

Workshop 1

Introducing Our Literary Community

“There is power in the written word. There is power in learners finding their own voices.”

—Tanya Schnabl, Sixth-Grade Teacher, Sherburne–Earlville Middle School, Sherburne, New York

Description

Imagine driving down the highway, faced with flashing emergency vehicle lights and slowing traffic. Immediately, you begin to develop a hunch about what is happening around you. The lights from the police cars and ambulances are clues of an accident scene ahead. Your prior experiences help you understand why the traffic is slowing down, as motorists take time to survey the accident. Emergency vehicles bustle towards the wreckage. You might recall a car accident that you experienced in the past. You are sizing up the situation. You are predicting how long it will take you to reach your destination, based on the pace of the traffic. You consider alternate routes for travel.

This process of creating an understanding is not so different from what effective readers do when they interact with literature.

Dr. Judith Langer spent over a decade examining how readers interact with texts, how they make meaning out of what they read, and the processes effective readers go through to create complex, rich understandings of literature. Her carefully researched observations are described in a process she refers to as building envisionments. In building envisionments, readers formulate a dynamic set of thoughts about a text, including their impressions, questions, judgments, predictions, and connections to their own lives. This recursive process occurs from the moment readers pick up a text and continues beyond the reading of the literature. Readers continue to think about the text. They discuss the literature, wrestle with it, and continually grow their interpretations of it.

This first workshop program in a series of nine introduces the hallmarks of the envisionment-building process. Dr. Langer explains ways that teachers can support and encourage this process to help students become better readers and thinkers. Eight middle school language arts classroom teachers also reflect upon their own teaching of literature. These classroom teachers grapple with the authentic, everyday challenges of middle school language arts instruction. They examine demands in education, needs of their students, and their beliefs in the power of literature to shape critically literate members of society.

Key Points

- Eight middle school language arts teachers are introduced in the video. These teachers will appear throughout the workshop series.
- Dr. Judith Langer defines an envisionment as a dynamic set of thoughts you have about a text including your impressions, questions, judgments, and predictions. Envisionments constantly grow and evolve throughout your reading and interaction with a text.
- Even though all students build envisionments in their daily lives, some of them have trouble applying it to the reading of literature. But there are ways to encourage this process in each student—ways to help them become better readers and better thinkers.
- Teachers in a classroom that support this process encourage students to offer their opinions and raise questions.

- There are four hallmarks of an envisionment-building classroom:
 - Students are treated as lifelong envisionment builders. Teachers assume students can build envisionments, that they have done it throughout their lives, and can apply this to the reading of literature.
 - Questions are at the center of the literary experience. Students are encouraged to raise their own questions about the text or their own understandings during class discussions.
 - Students and teachers assume that multiple perspectives are useful. These perspectives are going to enhance interpretations and help build more complex understandings.
 - Class time is used to:
 - develop student understandings.
 - extend student understandings and interpretations based on the readings they did at home.
 - utilize students' initial understandings to start provocative discussions in class and build richer interpretations.
- Middle school students bring many challenges and strengths to the literature classroom.
- Processes that support envisionment building provide opportunities for students to develop as lifelong critical thinkers and problem solvers, literate members of society, and individuals who can gain a sense of vision for what literature might mean for life and humanity.

Learning Objectives

After viewing this program, you will be able to:

- explain the envisionment-building process and the hallmarks of a classroom that supports this process.
- identify what elements of their own classroom instruction and environment support the envisionment-building process.

Background Reading

In preparation for this workshop, read "Literary Thought and Literate Mind" in Dr. Judith Langer's *Envisioning Literature* from the Teachers College Press, Columbia University. Copyright 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3464-0.

You may also be interested in the panelists' professional biographies found in the About the Contributors section of this guide.

For additional online resources, go to www.learner.org/envisioningliterature. Select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, click on Workshop 1, and go to Additional Reading.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready (30 minutes)

You will view a series of nine programs, focusing on practical ways to foster a classroom community that provides opportunities for students to have meaningful interactions with literature. The first program introduces the instructional approaches that support a literary community, as well as key teacher panelists who will appear throughout the workshop videos. Subsequent videos in the workshop will focus on more specific instructional concerns, such as how to get started in September, the use of diverse texts, and the art of literary discussions, to name a few. Read the Introduction of this guide to survey the workshop's content.

Site Leader: Review the workshop format with participants, in order to set clear expectations and enable participants to prepare for future sessions. Use the front matter of this guide to help you do this. Remind workshop participants to bring their workshop journals to each session. If you have Internet access, display the companion Web site to this workshop at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature, making participants aware of online resources and interactive opportunities.

Keep these general points in mind as you actively view the workshop programs:

- Teachers featured in the workshop are striving towards creating an envisionment-building classroom.
- The teachers in this series are continuing to learn and grow as professionals.
- Look at each program and consider: What is working for the teachers? What would I do differently? What can I take and use in my classroom?

Each workshop session will last two hours, including 30 minutes for "Getting Ready," 60 minutes for "Watch the Workshop Video," and 30 minutes for "Going Further." Additional activities include background reading and homework. Online materials and Channel-Talk, the email discussion list, can be found at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature.

Discuss:

Discuss the following questions:

- What do you want your students to gain from experiencing literature in your classroom?
- What is the value of reading literature?
- Describe what literature discussions currently look like in your classroom.

Site Leader: Use these questions to spark discussion before viewing the workshop program. Participants may write answers to the reflection questions in their journals, as time permits. You may use all of the questions or select only a few.

Reflect in Workshop Journals:

Respond to the following questions in your workshop journal:

- Reflect upon why and how you became a teacher of literature.
- Reflect upon your own reading process and habits. How do you make meaning out of what you read? What do you like to read? Where do you like to read? Are you part of a literary community or book club? If so, what aspects of that community would you like to reproduce in your own classroom or what skills would you like to instill in your own students?

Workshop Session, cont'd.

Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

Think About and Discuss:

Pause after the narrator states: "Throughout the nine programs in the series, these teachers will discuss how they encourage their students to build envisionments as they read, and how you can do the same in yours."

- What does it mean to develop an envisionment?
- What kind of classroom supports the process that Dr. Langer describes as envisionment building?
- In an envisionment-building classroom, teachers support their students' growth and development as engaged readers through a process Dr. Langer describes as scaffolding, or a system of supporting that development. In your opinion, what kinds of activities can you employ to help support students as they interact with texts? What kinds of activities would not support this process?

Site Leader: If you are watching on videocassette, you may pause at the segments indicated here to give participants opportunities to discuss, reflect, and interact with the program. If needed, rewind and replay segments of the program so that viewers can thoughtfully examine all pertinent information. If you are watching a real-time broadcast, ask participants to consider the questions as they view the program, and discuss them later.

You may select any or all of the questions to discuss, as time permits and according to the interests of your participants.

Pause after Dorothy Franklin states: "As a reader myself, I don't have anyone telling me how I should perceive what John Saul is saying. It's totally left up to me so why aren't children given that same privilege...? You can come up with your own feelings about this. And I should respect it."

- What do you want your students to take away from the literature experiences in your classroom?

Pause after Ana Hernandez states: "If they ever run into some type of problem that that character ran into, they'll be able to...figure out what to do and use the experience from a character in their real life and that's really what I want them to get. What would you do if you were in this position?"

- What are the characteristics and demographics of your student body? What challenges do you face as a teacher? What strengths do your students bring with them to the classroom? Consider their background knowledge, communities, and life experiences they may bring to your classroom. How can their multiple perspectives be used as a strength in your classroom community? How can you help students use their knowledge of each other to gain other perspectives on what they read?
- Why is it so important for you to know your students and their individual needs?

Pause after Linda Rief states: "When I have questions and want to know something then I'm really interested in what somebody has to tell me. When kids have questions then they're much more interested in finding that information. When there were no questions, no one cares. You're just giving out information and no one is doing anything with that."

- How do you encourage your students to raise thought-provoking questions about literature in your classroom? How do you turn those questions into a student-led and teacher-facilitated discussion?

Workshop Session, cont'd.

Pause after Joe Bernhart states: “We need people who are literate and have mastered different multiple literacies so that they can create change and transformation and transcend historical legacies, racist legacies, and discriminatory legacies that are existing in our country right now, that are institutionalized.”

- What are the characteristics of a middle school student? What challenges and strengths do these characteristics bring to your classroom community?

Going Further (30 minutes)

Discuss:

Discuss as many of the questions below as time permits. You may want to answer remaining questions in your workshop journal as homework.

- What do you think a successful literature discussion looks like?
- What questions do you still have about the process Dr. Langer describes?
- How do you select texts in your classroom? What is the student’s role in this process?
- Do you think all responses are valid in a classroom that supports the envisionment-building process?
- What is the value in this approach to literature instruction?
- Which teachers in the video can you most identify with and why?
- Which hallmarks of the envisionment-building process are already in place in your classroom? Which ones are not? Which elements would you like to focus on in the immediate future and why?
- What challenges do you foresee in moving to an envisionment-building classroom? How can you allow students time to find their own voices?
- How is envisionment-building different than more traditional methods of instruction or other theoretical bases you’ve dealt with at other workshops, in-services, or seminars? What components from past professional development experiences would work well within an envisionment-building classroom?
- What do you hope to gain from participating in this workshop?

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Journal:

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- Barry Hoonan states: "I think literature is learned in a community that embraces stories, embraces writing....You start with the community. And you start with humor and you start with relationships and you start by reading to kids."

How can teachers begin to create this type of community for students? How do you know when you have the support in place for kids to successfully participate in this kind of literate community? What do you think are the cornerstones of a literary classroom community? What do you think you need as a professional to successfully create this sort of classroom community? Consider resources and support.

Reading:

In preparation for Workshop 2, read "Building Envisionments," "The Classroom as a Social Setting for Envisionment Building," and "A Practical Pedagogy" in Dr. Judith Langer's *Envisioning Literature* from the Teachers College Press, Columbia University. Copyright 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3464-0.

Read the poem "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes, which can be found in the anthology by Edgar E. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*, 5th edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. Copyright 1998. ISBN 0-13-010076-5. The poem is also available in the online resources for this workshop.

For additional resources, including "A Response-Based Approach to Reading Literature," which summarizes some of Dr. Langer's research on envisionment building, go to www.learner.org/envisioningliterature. Select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, Workshop 2.

Ongoing Activity

Channel-Talk:

You are encouraged to participate in an email discussion list called Channel-Talk. Send comments and questions regarding the workshop to other participants around the country. Comments can also be viewed on the Web site. Go to www.learner.org/envisioningliterature, select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, and click on Channel-Talk.

Extension: Classroom Connection

Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner:

Start a classroom observation journal. Each time your students participate in a literature discussion, take time to reflect upon the discussion. You may take time after school or during lesson planning for journaling. Think about classroom discussions with your own students. How would you characterize them? What elements of your classroom discussions support envisionment building? Do students offer multiple perspectives? Do they explain to each other why they arrived at the interpretations they did? Do they return to the text and discuss what they think is the author's vantage point? What is your role in the discussions? Are students raising thought-provoking questions relevant to the literature at-hand? How can you offer additional support to the students as they work towards becoming active participants in a literary community?

Between Sessions, cont'd.

Student Activities:

Try these activities with your students.

Student Survey: Take time to get to know your students as members of the classroom community. Survey your students for their interests, experiences, background knowledge, family heritage, traditions, and reading habits. Use the activity sheet Student Survey found in the Appendix of this guide for this purpose. Use this information to enlighten your understanding of the multiple perspectives they bring to the classroom and how you can capitalize on those assets to enhance students' understandings of the author's or other readers' perspectives.

As an alternative to this survey, ask students to create a collage that represents their personal life experiences, interests, reading habits, and anything that is significant in their lives. Ask students to write a companion paragraph explaining key elements of the collage. Invite students to share these collages in small groups. Then, discuss ways in which their experiences help shape their understandings of what they read and how these might compare with others. In this activity, both overlap and difference are important to discuss.

Good Questions: One way to ensure dynamic literary dialogue in your classroom is to ask students to generate discussion with their own questions. Students need opportunities to think about how to craft thought-provoking questions in relation to literature they are currently reading.

Assign a short story for your students to read either in class or at home. Selections like Shirley Jackson's "Charles," Toni Cade Bambara's "Raymond's Run," or Langston Hughes's "Thank You M'am" are appropriate short stories that will engage your students. Then, in collaboration with your students, brainstorm a list of characteristics of thought-provoking questions. Ask students to consider what makes a good question. Narrow the list down to two or three key qualities. As a homework assignment, ask students to use these qualities to generate three questions for the next day's whole-class literature discussion about the short story.

When students return to class the next day with their questions, take time to discuss and evaluate the questions they created. As a way of doing so, ask students to write out each question on a separate strip of paper or on an index card. Shuffle the cards and distribute a set of questions to groups of four to five students each. Ask students to evaluate the quality of the questions in terms of their ability to stimulate thinking and discussion about the text. If questions need revising, ask students to do so in the groups. Students may rewrite the questions on the same strips of paper or index cards as the original questions are written. Circulate from group to group, helping students with their revisions.

When students are ready, begin the whole-class discussion by inviting different groups to pose questions from the index cards or strips of paper. This encourages participation from all students and it invites them to take ownership of the class discussion.

After the literature discussion, invite students to share what they learned from the question-writing experience. Ask them what they think they gained from the literature discussion that they would not have if they didn't pose their own questions.

Coat of Arms—All About Me: Cut out shields or use the student activity sheet Coat of Arms found in the Appendix of this guide. Ask students to draw, write information, or cut out pictures from magazines to create a coat of arms that represents who they are as a person. Invite students to orally present their coat of arms in small groups, so that students in your classroom community get to know one another. As you circulate throughout the classroom when students share their coat of arms, help students to recognize similarities and differences among themselves in each group. Then have the students discuss what these differing representations might mean for how they might interpret a story or poem. This will help you and the students in the class understand the different life experiences and multiple perspectives that exist in the literary community.

Between Sessions, cont'd.

Additional Reading

Langer, Judith. *Envisioning Literature*. Columbia University: Teachers College Press, 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3464-0.

Texts mentioned by teachers in this workshop program include:

Short Story:

"Passing" by Langston Hughes

Novels:

Scorpions by Walter Dean Myers

Slam by Walter Dean Myers

Freak the Mighty by Philbrick Rodman

Tears of a Tiger by Sharon Draper

The Giver by Lois Lowry

Poem:

"The Dreamer" by Lee Bennett Hopkins

For additional resources, go to www.learner.org/envisioningliterature. Select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, Workshop 1, and Additional Reading.