Podcast: Real Discussions

What are you finding when you observe discussions in classrooms? Are teachers hearing all students' voices? Are students' voices being heard by classmates? What would a student survey tell us? How would you coach teachers to teach and facilitate discussion skills? What's the quality of discussions taking place in PLC's and professional learning activities? Explore these questions with Liza Garonzik, the founder of **R.E.A.L. Discussion**.

Read Liza's article, "Three Steps to (Co)create Belonging During Class Discussions" here.
Visit the R.E.A.L. Discussion website here.

Subscribe to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast on iTunes or visit BarkleyPD.com to find new episodes!

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Steve: 00:00 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that

teachers in turn model for students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening.

Steve: 00:29 Real discussions. Joining our podcast today is Liza Garonzik, the founder of R.E.A.L. Discussion, a company with a focus on students discovering the discipline, joy and power of discussion. Liza believes that discussion skills are teachable, worth teaching, and that teachers deserve to have tools and support for teaching those skills. Liza so glad to have you with us.

Liza: 01:01 Thanks, Steve. I'm glad to be here.

Steve: 01:03 I'm wondering if you'd start by giving folks a little introduction to yourself and the path that led you to the formation of R.E.A.L. Discussion.

Liza: 01:12 Yeah, absolutely. I think I, hopefully like many of our listeners, started as a classroom teacher. So I taught middle school humanities, I taught high school literature, I worked as a Dean, so was focused kind of on the socio-emotional development of students in kind of a variety of school contexts. And through it all, I just became fascinated by what I saw as a real conversation crisis among today's students. I realized that they did not have the communication skills that they needed for success in class discussion, certainly, but also more broadly in their lives beyond the classroom. And so I said – I'm kind of a nerd, I'm a researcher all the time and so I kind of said to myself, okay, how can I make great discussion? How can I distill discussion into teachable skills and design methods to help teachers help students to practice and master them? So that's what I'm up to today as you summarized in the intro.

Steve: 02:15 Well, in the article that I that I read, which I'll post the link in the lead-in to the podcast, you talked about four skills that are part of your work. Relate, excerpt,

ask and listen. And I'm wondering if you'd take a few moments and kind of walk us through those.

Liza: 02:39 Absolutely. So relate, excerpt, ask and listen is real, right? That was my answer to the question of what skills go into a great discussion? We think about those skills as we kind of have differentiated models, whether you're working with like 11 year olds or 16 year olds, they might be – the habits associated with each scale might be a little bit different, but we think about relating as teaching students how to create connections among ideas and people. So ideas, it's creating connections among text and with people it's, how does their comment relate to something somebody already said. Do they agree, disagree? Do they wanna compromise, clarify, synthesize? So that's relating, it's certainly powerful. Excerpting is kind of a clunky word, but what we really mean is just using evidence and teaching students how to use evidence in a way that actually invites your audience to understand why that evidence is useful and dig into it with you.

Liza: 03:41 So with excerpting, we think about how specifically to cite quotes and how to bring everybody along. So for example, in any real discussion, all students are expected to turn to the page or open the source packet to the page that's being cited so that they are right there with the speaker, looking at the evidence together. And then accepting with editorial, which means don't just quote drop. How many discussions have you been in where somebody says, "well, on page 47, it says this." And that's the end of the full comment. Everybody already did the reading. What's your take on the evidence? And you can imagine that transfers easily to analytical writing. We think about different kinds of questions and give kids sentence stems for various kinds of questions throughout a discussion. And then listening, we think about listening in terms of facilitation. So listening to facilitate gracefully and have kind of a model for

facilitation driven by students. And then it's also listening to feedback. So listening to feedback, both that you collect and give yourself, but peer feedback and teach your feedback in terms of applying feedback to your own growth curve throughout discussions over the course of a year. So that's a quick synopsis of R, E, A and L.

Steve: 05:02 Thank you. Going through your website, I found this quote from a teacher who has been through a training with you and applied it in in her classroom and I'd like to read the quote. She said that, "R.E.A.L. ensures I will hear every student's voice and maybe more importantly, that every student will be heard by classmates. R.E.A.L. also ties directly into analytical writing, which students appreciate and I love that it makes their writing deeper." What are some of the keys to teachers getting those results as they implement the training and the resources that you've provided?

Liza: 05:58 Well, thanks for sharing that quote, Steve. It still kind of gives me goosebumps to hear that kind of positive positive feedback.

Steve: 06:05 So now you know why I shared it.

Liza: 06:08 I know, I love it. I think having the teacher hear everyone's voice is certainly important. One of the pieces to highlight here
though, is that every student feels heard by her classmates. So in our model, we do a survey after every three discussions. And one of the questions we ask is when you're speaking, do you feel as if your classmates are listening? And the numbers on this are shocking. I mean, at the beginning of the year, you see less than 10% of students agreeing with that statement. And what very quickly you realize is that if as a student or as an adult, frankly, you feel as if when you're speaking, no one in the room is listening to you, you're not gonna be authentically showing up in that conversation and it doesn't feel worth it. It probably feels performative.

Liza: 06:58 It feels like something I have to do to get the grade or to get through the dinner conversation rather than something that's worth investing my head and my heart into. And we believe that by, first of all, collecting data like that and taking time to ask students those kinds of questions, and then sharing statistics with kids, you are able to inspire growth. And this aligns perfectly with the kind of making thinking visible frames from Project Zero or like John Hatty's work, but figuring out how can you make some of the pain points of discussion, traditional pain points of discussion visible, and then allow students to solve for them goes a very long way in creating these results. So, for example, for this case, how do you make it so students feel heard by their classmates, it's fair game to show that number to students and say, "how can we solve for this?"

Liza: 07:55 And they'll come up with things. They'll say, like, it would be nice if everyone looked at me when I was talking. It would be nice if people had a way to show me that they were agreeing with me or that they thought I was on the right track that was visual. Like when I post something online or in a group meet, I get a like and as a teacher, you're then able to say, okay, great, well, let's come up with a nonverbal signal that means, I agree with you, that shows makes listening, which is usually invisible, visible. I also think the most powerful tool in making students feel heard by each other and showing them that they feel heard by each other is something that we call "in realtime notes." And I highly recommend that you do this with the next adult conversation you're in, or leading a 10th graders in a discussion. But in realtime notes ask students to three times throughout the course of the conversation, stop and write down the name of a peer, summarize an idea that the peer has said, and then make a note about how it changed or challenged your thinking. And then before you restart the discussion, the way you restart is somebody says, does anyone wanna share something from in realtime notes?

Liza: 09:20 And that is so powerful because what happens is that the ideas that make their way into in realtime notes are not always the loudest voices. In fact, they're quite often not the loudest voices. So students are literally seeing, in realtime with no adult mediation, wow, my classmate just heard me. And what I said changed how they're thinking about this idea, this text, this concept. And that's one little trick, for example, that I will guarantee that the results will change as measured in those surveys.

Steve: 09:58 Very powerful. A lot of the listeners to this podcast have coaching roles with teachers and I'm wondering if you have some suggestions for how coaches can engage teachers either in getting feedback on what's happening during discussions, or at least reflecting and asking questions about what the students are gaining from the discussion time that the teachers alloting.

Liza: 10:32 Yeah, that's a great question. And I'm so glad that teachers are getting coaching on their discussion practice because think it's absolutely important. A couple of things come to mind. So one would be asking students for anonymous feedback on discussion and creating a quick little survey and there are examples. I have a bunch of examples on my website and articles I write, but there are lots of different questions you can ask students to very quickly get a read on how discussion is feeling. I would say that those need to be anonymous because students will feel very different. They'll be much more honest in their approach. So I would ask for feedback from students, including, not just identifying problems, but identifying solutions, because there's nothing better as a coach than having a teacher come to you and say, here's a bunch of evidence, right?

Liza: 11:26 Like what can we do with it? And I would say that just because a student suggests something doesn't mean you need to do it. So it's not like students are running everything, it's an opportunity to meet them where they are,

because it’s often surprising. You can have a group of 11th graders of 17 year olds who are very high functioning, intellectually, who, when they’re asked to reflect about discussion dynamics, you might think that their responses are belong to 14 year olds. So it’s just a good kinda check of like, how are students doing in terms of discussion right now. The other piece I would say is, as a coach, asking a teacher to collect evidence of engagement that isn’t just verbal. So whether that’s how students prepared, whether that’s how students took notes, whether that’s how students reflected, but really ask your teachers to start creating systems for collecting evidence of engagement that isn’t just live verbal in realtime engagement. Because I think what you’ll see there is that there is actually so much potential, but too often, the only thing that gets assessed is what did Steve say between 10:10 and 10:30 when we had this discussion, rather than really honoring how much Steve did to prepare for that, how much thinking he was doing during it or afterwards. I find the depth of engagement that often can be invisible during a discussion is just really worth trying to make visible.

Steve: 13:11 Thanks. I mean, you laid out great areas there that a that a coach and a teacher could explore together and be able to collect kind of ongoing evidence to see whether or not the steps that the teacher takes are bringing about a change that the teacher’s looking to make happen. And my coaching work, that’s always where I wanna be, that teachers are seeing a payoff from the energies that they’re investing.

Liza: 13:44 Yeah. And by the way, students will just be so relieved to be having a discussion about discussion. And they will feel so excited and they’ll feel so heard that the teacher is the time to ask these questions will mean so much to them and I think we’ll ultimately empower them to own their learning and own the classroom dynamic in the way that we so often hope students will. So it’s definitely a path to true student centered learning I think.

Steve: 14:14 So I have a last question that I've had to hold myself off on through our whole conversation because everything you said made me want to jump to it. And it's that everything you've said applies to teachers working together in groups like a professional learning community, and many of the listeners to this podcast are frequently facilitating those groups. And it's just striking me that it's exact same thing. You know, I'm doing a workshop, but I'm telling teachers at a table of five to turn and have this conversation, and it's not a whole lot different than doing it in a eighth grade classroom where kids aren't prepared or have protocols for discussion.

Liza: 15:06 You're absolutely right. And it's funny, I mean, so often I use R.E.A.L. model in all the PD I lead. But what you'll find in any school that uses R.E.A.L., one of the first things that happens, so two things happen, the R.E.A.L. training is focused specifically on using R.E.A.L. in your classroom, but by teaching teachers a common language and a set oroutine on what makes discussion great and equitable, the teacher suddenly thinks about conversation differently and the conversations that they show up in. So I mean, I can tell you for me, I can't go to a dinner party without sitting there in my head and tracking like who's doing an R E A L. And teachers say the same thing. I mean, they say at my dinner table, suddenly I realize like we need to work on clarification questions that show curiosity rather than illicit defensiveness.

Liza: 15:58 And so it's this way of being and way of showing up. And it will, without a doubt, if you have teachers who are using R.E.A.L. with students, the PLC among those teachers will look completely different because there just suddenly is a shared understanding of what goes into a great discussion. And I love focusing on students first and then unlocking that capacity in teachers because I find it's a lot less threatening than just going to a group of adults and saying,

hey, 55 year olds, I know you've been around the block for a while, but we're not great at having equitable conversations so I'm gonna make you use a scaffold that was designed for 11 year olds. So it's a little bit of a backdoor way in, but I think you're absolutely right. And it does change the adult culture as well as the student.

Steve: 16:51 Well, Liza, thanks for everything you've shared with us. I'm wondering if we close out by telling people a little bit about about the R.E.A.L. organization and how they could get in touch with you to find out more.

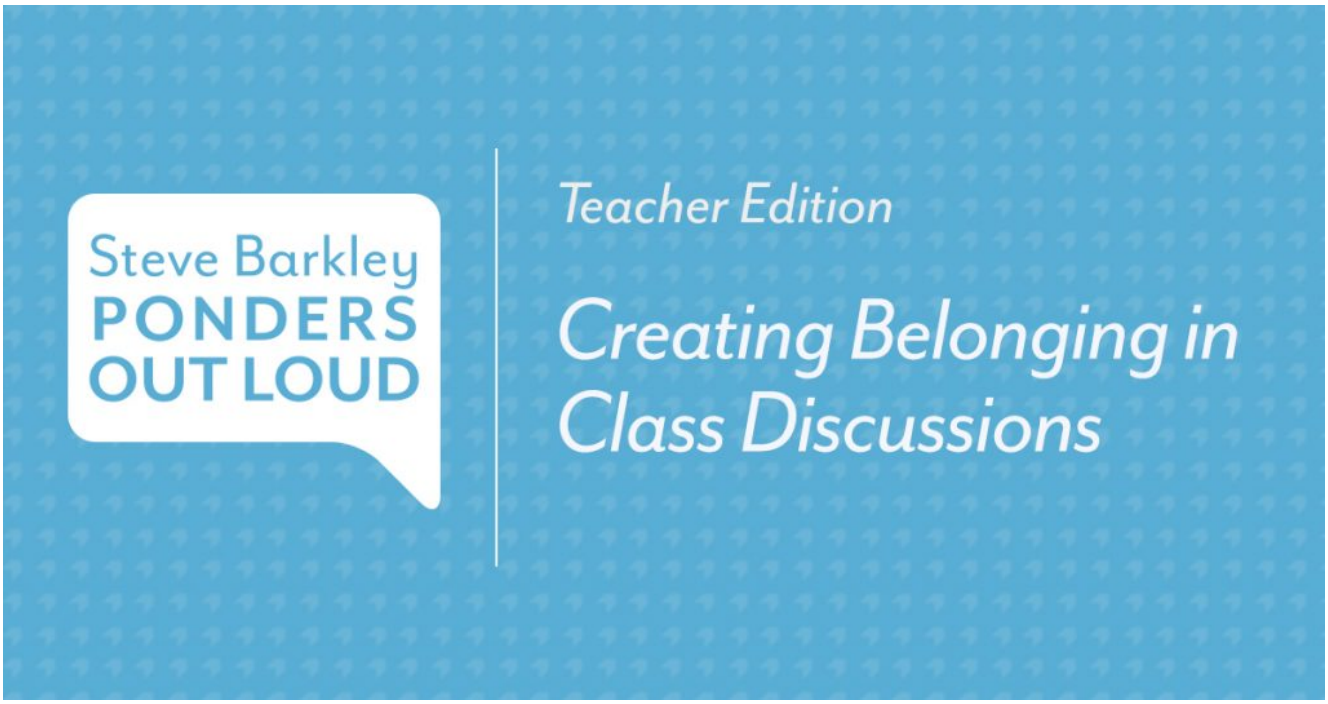
Liza: 17:05 Yeah, absolutely. The easiest way to get in touch is just check out our website. It's realdiscussion.org, or shoot me an email. It's, liza@realdiscussion.org. The way we work with schools is, we usually we offer schools three things. So we do professional development that's aligned to whatever kind of your curricular context is. We do professional development, where we certify your teachers in our method, we do student materials. So we have tons of materials related to all of those things we talked about. Like, how do you collect evidence? How do you prep for discussion? How do you take notes? How do you then build rubrics that integrate that evidence in a way that reflects your values as a teacher? So professional development, student materials, and then kind of ongoing support. So we offer coaches, mostly coaches, actually, coaching on how to support their teachers using R.E.A.L. discussion, as well as kind of ongoing community as I mentioned earlier, and then a little subscription to our data portal, which offers the surveys that I was talking about earlier. So those tend to be the three kind of prongs of any programmatic work we do with schools. But honestly, we just meet with you and meet you where you are. That's kind of our outlook. And as long as it's a great discussion in the process, we're pretty happy.

Steve: 18:23 Terrific. Well, thanks so much. I really appreciate you joining us.

Liza: 18:27 Thank you, Steve. Take care.

Steve: 18:30 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to rate and
review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.

Podcast for Teachers: Creating Belonging in Class Discussions



Students have shared that discussion time is scarier than taking a test. How do we create classrooms where students report that during discussions they feel confident to ask a

question, feel that classmates are listening to them, and feel connected to classmates? Liza Garonzik, from Real Discussion, provides some immediate steps teachers can take.

Read the article, "Three Steps to (Co)create Belonging During Class Discussions" here.
Visit the Real Discussion website here.

Subscribe to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast on iTunes or visit BarkleyPD.com to find new episodes!

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT
Steve: 00:00 Hello, and welcome to the teacher edition of the Steve Barkley Ponders Out loud podcast. The complexity of teaching is both challenging and rewarding. And my curiosity is peaked whenever I explore with teachers the multiple pathways for facilitating student engagement in the exciting world of learning. This podcast looks to serve teachers as they motivate coach and support their learners.

Steve: 00:32 Creating belonging in class discussion. Joining our podcast today is Liza Garonzik, an experienced teacher and administrator with a passion for students learning the skills of discussion, skills that she believes they need for learning and for life. I reached out to Liza after reading an article that she published titled, "Three Steps to Co-create Belonging During Class Discussions." Of course we'll have that link to that article in the lead-in to this podcast for you. I'm excited that she agreed to join us. So welcome Liza.

Liza: 01:10 Well, thanks for having me, Steve. I'm thrilled to be here.

Steve: 01:13 Terrific. For starters, would you share a little bit about your, your teaching background and how you developed your interest in the topic of discussion?

Liza: 01:22 Absolutely. So I started teaching in a middle school humanities classroom where we were lucky enough – I was

in a school that really valued student voice and believed in the power of student led learning, which was wonderful. And it meant that we used discussion all the time. That said, I think we largely thought about discussion as a tool for process content, rather than as a tool for developing students' voices and creating relationships among the kids themselves. And what I realized was that as teachers, we kind of fell into the same patterns around student led discussion. Students would come into the class, they'd sit down, they'd be ready to have a conversation, then the same five extroverts would dominate, some introverts would try to elbow their way in, a class clown would kind of lob a one liner, somebody would chuck a cell phone under the desk, and then everybody would be relieved when the discussion was over.

Liza: 02:19 And as teachers, we wouldn't really know how to grade it. And I just said, hey, wait a minute. What is going on here? First of all, it's interesting to me that so many teachers feel quietly frustrated and honestly I think inadequate around their management of discussion as a pedagogical tool. And for students, how do we make this an authentic experience? And as you said, it was pretty clear to me, the kids sitting in the classroom today are gonna be citizens, they're gonna be parents, they're gonna be professionals. They need discussion skills, not just for success in their conversation about Romeo and Juliet, but they need discussion skills for real life. So I said alright, how can I make great discussion teachable? The answer to that is this little model I've come up with, there are four skills, I know we'll get into that later.

Liza: 03:06 But I think conceptually, the place that ultimately I landed was, I grew up in the nineties so we had computer labs in school and we would go once a week to computer lab and we'd have this dedicated time where we learned how to type, for example. And we didn't really know where typing was gonna fit in our lives, but it was clear it

was very important. And the way I started thinking about student led discussion was today's kids actually need conversation lab. They don't need computer lab, they are computer labs. But they need that dedicated time during school to practice great conversational skills. So that's kind of where the outlook came from and, and what I'm up to now.

Steve: 03:49 Well, I know from earlier discussion that you and I had that you interviewed a lot of students about their experiences with discussion, and I'm wondering what you found, what kind of insights you gained through those interviews?

Liza: 04:07 Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I thought who better to tell me about the experience of student led discussion than students themselves? And so I would say my friend, Mary Dahlgren, at Tools For Reading, talks about anec-data, and I would say that my research falls anec-data category. You know, I probably talked to, or surveyed about 1800 kids, grade 7-12, and the punchlines were one – and this was pre COVID. So this was research done in 2018/2019. Discussion is scarier for them than taking a test for the majority of students. And that was a big highlight. A second highlight when you actually dug down into why discussion was anxiety producing was, I think there were kind of eight options for what do you find most kind of scary about a discussion. And the first response was pretty predictable – can I get my voice in? The second was, is my comment gonna be good enough? But the third, which really surprised me, was how do I take notes so that I have a record of the conversation? And so, there were little insights like that, that that really surprised me and influenced how I designed Real, which is an approach to student led discussion.

Steve: 05:23 Could you talk a little bit more about the connection between discussion and belonging? I think that's why the article that you
wrote jumped out at me at first.

Liza: 05:37 Yeah, absolutely. Discussion is fundamentally a

deeply human experience. And so it is something that is at the heart of any classroom that you enter. Whose voice is heard, how many times, who's listening, what does that look like, is something that we don't often name in terms of classroom dynamics, but is absolutely present. And when I think about discussion as a tool for belonging, there's a lot of research out there. That's kind of adjacent to that. I think first about Joe Feldman's work, he wrote "Grading For Equity" and he has a concept around demystifying success. So he talks about making clear upfront, what success looks like, so that then all students can achieve it. And discussion to me, wasn't particularly clear what success looks like in a conversation, which is why we were in that ambiguous space where the extroverts and the introverts were trying to do things differently and it wasn't working for anybody.

Liza: 06:32 And so stepping back and saying, "okay, how do we do mystify success so that all kids can achieve it," I think is really step one in terms of creating belonging. The other thing about belonging in the classroom is that routines can be extremely powerful in creating it. And so often we don't have explicit routines built around discussion. We have routines thanks to folks like John Hatty, thanks to folks like Project Zero at Harvard, there are lots of great thinking routines for other elements of the curriculum, but so often discussion still feels ambiguous. And I found that by making routines for discussion explicit, you're able to help students predict how a discussion will unfold. And then they're much more relaxed heading into it and they're able to be more fully present. You can also create protocols for deeper listening and sharing during discussion.

Liza: 07:30 So for example, one thing that I find very powerful is, there's a symbol and sign language, and I know you can't see me right now, but it means eye to eye. And it's almost like your head banging symbol. And I tell kids that that's basically a visual "like" button. And when a student

starts speaking up and sees their classmates all using this symbol saying, “hey, I agree with you,” immediately, that child’s posture changes. They feel affirmed and they keep going. And they’re more likely to talk again in the next discussion. So there are all of these kinda little routines that I think we can make and build in a classroom that ultimately validate each student’s voice and I think that that’s an important step in terms of creating belonging.

Steve: 08:19 As I was listening to you, I don’t think I’ve ever made that solid connection that just jumps out at me, listening to you, that if I’m part of a discussion as an adult in a group – if I’m part of a discussion sitting around the dinner table, I walk away with this sense of belonging to the people who are there. But I’ve already been at that table where – and I’m one of the extroverts who usually gets in pretty easy but to have those experiences where I’m not, I don’t think I’ve ever really processed that as I am now talking with you that that’s really walking away not having that sense of belonging.

Liza: 09:12 Yeah. I think the other thing – it’s interesting, your comment about basically you already feel at home at the dinner table, and I think that something that happens in class discussion, it’s funny because many schools, schools that have selective admissions, work so hard to choose the students who are in the class and to create diverse environments. And yet, too often, we forget about making sure that all of those students feel as if the dinner table’s theirs, as if the desks in the classroom belong to them. And little routines like this help build a culture around like, we’re so glad you’re here, we’re so glad you’re sitting here and here is how we engage each other at our school. And I love that, particularly in schools that have diverse student bodies that have high turnover among students. I think it’s really important.

Liza: 10:07 And certainly, I will just say, more anec-data supports this – that if students feel belonging in the

classroom and especially in discussion based courses, they carry that with them throughout the entire school day. I mean, the relationship, for example, we see in our surveys around Real, between students who are using real discussion, they report being more likely to say hi to each other in the hallways. So they're all kinds of socio-emotional, I'd say, benefits that relate directly to belonging and to creating school community when you're intentional about scaffolding the conversation that's happening within a classroom.

Steve: 10:48 Are there strategies and approaches for students to learn about discussion when a teacher breaks the class into groups of four or five and is looking for discussions within that group versus when the teacher's looking for a whole class discussion?
Liza: 11:09 Absolutely. I mean, I think anything that can help kids feel confident and not awkward facilitating, goes a really long way. I think always giving students in small groups a bailout question so that when they get to the awkward silence, they have something to ask is a great one. I know in my classroom, it was always fair game for the final discussion question to be, "why are we reading this?"

Steve: 11:35

Liza: 11:37 And so often, students would get there and that would be the best part of the conversation. I would say another, just simple, simple win – a few of them. So one would be to help build equity in terms of whose voices are being heard and when. In a purely student led capacity or student led context, like what you're describing, you can have students hold up – they pass off to each other. So I speak and then I look around and I see who wants to speak next. And everybody who's sitting in my little group will hold up a finger for every comment that they've already made. And what that does is it makes it so that if Liza just spoke and Steve wants to speak, but Steve is holding up four fingers, because he's an extrovert and he's already talked a bunch, but then we

have Joe over there and Joe is holding up a fist, which means he hasn't talked at all, it's my job to make space for Joe's voice rather than the other way around rather than Joe feeling like he has to jump in before Steve does.

Liza: 12:29 And little things like that, empower students to feel confident facilitating and to have a method to decide who talks when. And it is amazing to see – their number one in all the surveys we do, their number one emotion after using Real, which uses all these kinds of scaffolds is relief. And I think again, that speaks to the anxiety of discussion and the anxiety of being put in that group of four and being told to talk for 20 minutes. And the first, second and third thoughts are, how do we do that? So helping them figure out how you facilitate both in terms of who's speaking when, but also what do we do if we run out of stuff to talk about, those are two pretty easy wins.

Steve: 13:22 Cool, cool. Well, Liza, I want you to take a couple moments to tell people about the the Real Discussion organization that you formed and how they might be able to tap into you and your resources for support.

Liza: 13:45 Yeah, absolutely. So as you gestured to at the beginning, Real Discussion is an organization that's committed to teaching teachers how to teach students the discussion skills they need for success in school and in life. And that looks different depending on what kind of school we're in, but certainly we offer professional development that's aligned to various frameworks. So, in terms of IB, we really contextualize the real model we teach within approaches to learning. If you're looking at and common core in the US, we focus specifically on how to teach speaking and listening standards within the context of curriculum you're already using. And in independent schools, we help each teacher look kind of at their school mission statement and think about how our framework fits in with their particular school environment. So we offer PD that really empowers teachers to

take our framework and make it work in their classroom.

Liza: 14:41 We also provide a lot of student materials because again, I mean, I'm just so student centered. So we have student portfolios that help kids document their engagement in a discussion over the full year. And we do also have this virtual professional – it's almost like a virtual PLC of folks who are dedicated to teaching discussion skills in middle and high schools primarily, you know, kind of years 10-18, and we call it a nerd party. That's kind of the joke. And it truly is. We have a study session every month where we come together and solve the problem someone's having in their classroom and have all kinds of resources. So that's what the organization does. And the easiest way to reach out is just check out our website, it's realdiscussion.org or get in touch with me directly. We design programs for schools all the time and would love nothing more than to add some new voices to this discussion about discussion. It's truly a privilege to be in a place where like we're convening these conversations.

Steve: 15:48 Terrific. Speaking and listening is in everybody's curriculum standards these days. So we're beginning to to suggest that it's a skillset students have to develop across the board. So we'll be sure to put the link to your website in the lead-in to the podcast. So thank you so much for joining us.

Liza: 16:11 Well, thank you.

Steve [Outro]: 16:14 Thanks for listening in folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me
your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.