

Video Clip 1

Introducing the Envisionment-Building Classroom

Length of Clip:	18:55
School:	Eight Different Schools
Location:	Various Across the United States
No. of Students in Schools:	Between 125 and Almost 2,000
Teacher:	Various
Grades:	6th to 8th
Subject:	Language Arts
No. of Students in the Classroom:	Between 15 and 32

Schools: The schools in this video library are in geographically diverse locations across the United States. Some, like Joe Bernhart's Houston classroom or Dorothy Franklin's Chicago school, are in urban settings. Some are rural, such as Tanya Schnabl's school in upstate New York and Barry Hoonan's school on Bainbridge Island in Washington state. Others are in suburban locations. A wide variety of classrooms and teachers were chosen to help teachers everywhere see how envisionment-building might apply in their own locations.

Number of Students in Schools: The schools featured in the video library run from the small and intimate (125 students at The Odyssey School on Bainbridge Island) to schools accommodating more than 1,500 students (DeWitt Clinton Elementary School in Chicago with 1,600 and Howard A. Doolin Middle School with 1,980).

Teachers: The teachers reflect the diversity of their profession. Both male and female, they come from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds. Some are just beginning their careers. Others have 15 to 20 years of experience (one has nearly 30) with students. All of them believe that every student is capable of learning and that it is their job to help learning happen.

Grades and Subject: All the teachers in this library teach language arts in grades 6 through 8.

Students: While some of the students portrayed in these classrooms come from middle class economic backgrounds, a number qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; some children of migrant families at Picacho Middle School live in shelters or other temporary housing. Students in these classes come with a wide range of reading levels (several teachers have students who read between first grade and college levels in the same classroom). As is perhaps typical of the nation as a whole, most of the schools work with students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and even language backgrounds. The K–6 population of DeWitt Clinton Elementary School in Chicago is primarily first-generation immigrants (Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Russian, or Bosnian) who speak more than 17 different languages. Fifty percent of the students test below grade level in their core subjects. At Stephen Decatur Middle School in Maryland, 30 percent of the students are minorities drawn from a nearby retirement community, a tourist destination, and a rural town.

“The envisionment-building classroom looks and feels like a community of learners...[where students are] able to look to each other for information, for readings, for takes on the piece that they themselves might not have had.” — Judith Langer

About This Video Clip

Welcome to ***Making Meaning in Literature: A Video Library, Grades 6–8!*** Produced by Maryland Public Television with funding provided by Annenberg/CPB, this nine-part video library is designed to help literature and language arts teachers in grades six to eight enhance the literary experiences of their students. This series overview introduces Dr. Judith Langer’s theory of literary envisionment and envisionment-building classrooms and invites us into real classrooms of real teachers to see how this theory plays out in practice with real students.

Like all good pedagogical theories, Dr. Langer’s theory of envisionment-building classrooms is philosophically concrete, yet allows for a widely diverse range of classroom practices. Grounded in key understandings about human beings as learners and as makers of meaning, the basic tenets of envisionment theory could productively underpin literature instruction in any classroom, at any grade level.

Dr. Langer identifies four central characteristics of the envisionment-building classroom:

- **Students are treated as life-long envisionment builders.** Both teachers and students assume that students have been making sense all their lives. They have been hearing stories and creating stories. They have been building envisionments—worlds of understandings including images, questions, disagreements, anticipations, arguments, and hunches that fill the mind during every reading, writing, speaking, or listening experience—and they know how to create understandings. They know how to respond to pieces that they have heard, or read, or seen. And their ideas are at the center of the envisionment-building classroom.
- **Questions are at the center of the literary experience.** These are real questions about things that people really want explained or want to know more about. While some of these questions may come from the teacher, many of them come from the students themselves as they expand their understandings of the literature. Teachers and students in envisionment-building classrooms know that making sense in literature involves asking questions.
- **Students are expected to develop and expand their understandings.** Teachers and students assume that students come to class with understandings and interpretations based on the readings they did individually, but that these will not be final. Rather, these interpretations will be the beginning of provocative discussion that helps everybody develop richer and more complex understandings.
- **Students and teachers assume that multiple perspectives are useful.** Envisionment-building classrooms encourage different points of view because multiple perspectives enhance interpretation. They lead to the development of more complex understandings of the text than any one individual is likely to reach alone. In the envisionment-building classroom, respectful conversation is a tool for exploring and testing these multiple points of view. It is understood that it is not always possible to reach a complete consensus about a literary work, although the group will probably agree on a number of shared points. This is quite different from the literature classroom in which a push for consensus is the norm, and one “best” interpretation is valued above all others.

Dr. Langer developed her understandings of envisionment-building and how it might play out in literature classrooms through years of research during which she and her colleagues looked at how good readers—including adults—grappled with, and made sense of, literary texts. In addition the researchers went into the classrooms of teachers around the United States—in urban schools, in suburban schools, and in rural schools—and tried to identify common characteristics of effective instruction. What they learned is distilled into the four tenets of envisionment-building theory listed above.

Visit the *Making Meaning in Literature: A Video Library, Grades 6–8* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature to access further resources related to this video clip. At this site, you can access a Lesson Builder and Lesson Builder Template. These may be useful as you incorporate envisionment-building into your curriculum.

About This Video Clip, cont'd.

Featured Texts

Among the Hidden by Margaret Haddix

The Giver by Lois Lowry

Tears of a Tiger by Sharon M. Draper

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis

The classrooms shown in this video—and throughout this video library—use a number of different young adult titles. Those listed above are the books used in the classrooms focused on single titles. Refer to the portions of the guide featuring specific classrooms for detailed information about each title.

Often the students in these classes are asked to make their own reading selections. They may be given complete free choice as they often are in Ms. Rief's class, or they may be asked to choose from a selected list based on theme, reading level, or availability. When choosing or recommending books for students, all the teachers profiled here seek titles that will engage students and challenge them in some way to think about their own lives and about the world they live in.

Visit the *Making Meaning in Literature: A Video Library, Grades 6–8* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature for related Web sites.

Viewing Suggestions

Who Should Watch This Video

Teachers and teacher educators can use this video as a professional or preservice education tool to introduce the principles of an envisionment-building classroom. The video enables viewers to see the roles played by students and teachers in such classrooms. Viewers might connect what they see with the four key tenets of envisionment-building:

1. students are life-long envisionment builders whose ideas are at the center of the classroom;
2. questions are essential to envisionment-building;
3. students come to class after reading equipped with understandings about the literature—it is assumed that they will develop those understandings during class discussions; and
4. multiple interpretations of literary texts are to be expected and are helpful, both to the individual and to the class as a whole.

The video might also assist teachers who reach out to families in the school community at PTA meetings or back-to-school events. In these settings, the video can be a vehicle for demonstrating how an envisionment-building classroom might look.

Curriculum planners can use this video as a way of inspiring discussion about ways in which literature might figure in the language arts curriculum and how it can be integrated with instruction in writing, speaking, and listening.

Administrators can use this video to offer teachers, parents, and other administrators a vision of literature classrooms that encourage authentic engagement with texts while supporting the development of interpretive and thinking skills.

Before Watching

Before viewing this video, consider the following:

- What makes reading literature pleasurable? What might get in the way of such pleasure?
- Why should literature be included in the language arts curriculum? What value does it have for students?
- What does an authentic conversation about literature look and sound like?

Suggestions for Post-Viewing Discussion

Teachers involved in professional development and preservice education may want to discuss:

- How do these teachers encourage students to discuss their literary understandings?
- As viewers, what evidence did you find that these are envisionment-building classrooms? Give specific examples.
- How might these teachers assess their students' literary understandings?
- What ideas did you glean from the video that you would like to try in your classroom?
- What questions do you have about envisionment-building classrooms?
- How can you use this video to help teachers attempt new ways of facilitating discussion?

Viewing Suggestions, cont'd.

Teachers holding PTA meetings, back-to-school events, or other outreach meetings can use questions like these to start group discussion:

- How might your child respond to literature discussions such as those portrayed in this video?
- Did any of the student comments or responses surprise or intrigue you? Why? Give examples.
- How can discussions such as these help students learn?
- How can you support this approach to literature instruction at home?

Curriculum planners can discuss:

- How does this vision of literature instruction fit into your existing curriculum?
- What additions or changes might you have to make to develop a curriculum supportive of envisionment-building?

Administrators can discuss:

- How can physical issues (classroom size and configuration, teacher/student ratio, external distractions, etc.) enable or prevent teachers from encouraging envisionment-building in their classrooms?
- Do teachers have appropriate resources (book sets, for example) to enable them to develop envisionment-building literature instruction?
- What professional development is available (or might be made available) for teachers who wish to develop envisionment-building instruction?

Suggestions for Post-Viewing Activities

For teachers involved in professional development and preservice education:

- Make a list of activities that students might use to support their developing envisionments of a literary text.
- Make a list of ways you might monitor student responses to their reading.
- What assessment strategies have you found most useful when you need to know how effectively students are approaching a literary text?

For teachers reaching out to families:

- Make a list of ways you can help families support their children's experiences with literature. Consider using brief notes, email, a newsletter, or a course Web site to keep families informed about texts and activities their children will experience in class.
- Will parents be comfortable with the more central role played by students in an envisionment-building classroom? What might you do to help them understand and support envisionment-building instruction?
- Invite family members into your classroom to observe, and—if they have read the text—perhaps even to participate in a literary discussion.

For administrators:

- Share this video with language arts teachers in your school. Discuss the values of envisionment-building literature instruction. Ask teachers to consider ways in which these classrooms succeed and to suggest ways in which they might be strengthened. Provide time for teachers to discuss their observations.

Additional Resources

Teacher tools, student activity sheets, and links to related resources are accessible at the *Making Meaning in Literature: A Video Library, Grades 6–8* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature.

You may also be interested in the following texts, many of which can be purchased through the National Council of Teachers of English at www.ncte.org:

Allen, Janet and Kyle Gonzalez. *There's Room for Me Here: Literacy Workshop in the Middle School*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 1998. ISBN 1-57110-042-3.

Andrasick, Kathleen Dudden. *Opening Texts: Using Writing To Teach Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990. ISBN 0-435-08522-0.

Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. ISBN 0-86709-374-9.

Beers, Kylene and Barbara G. Samuels, eds. *Into Focus: Understanding and Creating Middle School Readers*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gorden Publishers, Inc., 1998. ISBN 0-926842-64-1.

Berghoff, Beth, Kathryn A. Egawa, Jerome C. Harste, and Barry T. Hoonan. *Beyond Reading and Writing: Inquiry, Curriculum, and Multiple Ways of Knowing*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2000. ISBN 0-8141-2341-4.

Brozo, William G. *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader: Engaging Teen and Preteen Boys in Active Literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2002. ISBN 0-87207-175-8.

Close, Elizabeth Egan. "Literature Discussion: A Classroom Environment for Thinking and Sharing." *English Journal* (September 1992): 65–71.

Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. 2nd ed. York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002. ISBN 1-57110-333-3.

Elliott, Joan B. and Mary M. Dupuis, eds. *Young Adult Literature in the Classroom: Reading It, Teaching It, Loving It*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2002. ISBN 0-87207-173-1.

Evans, Karen S. *Literature Discussion Groups in the Intermediate Grades: Dilemmas and Possibilities*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2001. ISBN 0-87207-293-2.

Golub, Jeffrey. *Making Learning Happen: Strategies for an Interactive Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000. ISBN 0-86709-493-1.

Golub, Jeffrey, NCTE Committee on Classroom Practices. *Focus on Collaborative Learning: Classroom Practices in Teaching English, 1988*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1988. ISBN 0-8141-1753-8.

Hoonan, Barry. "Drawing on the Artist's Perspective: Ventures Into Meaning." *Literature Circles and Response*. Ed. Bonnie Campbell Hill, Nancy J. Johnson, and Katherine Noe. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1995. ISBN 0-926-684-248-X.

Krogness, Mary Mercer. *Just Teach Me, Mrs. K.: Talking, Reading, and Writing With Resistant Adolescent Learners*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995. ISBN 0-435-08815-7.

Langer, Judith A. *Envisioning Literature*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3463-0.

Langer, Judith A. "Discussion as Exploration: Literature and the Horizon of Possibilities." *Exploring Texts: The Role of Discussion and Writing in the Teaching and Learning of Literature*. Ed. George E. Newell and Russell K. Durst. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1993. 23–43. ISBN 0-926842-24-2.

The Language of Literature classroom anthology series (grades 6–12) and teacher support materials. Boston: McDougal Littell, 2002.

Additional Resources, cont'd.

- Phelan, Patricia, ed. *Literature and Life: Making Connections in the Classroom*. Classroom Practices in Teaching English Vol. 25. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990. ISBN 0-8141-2962-5.
- Rief, Linda. *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts With Adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH, 1992. ISBN 0-435-08598-0.
- Rief, Linda. *Vision and Voice: Extending the Literacy Spectrum*. Portsmouth, NH, 1998. ISBN 0-3250-0097-2.
- Rief, Linda and Maureen Barbieri, eds. *All That Matters: What Is It We Value In School and Beyond?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995. ISBN 0-4350-8848-3.
- Routman, Regie. *Conversations: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000. ISBN 0-325-00109-X.
- Samuels, Barbara G. and Kylene Beers, eds. *Your Reading: An Annotated Booklist for Middle and Junior High 1995–96 Edition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996. ISBN 0-8141-5943-5.
- Schoenbach, Ruth, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko, and Lori Hurwitz. *Reading for Understanding*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999. ISBN 0-7879-5045-9.
- Soter, Anne O. *Young Adult Literature and the New Literary Theories: Developing Critical Readers in Middle School*. New York: Teachers College, 1999.
- Tchudi, Stephen and Susan Tchudi. *The English/Language Arts Handbook*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. ISBN 0-86709-288-2.
- Trelease, Jim. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995, ISBN 0-1404-6971-0.
- Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *You Gotta BE the Book*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997. ISBN 0-8077-3566-3.
- Wilhelm, Jeffrey D., Tanya N. Baker, and Julie Dube. *Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy 6–12*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2001. ISBN 0-86709-561-X.
- Yokota, Junko, ed. *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Booklist for Grades K–8*. 3rd ed. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001. ISBN 0-8141-2540-9.