

# Workshop 2

## Encouraging Discussion

*"[Students] need to hear what other kids think and that builds on the layers of what they each are thinking and it makes them ask questions."*

—Linda Rief, Eighth-Grade Teacher, Oyster River Middle School, Durham, New Hampshire

### Description

We learn best by contemplating and synthesizing new information. By turning over new concepts in our minds and raising questions, we better understand how to apply the knowledge in multiple situations. This is what makes us critical thinkers.

Literary discussion gives students an opportunity to develop their own interpretations, challenge their initial understandings, raise questions, and grow as critical thinkers and literate members of society.

How can teachers encourage thoughtful discussion in their literature classrooms? What instructional techniques encourage students to discuss literature and how do we plan for these discussions? In this workshop, eight middle school teachers address these concerns and share strategies they use to support and nurture students' discussion of literature.

### Key Points

- Students are encouraged to offer their unique perspectives, share interpretations, and raise questions in classrooms that support discussions.
- Discussion provides students with opportunities to explore the layers of possibility individuals bring to each reading, including unique experiences and differing perspectives.
- Classrooms that support students' developing understandings provide a safe learning community where students feel free to share their range of ideas. They feel respected and learn to respect and trust others in the community.
- Writing is an important rehearsal for fruitful classroom discussions.
- Students are treated as lifelong learners in classrooms that support discussion.
- Teachers can encourage discussion by:
  - providing engaging texts, such as literature that features adolescents and their dilemmas.
  - asking questions that help students tap prior knowledge and life experiences.
  - choosing a compelling passage and reading it aloud.
  - being a good listener to students' ideas.
  - setting discussion guidelines in concert with student input.
  - modeling ways to connect to the literature. For instance, share personal experiences that the text makes you recall or similar situations you have encountered in your life.
  - using think alouds to demonstrate the ways you are interacting with the literature as you read.
  - modeling writing as a way to collect your own ideas about a text.

- inviting students to create their own questions about the text.
- removing yourself as the point from which all conversation flows.
- Successful discussions do not occur without careful strategic planning. In planning for discussion:
  - consider ways to help students find their way into the text. This is crucial in getting a conversation started.
  - consider ways you can model thinking, writing, and connecting the text to your own life.
  - physically arrange your classroom so that it best supports discussion. This may be small groups, pairs, teams, or rows facing one another. Rely on your knowledge of your students, their energy level, their experience with discussion, and your goals for the discussion. It may be necessary to change the configurations often for optimum success.
  - know that all groups will not be successful. When this happens, sometimes it is best to allow the group to break off into smaller groups or to allow students to work independently and join the class later in a whole-class discussion.
  - think about which students in your class are more likely to contribute to discussion and which ones are more reluctant. Plan for including all students in the literary discussion. This might include your listening to a group's discussion and directing the conversation towards the quieter students or creating heterogeneous groups with many personalities and temperaments.
  - consider ways to respond to the literature, other than discussion, such as the use of art and writing. These opportunities will include some of the quieter students.
  - think about ways you can encourage students to pose their own questions.
- Discussion creates a classroom environment where students focus less on recitation and memorization and more on substantial inquiry and analysis.
- Questions are a natural part of the literary experience and students are invited to raise thought-provoking questions in a literary community. Questions are never viewed as not knowing or not fully understanding, as in a traditional classroom.
- Literary concepts are learned in context, as students use this literary lexicon as the fabric of their discussions, developing their understandings and growing their interpretations. Teachers can provide opportunities for literary concept experience by:
  - asking questions that foreground literary elements in a text.
  - modeling the use of literary language in questions and contributions to discussions.
  - planning natural connections in the text. If a text lends itself well to "foreshadowing," for instance, find ways to bring this to your students' attention and allow them to take the conversation further. This may include the use of picture books, read alouds, or questioning.

## Learning Objectives

After viewing this program, you will be able to:

- identify instructional strategies that support literary discussion in the classroom.
- plan and strategize for literature discussions in their own classrooms.

## Background Reading

In preparation for this workshop, 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.

You should also 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, and other resources for this workshop, are available at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature). Select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, Workshop 2.

# Workshop Session (On-Site)

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## Getting Ready (30 minutes)

### Quick Write:

A “quick write” is a brief written response or reaction to literature. This is an opportunity to capture your initial thoughts and questions about a piece. Quick writes require no more than five to six minutes to create a response. Responses can be composed in a number of ways, including short sentences, lists of ideas and questions, webs, or phrases. Capturing spontaneous ideas is key to the quick write, and attention to the conventions of usage, grammar, style, and spelling distract the writer from obtaining this goal.

**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.

If you have Internet access, display the workshop Web site at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature), making participants aware of online resources and interactive opportunities.

In your workshop journal, jot down your initial reactions to the poem “Let America Be America Again.” A Sample Quick Write Response can be found in the Appendix of this guide.

### Discuss and Share:

Discuss and share quick writes. Address as many questions as time permits.

- What questions do you have about the poem?
- What is the speaker’s vision of America? Consider how the speaker views the current state of America and its potential in the future.
- How did the quick write prepare you to share your initial thoughts and questions about the poem?
- How has this discussion enhanced your own understanding of the poem and your overall literary experience with it?
- Why do you think discussion is important in a literature classroom?

## Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

### Think About and Discuss:

**Pause** after Ana Hernandez states: “Set the guidelines for discussion even for the tone of the classroom.” This closes the discussion about creating trust and a classroom of listeners.

- How do you provide opportunities for students to find their way into the book?
- How do you tap students’ prior knowledge and experiences in a literature discussion?
- How do you get students talking about books?
- How do you create a classroom environment of trust and respect, one where students feel free to share their ideas openly?

**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.

# Workshop Session, cont'd.

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**Pause** after Dorothy Franklin states: "To me one of the biggest challenges that faces teachers is how do I spread it out so it's not the same five hands...being raised? And prewriting is definitely one way to give everybody some confidence...."

- How do you select texts in your classroom? What professional resources assist you in this process?
- How do you use writing to enhance discussion in your classroom?

**Pause** after Tanya Schnabl states: "I like kids to write their own questions because...they're more involved...." This concludes the discussion about encouraging students to ask their own questions.

- What are some ways you spark discussion in your own classroom?
- How do you begin removing yourself as the point from which the conversation flows?
- How do you encourage students to ask their own questions?

**Pause** after Barry Hoonan states: "...Depending on your needs, depending on the energy and the experience of your kids, and depending on your focus of the literature, so much depends on what kind of literature group you want to have."

- How do you physically arrange your classroom for successful group discussions?
- How do you organize your class discussions? Do you use small groups, large groups, or whole-class discussions? Discuss what best works for your students and why.
- How can you take cues from students in guiding the discussion?
- How do you set discussion guidelines in your classroom? How did you arrive at them?

## 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 are some discussion strategies you utilize in your classroom? Consider how you ask students to prepare for discussions and how you prepare as well.
- How do you include the quieter students and the reluctant readers in a literature discussion? What are some alternative ways of assessing these students' learning when they are less vocal in your classroom?
- Consider a particularly successful literature discussion in your classroom. Share what made it successful, how you planned for the discussion, in what ways students participated, and how you managed the discussion process.
- What questions do you still have about planning and strategizing for literature discussions?
- What are some books that lend themselves well to read alouds?
- What discussion techniques shared in this workshop would you like to implement in your own classroom?

# Between Sessions (On Your Own)

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## Homework Assignment

### Journal:

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- As you are doing the assigned reading in preparation for Workshop 3, write down two thought-provoking questions generated by your reading experience. These questions will be used as discussion starters for Workshop 3.

### Reading:

In preparation for Workshop 3, review “The Classroom as a Social Setting for Envisionment Building,” and “A Practical Pedagogy,” and “Strategies for Teaching” in Dr. Judith Langer’s *Envisioning Literature* from the Teachers College Press, Columbia University. Copyright 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3464-0.

For additional online resources, visit the Web site at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature), select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, and look under Additional Reading for Workshop 3.

## Ongoing Activities

### 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](http://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:

Videotape a discussion of literature in your own classroom. Analyze the discussion. Write your response in your workshop journal. Consider the following in your analysis:

- What about the discussion was successful?
- What parts of the discussion need improvement?
- Did the discussion flow through you as the facilitator or did students converse with one another? Think about how this occurred and why.
- How was the class physically structured? Whole groups or small groups? How did that structure contribute to the success of the discussion?
- Were all students actively involved in the dialogue? Did some students involve themselves by listening alone?
- How were students prepared for the discussion and how did that contribute to the overall success of the discussion?
- How did you prepare for the discussion? What would you do differently next time?

# Between Sessions, cont'd.

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## Student Activities:

Try these activities with your students. Each activity is designed to help students start talking about literature.

**Book Talk:** Ask students to perform a 10-minute book talk about their favorite book, persuading their classmates to read the book. Ask students to briefly tell about the book and why they like it. Require them to perform a dramatic read aloud with a small segment from their book. In addition, ask students to create a visual presentation, which may be a poster, puppet show, prop, video creation, or costume that represents their book. Model several book talks for your students ahead of time so that they understand your expectations. Consider providing a presentation rubric or scoring guide and asking students to submit a book talk presentation summary for your approval before the actual book talk.

**Quick Write:** The next time you read a piece of literature with your students, ask them to respond to it with a quick write. Remember that a quick write is meant to be a brief initial written response to literature, no more than five to six minutes in length. Students may need assistance with initial responses, so you may offer a question or topic for them to consider. Once students are more experienced with quick writes, they will be able to get started on their own.

You may use the students' quick write responses as a discussion starter for class. Remind students that they can respond in a variety of ways, including short phrases, lists, or webs. Model the quick write process for your students before this activity. Utilize the teacher resource Sample Quick Write Response for "Let America Be America Again" found in the Appendix of this guide for help in planning this activity.

**Sticky Notes:** One strategy for preparing students for class discussion is to use sticky notes. The next time you assign a segment of reading for homework, ask students to use three sticky notes to record three unique initial impressions, questions, and interpretations of what they read. Students should post the notes next to the passage that sparked their response or question. Utilize the students' sticky notes the next day in class as the cornerstones of class literature discussion. Model this strategy before assigning the activity.

**Insert Method:** The insert method is a strategy for responding to literature that prepares students for discussion. Here, readers use symbols to represent reactions to passages of text throughout a reading. For instance, if a reader is surprised by new information in a passage, they may mark or insert an exclamation point in the margin near the passage or use a sticky note with an exclamation point. These symbols serve as reminders of the reader's initial response to the text. You may provide a bookmark with symbols and their meanings for students' first experience with this activity.

Demonstrate the insert method and practice this strategy in class before asking students to try it on their own. Once students are comfortable with this approach to responding to literature, invite them to create their own symbols or expand the ones you have provided in class. Utilize the teacher resource Insert Method Bookmarks, found in the Appendix of this guide, to get your students started.

# Between Sessions, cont'd.

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## Additional Reading

Beck, I., editor, McKeown, M., and Hamilton, R. L. *Questioning the Author: An Approach for Enhancing Student Engagement With Text*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1997. ISBN: 0-8720-7242-8.

Gambrell, L. B., and Almasi, J. F., editors. *Lively Discussions! Fostering Engaged Reading*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1996. ISBN: 0-8720-7147-2.

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

Lindfors, J. W. and Townsend, J. S., editors. *Teaching Language Arts: Learning Through Dialogue*. National Council of Teachers of English, 1999. ISBN: 0-8141-5035-7.

Samuels, B. and Beers, K., editors. *Books for You: An Annotated Booklist for Middle School and Junior High*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996. ISBN: 0-8141-5943-5.

Soter, Anna O. *Young Adult Literature and the New Literary Theories: Developing Critical Readers in Middle School*. Teachers College Press, 1999. ISBN: 0807738808.

Trelease, Jim. *The Read Aloud Handbook*, 5th Edition. Penguin, 2001. ISBN: 0-14-100161-5.

Wells, G., and Chang-Wells, G. L. *Constructing Knowledge Together: Classrooms as Centers of Inquiry and Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992. ISBN: 0-4350-8731-2.

Yokota, J., editor. *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Booklist for Grades K–8*, 3rd Edition. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001. ISBN: 0-8141-2540-9.

*Texts mentioned by teachers in this workshop program include:*

### **Short Story:**

“Passing” by Langston Hughes

### **Novels:**

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis

*Fig Pudding* by Robert Fletcher

*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

*Letters From a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs* by Mary E. Lyons

*Holes* by Louis Sachar

### **Non-Fiction:**

*To Be a Slave* by Julius Lester

### **Picture Book:**

*The Lady With a Ship on Her Head* by Deborah Nourse Lattimore

For additional resources, go to [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature). Select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, Workshop 2, and Additional Reading.

# Notes

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