, and their voice has an impact. If teachers speak too often, they risk becoming a constant, muffled voice much like the voices of the parents in the animated "Peanuts" cartoon---whaaa, whaaa, whaaa, whaaa.... So, let's make a pact to do our best to "shut up" so that our students will hear us!