



# Spinning the Web

*Student-led conversations can create true leaders and collaborators.*

**Alexis Wiggins**

**W**hen I was in high school, most of my classes were exercises in dictation. Whether the class was 10th grade chemistry or advanced placement European history, I was expected to copy information from the board and then recall it for tests, papers, and projects. These days, we expect more of our students. We want them to have good recall of content, but more than that, we want high school graduates who can collaborate and communicate well.

Just ask Google.

In 2009, Google began an initiative called Project Oxygen to figure out the eight key attributes of the company's best managers. They called the list The Big Eight and ranked the traits in order of importance:

1. Be a good coach.
2. Empower your team and don't micro-manage.
3. Express interest in team members' success and personal well-being.
4. Be productive and results-oriented.
5. Be a good communicator and listen to your team.
6. Help your employees with career development.
7. Have a clear vision and strategy for the team.

8. Have key technical skills so you can help advise the team.

Noting that technical skills such as the ability to write computer code ranked last, the Google team in charge of the project said that employees most valued “even-keeled bosses who made time for one-on-one meetings, who helped people puzzle through problems by asking questions, not dictating answers, and who took an interest in employees’ lives and careers.”<sup>1</sup> Technical skills were not nearly as important to employees as their managers’ ability to make a connection and communicate well with staff. Knowing how to empower a group is vital in a company like Google, where everything is designed, created, and implemented through collaboration.

### Building Better Collaborators

In my mid-20s I was hired at a school where Socratic seminar-style discussion was used in all classrooms. For the first time in my teaching career, I had to shift from being a font of knowledge to being a facilitator. The challenge posed was entirely novel to me: How could I get students *themselves* to uncover the most pertinent, key understandings in the content with as little hand-holding from me as possible?

Using a rubric a colleague shared with me, I asked students to engage in fairly standard practices during discussions: listening, being respectful, referring to the text to support a point, and not interrupting others. One interesting element was that the rubric asked for fairly equal participation during discussion. The shy kids would need to make an effort to speak up, and the chatty kids would need to make an effort to give others room to speak. The kicker, though, was at the bottom of the rubric: “Because this is a team effort, there will be a team grade. *The whole class will get the same grade.*”

This was truly different. In all the years I had

been a teacher or a student, the participation grade was always about 10 percent of the students’ overall grade, and it was always an individual grade. A shared grade meant that someone else’s behavior could bring a student’s grade down, which would be unfair. But I quickly realized the power of the group grade. At the beginning of the year, students immediately understood that they were in it together, working as a team. All students

actively tried to get others to participate because they knew their grade depended on it.

After several months, I discovered that many bright, vocal students who had always been stars in English class were not really good collaborators—they were just loudmouths. Slowly, the dynamic shifted. More loquacious students learned to be better question askers and discussion facilitators, and shy students crept out of their shells and offered more insights, sometimes becoming leaders themselves—much to everyone’s surprise (including my own).

For years, I had given As to students for participation when all they did was monopolize discussion, and I had given Cs to students who were just too shy to speak. How was that grading process helping either of them learn? I was just grading them on their natural tendencies, not on their true ability to communicate, lead, or collaborate.

When I made that discovery, I knew I would never go back to individual grading of discussions. I have used my own version of Socratic seminar, called Spider Web Discussion, for several years because I am so convinced that grading how students collaborate is fundamental to getting them to do so authentically.

For those educators who are wary of the fairness of group grading or who work in schools that do not allow it, I’d urge you to use it anyway—just don’t count the grades. I’ve done this at several schools where there was a policy of not allowing

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group grades; to my surprise, the practice was just as effective. When students are aware that they will be assessed and graded, even if the grade is symbolic, they perform at a higher level.

### Spinning the Web

The Spider Web Discussion begins with identifying the goals for the discussion. When developing a rubric, the most important thing is to identify what you want to achieve during discussions with regard to inquiry, style, and collaboration. See the sample rubrics at [http://alexiswiggins.pbworks.com/w/page/57830796/SPIDER\\_WEB\\_Discussion\\_Documents](http://alexiswiggins.pbworks.com/w/page/57830796/SPIDER_WEB_Discussion_Documents) for ideas of the types of items you might include. Rubrics can include items related to good discussion skills, as well as items related to content.

My English language arts discussion rubric, for example, includes these requirements for groups discussing a literary text to earn an A:

- *Everyone* has participated in a meaningful and substantive way and more or less equally.
- There is a sense of balance and order; the focus is on one speaker at a time and one idea at a time. The discussion is lively, and the pace is right (not hyper or boring).
- Students back up what they say with examples and quotations regularly throughout the discussion. Dialectical journals and/or the text are read from out loud *often* to support arguments.
- Literary features/writing style and class vocabulary are paid special attention and mention. There is at least one literary feature *and* one new vocabulary word used correctly in each discussion.

During the discussion, students sit in a circle, and I sit silently in the back, outside the circle, with a blank note pad in front of me. On the note pad, I draw a circle with students' names on it, and I graph the

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discussion “web” by drawing lines across the circle as students respond to one another’s points.

In the first year of using Spider Web Discussion, I realized that the group discussion gave me a wealth of data on individual students. I began making notes about each student regarding items on the rubric. For example, I wrote *I* next to students’ names every time they interrupted and *T* every time they referenced the text.

With time, I expanded my notes to include other intriguing patterns. Insightful comments or sharp, probing questions would earn a star. Some students were especially good at comments, and some were especially good at questions—interestingly, they often weren’t the same students. The ones who were excellent question askers were sometimes students I’d least imagine giving a star to—they tended to be more marginalized students who were overlooked socially or academically.

This system enables me to easily track students’ patterns over the year and target their needs specifically. For example, I noted that a student named Alexandra spoke often, but her comments were nearly always superficial, evincing a lack of depth or understanding. Once I saw this pattern, I was able to sit down with Alexandra and encourage her to think through her comments first or to share some of her deeper insights from her reading journal, rather than commenting

mainly on plot and superficial elements. Tracking her comments helped me see that she wasn’t getting deep enough into the texts, so I could talk about this with her after only a few discussions and before any high-stakes assessments. Using this kind of data to help students correct errors in thinking or understanding *before* the big test or paper was one of the most powerful outcomes of my coding system.

### Students Take the Lead

In most high schools, Socratic seminars are driven by the teacher. Although students are the ones discussing, the teacher remains the referee and master of knowledge, offering the right question at the right moment, redirecting the conversation, correcting misunderstandings, and ensuring that students are civil. With Spider Web Discussion, I have moved away from that model toward a student-facilitated one. During discussions, I sit in the back, avoiding eye contact.

If I’m sitting in the back, who is asking questions, redirecting the conversation, correcting misunderstandings, and ensuring that students are being civil? The students are. By the middle of the year, they do it very well, and I take great pleasure in seeing how irrelevant I am. Students are far better referees and masters of knowledge than we usually give them credit for. The video at [www.authenticeducation.org/alexis](http://www.authenticeducation.org/alexis) shows how well students can stay on task and move toward deep thinking without my help.

When I first introduce the Spider Web model to my class, I explain the process, share the rubric, set a time for discussion, and then let students discuss. For the first discussion, I try to find something that really hooks the students and that will spark a good debate without too much effort. I find that short films often do the



trick. Two of my favorites are Spike Jonze's two-minute fiction film "How They Get There" (<http://youtu.be/RQ3DyxhoJR0>) and the music video "Fake Empire" by Ryan Lewis and featuring the rapper Macklemore (<http://youtu.be/MdoliLNRIHo>). But there are many fiction and documentary shorts available online that will engage students and ignite the discussion. Other options are to pose an engaging question on the board—such as, "Do parents always know what's best for their children?"—or to ask students to

I don't discourage any of this, nor do I say anything at all, especially at the beginning of the year when I first introduce the method. If students are to be independent, effective collaborators working toward a common goal, they need to work out the kinks on their own.

When the time is up, I ask students to pull out their rubrics and go down the list one by one and agree as a group whether each point was met. In my experience, the students are pretty accurate in self-assessing.

bit rocky as students find their footing, but I liken Spider Web Discussions to writing; it's not a one-off activity but a long-term, practiced skill. I remind students regularly that we are practicing the art of group inquiry and that it takes some time to get good at it.

### A Simple but Powerful Tool

Every year, I get feedback from all my students through online anonymous surveys. For the past four years, the majority of students have rated Spider Web Discussion as their favorite and



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generate their own questions on a particular topic—such as fairness.

Once we have practiced a discussion or two, I jump right into our routine, which in my high school English courses usually consists of a nightly assigned reading and a discussion during the following class. Those discussions might begin with a student's question inspired by the reading, a quote from a student's dialectical journal, or just a general reaction to the text from the students. At the high school level, I leave it up to the students to decide where they begin discussion, as I think it helps create a sense of ownership.

Sometimes during that very first discussion, the students keep the conversation going for the whole time allotted. Other times, there is awkward silence or nervous laughter. Sometimes students believe they have sufficiently discussed everything, but there are still 15 minutes left on the clock and they nervously start chit-chatting.

Once students finish assessing their performance against the rubric, I talk with them about my observations and encourage them to share how they felt about the awkward moments or how frustrating it was that one class member refused to participate.

During the debrief, no aspect of the discussion is taboo, and improving the discussion for next time is everyone's responsibility: If Beth is too shy to speak up, how can we help her? If Jake is always talking so that no one can get a word in edgewise, what should our plan be for next time? With this open approach, students begin to see they are in it together. The goal is no longer how to be your best individual self but how to be the best team you can be. This is a shift in thinking about learning and assessment for many students, but I think it targets some major gaps in how we educate students to become ethical, collaborative thinkers and problem solvers.

The first few months are always a

most useful learning tool. And it's as simple as asking students to sit in a circle and discuss the topic, text, or question while you take notes. No training needed, no expensive tech necessary. Just a circle, a topic, and a pad of paper. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>Bryant, A. (2011, March 12). Google's quest to build a better boss. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/business/13hire.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/business/13hire.html)

*Author's note:* For more information on how to use Spider Web Discussion in any classroom, see my wiki at <http://alexiswiggins.pbworks.com> for resources, rubrics, coding keys, sample discussion maps, and other documents.

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