

A photograph of five students sitting around a wooden table in a classroom. A young man in a teal shirt is looking down at a blue folder. A young woman with curly blonde hair is smiling and resting her head on her hand. Another young woman with long dark hair is looking at the folder. A young man in a dark blue sweater is gesturing with his hands while speaking. A young woman with long dark hair is in the foreground, looking towards the group. The background shows other wooden tables and chairs in a well-lit room.

Teaching the Art of Effective Communication:

A Case Study of R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion
at Blair Academy

R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion

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BLAIR ACADEMY

About the School

Teaching communication skills is at the heart of Blair Academy's mission. A co-ed boarding school perched on a stunning hilltop campus in Blairstown, New Jersey, the School welcomes students from around the world to embark upon a high school education where, in the words of the Head of School: **"Participation in class discussion is a critical piece of our public speaking initiative, as it develops students' confidence and prepares them for so many other aspects of our program, including grade-wide speech contests, our signature leadership stories project, and other opportunities to engage in debate outside of class."**

At Blair, relationships are everywhere – in the classroom, on athletic fields, in studios and dormitories, around dining hall tables. To thrive, Blair students must develop strong in-person communication skills.

The faculty at Blair have defined seven principles that encapsulate "the values and ideals that inform our work in and out of the classroom." One of these is excellent communication, which the faculty views as a prerequisite for leadership. This vision is manifested in a series of initiatives designed to teach and celebrate communication skills, including public speaking opportunities at Chapels and School Meetings, programs like Leadership Stories and Society of Skeptics, and the implementation of a Graded Discussion as a Signature Assessment in English II (10th grade).



"R.E.A.L.® enables our English teachers to effectively track students' progress as they develop their skills and confront challenges along the way, while its platform and 'rules of engagement' offer *all* voices encouragement and opportunity to be heard."

–Peter G. Curran, Head of School



Jim Moore, English Dept. Chair

“In a ChatGPT world, Blair’s adoption of R.E.A.L.® Discussion looks prescient. R.E.A.L.® has given us a framework to document and celebrate the deeply human processes of idea generation, oral engagement, and writing that builds directly on class discussion. This is, of course, where we have always wanted to be: at the opening of young minds.”



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The Vision

English Department Chair and longtime faculty member Jim Moore took seriously his duty to ensure his Department taught “the art of effective communication” – especially amidst the challenges of today’s world. He saw 10th grade as a powerful moment to emphasize discussion skills for two key reasons:

- » This is a year in which over a quarter of the class is new to Blair, which includes many international students, is new to the school. Plus, 10th graders must complete a traditional oral exam.
- » After decades as an AP school, Blair will launch a new, advanced curriculum in Fall 2024, which Jim knew would ultimately require his faculty to build a shared language of their own.

Launching a R.E.A.L.® Pilot Cohort

Jim partnered with Amanda Lucas, Dean of Teaching and Learning, to create a “R.E.A.L.® Pilot Cohort” in 21-22. He invited interested faculty from across disciplines to train in the R.E.A.L.® Discussion method over the summer while supporting a year-round program roll-out in 10th grade English. The R.E.A.L.® Pilot was set up for success for several reasons, including:

- » It had buy-in “above and beyond” the English Department;
- » It was aligned to strategic school priorities;
- » It was inclusive and opt-in.



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The Strategy

Jim partnered with R.E.A.L.[®] to implement a three-pronged strategy at Blair.



First: Identified 10th grade English as the “pilot spot” – this meant an entire cohort of students would gain R.E.A.L.[®] skills and be structured for success in their Blair experience.



Second: Empowered a program lead who was not the Department Chair – Cally Queally, a dynamic early-career English teacher with twin passions for pedagogy and communication, stepped up. Cally is a key presence on the English II team and a vocal champion for the R.E.A.L.[®] program.



Third: Invited other faculty and leaders who were curious about R.E.A.L.[®] “in” – in order to empower them to support student transfer of skills and help build *Conversation Culture* beyond the English classroom.



Cally Queally, R.E.A.L. Program Lead

“R.E.A.L.[®] feels foundational, like it’s something all Humanities teachers, and especially early career teachers, should be trained in. It provides the consistency students need to build community — and ultimately, get creative together!”

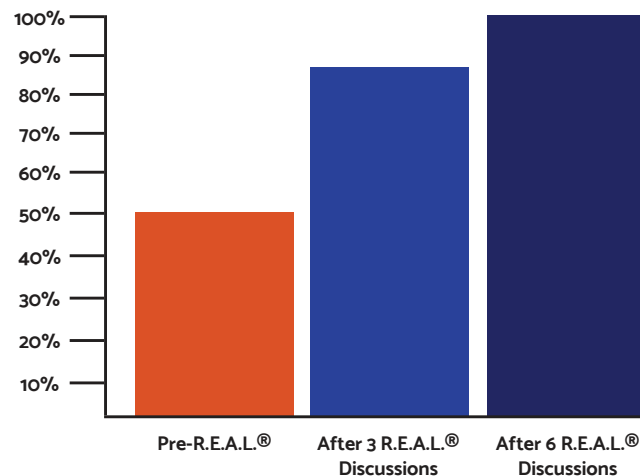


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The Results

R.E.A.L.® Teacher Dashboards – which are reports generated for teachers every three discussions using results from the R.E.A.L.® Student Survey – show that Blair students experienced impressive gains across skill development, feelings of belonging, and a sense that the work of discussion is relevant to “real” life.

Self-Described Introverts' Confidence Asking Questions in Class Discussions



Belonging

Deploying R.E.A.L.® has led to the development of a greater sense of belonging and in-class confidence among Blair students. For example, one measure R.E.A.L.® uses to assess belonging is the level of confidence self-described introverts report over time, as this demographic has historically been more likely to feel alienated in class discussions. Pre-R.E.A.L.®, just 50% of self-described introverts felt comfortable asking a question in class.

After cycle 1, 88% of introverts were comfortable asking questions. After cycle 2, 100% had gained that comfort and confidence.

Program lead Cally Queally has seen tangible growth in the rapport and respect that has developed among her students. “The students really bond with each other through R.E.A.L.® They’re so much more comfortable with each other, and there’s more of a community feel than in previous years.”

“As we have had more R.E.A.L.® discussions, I have gotten more comfortable sharing ideas I have had. I have also grown by connecting with people if we do share the same ideas.”

–Blair Student

Rigor

In addition to facilitating a more inclusive and respectful classroom environment, R.E.A.L.[®] added more rigor to Blair's classroom discussions. The R.E.A.L.[®] rituals of Discussion Prep, Goal-Setting, Self-Tracking, Note-Taking, and Reflection made students' engagement with content and each other consistent – and, importantly, visible to Cally. This structured students for success on written assignments and their oral exam.

Survey data reveals that 72% of students reported using notes or ideas from discussions in their writing after completing the first R.E.A.L.[®] cycle, compared to just 46% pre-R.E.A.L.[®] After the second R.E.A.L.[®] cycle, 100% of students reported connecting in-class discussion and preparation with their assigned writing.

"It helps us develop skills in writing essays as well as using evidence to support our arguments," wrote one student after completing two cycles of R.E.A.L.[®]

Cally, too, has seen significant improvement. "Their analysis is deeper, their thoughts are more considerate, and their engagement with their classmates is much, much higher," she says.

72%

After just three discussions, a majority of students reported using, or hearing other students use, R.E.A.L.[®] skills outside of class.

Relevance

The Blair community has witnessed the organic transfer of the skills learned from R.E.A.L.[®] within and beyond the 10th grade English classroom.

After implementing R.E.A.L.[®], Jim has reported an unprecedented pedagogical alignment among the tenth grade English team among the English faculty. "One age-old challenge of being department chair is to ensure alignment across grade levels while preserving each teacher's autonomy," he says. "R.E.A.L.[®] enables our 10th grade English faculty to employ a common approach to conducting and grading what has been a nebulously-defined activity, regardless of the text they are using or what they want their students to gain from it."

Jim's English faculty are not the only teachers who have noticed R.E.A.L.[®]'s benefits. One history teacher noted that her department colleagues "started raving about how randomly, in their first discussion the past two days, kids started doing R.E.A.L.[®] hand signals and running discussion themselves. These teachers didn't even teach R.E.A.L.[®], and the kids are bringing it with them as they move up at Blair. Very cool!"

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–Blair History Teacher



“R.E.A.L.® has become part of the fabric at Blair. Discussions are more precise, dynamic, and inclusive than ever.”

–Jim Moore, English Department Chair



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A Culture of Conversation

Authentic, respectful, thought-provoking conversation is already at the heart of Blair’s culture. Partnering with R.E.A.L.® enabled the English department to add rigor to the school’s overarching vision, and it gave teachers and leaders the tools they needed to make that vision a reality.

R.E.A.L.® has laid a solid foundation of conversation skills among 10th grade students, and its benefits have already begun to transfer outside the department and outside the classroom. Armed with the R.E.A.L.® approach, the Blair school community is beginning to develop a conversation culture that celebrates and instructs the art and science of discussion.



R.E.A.L.® partners with schools to teach and celebrate the live conversation skills today’s students need for learning—and real life. Reach out today!

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