

Workshop 3

Going Further in Discussion

"I think literature's job is to help kids find their way and see their way in books. It's hopefully illuminating the challenges that we have as people in this world."

—Barry Hoonan, Fifth- and Sixth-Grade Teacher, The Odyssey School, Bainbridge Island, Washington

Description

Orchestrating meaningful literature discussions is a delicate dance. Teachers must artfully push the conversation along, while at the same time, not intrude on students' unique perspectives and interpretations. In this scenario, the teacher is not the point from which all conversation flows, but a knowledgeable member of the literary community, modeling risk-taking and dynamic approaches to examining texts. Teachers need to be keen observers of the discussion dynamics, knowing when to end conversations, when to start new ones, and when to encourage students to further develop their ideas.

Much planning is involved in facilitating a successful literature discussion. Teachers contemplate issues and concerns that are raised in a text by preparing thought-provoking questions before a class meeting. Teachers consider ways they can help students make connections to other texts and to their own lives. Teachers plan for inviting multiple viewpoints and time to explore others' perspectives.

In Workshop 3, teachers explore ways to help their students dig deeper in the literature, consider possibilities they may not have explored on their own, and experience a vibrant, meaningful discussion.

Key Points

- In classrooms that support discussion, teachers guide students to examine texts at a deep level, connecting the literature to other texts and their own lives, and exploring possibilities for themselves.
- Teachers can help students take a discussion further once it's underway by:
 - posing broad thought-provoking questions to encourage students to consider texts in a variety of ways. These types of questions have no wrong or right answer and invite students to think "what if..." or "how does this apply to my own life?"
 - preparing lists of key issues or concerns that prompt students to explore areas of a text they would not have discovered yet.
 - modeling read alouds from texts in the midst of literature discussion. A read aloud is the expressive reading of a passage from literature. When planned in advance, this may include the use of dramatic voice, props, or music. An impromptu read aloud demonstrates to students that good readers revisit a text for further examination.
 - expanding and enriching students' understandings through artwork, music, drama, and writing.
 - providing a discussion format or structure that students can follow and then go beyond. Teachers may post this format or provide a discussion guide.
 - modeling and celebrating risk-taking in the classroom. Students need to feel confident that their thoughts and ideas have merit and are worth trying out with the group.

- Teachers need to develop a “third ear” for productive conversations—insuring that students listen to each other, build on each other’s ideas, challenge each other, and still have something new to offer.
- Teachers must be ready to step in and help move the conversation forward, to help students consider other possibilities, consider the same issues in more complex ways, or to move on and get more information by reading or connecting to literature, history, and life.
- Teachers need to monitor their interjections in a discussion, allowing students to take the conversation in directions the teacher may not have considered.
- Personalizing what we read is a natural part of the literary process for experienced readers. Teachers can help students personalize what they read. Some questions teachers can ask students to make personal connections to the text include:
 - How do your own experiences help us better understand the story?
 - How do you see the character differently? How might she feel? What else might she do?
 - How else could you explain what happened?
 - Have you thought about...?
 - What did the event or scene remind you of?
 - How did it make you feel?
 - How would you handle the situation?
 - Did anything like this ever happen to you?
 - What can you learn from how the characters handled their dilemmas?
 - Does the story make you rethink any of your own choices or decisions? Explain.
- You know you have a successful discussion when:
 - students begin to converse with one another instead of through the teacher.
 - students use the text as a starting point, but go beyond it by connecting the text to their lives and the world in which they live.
 - students are listening to one another and making comments based on what others have contributed to the conversation.
 - students argue with one another, revisit the text to make a point, and express passion about their view-points.
 - students can identify what made the discussion powerful and what they took away from it that they would not have been able to do without the interaction with other students.
 - students are posing their own questions.

- Teachers need to guide students in thinking about what they gained from the discussion. This awareness helps students understand the depth of the conversations they are having. Some questions that might help students examine their discussions include:
 - How did the discussion impact your understanding of the literature? For instance, how is your interpretation of the literature different from your initial understandings of it?
 - How did the discussion change your perspectives?
 - What did you learn about yourself from the conversation? What did you learn about others?
 - What did you learn about the world in which you live?
 - How did you contribute to the conversation?

Learning Objectives

After viewing this program, you will be able to:

- identify the hallmarks of a successful literature discussion.
- guide students in meaningful literature discussions, ones where students connect literature to other texts and their own lives, and explore possibilities for themselves.
- understand the balance between knowing when to step into a literature discussion and when to step aside and allow students to lead the conversation in another direction.

Background Reading

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

For additional online resources, visit the Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature. Select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, click on Workshop 3, and Additional Reading.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready (30 minutes)

Discuss:

Share Workshop 2's Homework: (20 minutes). Share and discuss the two thought-provoking questions that you wrote down as you read the *Envisioning Literature* background reading for this workshop.

Reflect in Workshop Journals:

Do a Quick Write: (10 minutes). Spend eight to 10 minutes considering what a meaningful and rich literature discussion looks like. Record your responses as a quick write in your workshop journal. Refer to this quick write as you view the video. Think about how your vision of a meaningful and rich literature discussion compares with the ones shared by the teachers in this workshop.

Site Leader: Use these questions and activities 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, making participants aware of online resources and interactive opportunities.

Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

Think About and Discuss:

Pause after Barry Hoonan states: "There's this subtlety that we do as teachers where we influence because we have a bigger picture in mind."

- How do you prepare for literature discussions with your students?
- What are some strategies you use in your classroom to encourage students to examine literature on a deeper level?

Pause after Dr. Langer states: "...The goal always is to step in, provide the help, and to step out and see if the students can start taking over on their own." This concludes Dr. Langer's thoughts on teachers knowing when to step into a conversation or when to stay out.

- How do you know when it's time to step into a conversation and when to hang back and let the dialogue take on a life of its own?
- How do you help students focus on salient points others make in a group discussion?

Pause after Dorothy Franklin states: "We have to be the ones that cherish risk taking. And if we cherish it, then eventually they'll take those itty-bitty steps...One of the greatest things I like to see are those little steps that the students make." This concludes the discussion about encouraging risk taking in class discussions.

- How do you encourage students to take risks in literature discussion?
- How do you help students understand that multiple ideas and interpretations are accepted and that there is not just one way of looking at a piece of literature?

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.

Pause after Linda Rief states: "So...what I see as most substantive discussions or ones that are most meaningful to them [kids] are when they can take it to themselves but then go outside of themselves."

- How do you help students make personal connections to literature in your classroom? How do you help students take those personal connections and use them to extend their understandings of the text and their own world? What are some questions you can ask students to consider?
- Does "anything go" in a literature discussion? Explain your views on this.

Pause after Dorothy Franklin states: "So to me the best discussions are the ones where the text is central and yet all of our comments are piggybacking off of each other." This occurs before a classroom example from Dorothy Franklin's classroom, where students are discussing the short story "Passing."

- Other than whole-class and small-group discussion, what alternative literature response opportunities do you provide for your students?
- How do you know when you have a good discussion? How do the students know? Do you think it is important for the students to be able to identify a good literature discussion? Explain.

Going Further (30 minutes)

Responding to Literature Through Art:

Read the opening paragraph of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." This text may be found in the anthology *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*, 5th edition, Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs, Prentice Hall. Copyright 1998. ISBN 0-13-010076-5.

Online versions of the Poe text and related resources may be accessed at the workshop Web site. Go to www.learner.org/envisioningliterature and select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6-8*. Click on Workshop 3 and go to Additional Reading.

In your workshop journal, sketch images that come to mind from reading the Poe passage. This activity is offered as an Extension: Classroom Connection in the workshop materials and you may choose to try this with your own students. Focus on phrases or key passages that paint a picture in your mind. You will have an opportunity to polish your sketches as homework for this workshop.

Site Leader: Consider modeling a different passage from the text and sketching your mental images for participants. This will help them understand the activity more clearly. Set aside 15 minutes for sketching, five to six minutes for sharing sketches, and 10 minutes for a post-activity discussion.

Share your sketches, then discuss the following questions as time permits:

- How did you feel about responding to the passage through sketching?
- What is the value in responding to literature through drawing?
- What other alternatives to formal discussion can you think of that would engage students in authentic interactions with literature?

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Journal:

Polish your sketches from the Going Further activity in this workshop. Add color or ink to the drawings. Select one or two key phrases or passages that you think inspired your sketch and write these at the bottom of the sketch.

Reading:

In preparation for Workshop 4, read "Literature for Students the System Has Failed," "Literature Across the Curriculum," and "Closing Thoughts: Literature in School and Life" in Dr. Judith Langer's *Envisioning Literature* from the Teachers College Press. Copyright 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3464-0.

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 4, and go to Additional Reading.

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, 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:

Take time to reflect on class meeting time.

Classroom Cruising and Discussion Debriefing: The next time your students participate in a small-group literature discussion, prepare to monitor the groups with a clipboard or a spiral notepad.

Create sections on a piece of paper for each group and label each group's section.

Cruise: Circulate throughout the classroom as students participate in the literature discussion. Listen for key points, questions, debates, and connections students make to the text. Jot down points of discussion and students' names. You may only have an opportunity to observe a few of the groups. Also jot down additional questions for the students to consider based on the discussions you observed.

Debrief: Set aside the last 10-15 minutes of class for a discussion debriefing. When debriefing the students, highlight powerful student contributions and raise additional questions for students to consider. Ask students what they gained from participating in their discussions and what questions they would still like to explore.

Plan on providing students with additional discussion time at the next class meeting to revisit questions and areas they would still like to examine.

Reflect: During planning time, review the notes you made from the class literature discussion. What areas of the literature did the students examine? What additional issues would you like students to explore? At what points in the discussions could you have interjected ideas or questions to push the conversations along? What literary elements did students touch upon and which ones can you help bring to the forefront of the students' next discussion?

Between Sessions, cont'd.

Student Activities:

Try these activities with your students.

Risk-Taking: Select a poem or short story that you have never read before. Tell your students that this is your first reading of the text. Together you can discuss the meaning of the literature and explore its possibilities. Students will see you as a member of the classroom community, taking risks and examining a piece of literature for the first time.

Book Buddies: Ask students to correspond with another student about the book they are currently reading. This can be a book that students are reading independently or it may be a book they are examining as a class or as a small book group. Offer suggested topics for the students to write about in their letters. Distribute the activity sheet *Book Buddies: Letter-Writing Topic Suggestions*, which can be found in the Appendix of this guide.

Responding Through Art: Select literature rich in description or imagery. Consider novels like *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli, or *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. Also, the poetry of Robert Frost, or short stories by Edgar Allan Poe or Ray Bradbury would be appropriate. You may choose to focus on literary concepts like color imagery in a poem or a setting description, or characterization in a short story or novel. Ask students to sketch an artistic representation of the literary concept related to the text. Provide students with large art paper, colored pencils, pastels, or markers to enhance their drawings. Ask students to write a paragraph explaining their artistic response to the literature and how the work represents their reactions to the text. Display the artwork and offer students time to share their drawings.

Use your experience from the *Going Further* portion of this workshop experience to guide you in implementing this activity.

Responding Through Music: Select a poem rich in sound, rhythm, or rhyme, for instance poems like “The Bells” by Edgar Allan Poe, “Harlem Sweeties” by Langston Hughes, or “March for a One-Man Band” by David Wagoner. Play with the different sounds in the poem by creating a “choral round” reading of the poem with different groups of students focusing on selected phrases, words, sounds, or lines. Consider inviting students to make up an additional verse that imitates the poet. As an extension to this activity, invite the music teacher to collaborate with your class. Either through vocal sounds or hand-held percussion instruments, enhance the poetic reading. Conduct a discussion after the musical reading, asking students to explain how their experience added to their understanding of the poem.

Ask students to select a song that reminds them of the literature you are currently studying. Ask student volunteers to bring in these selections of music for class listening. Listen to the music selections and discuss how they might represent the literature. Model this activity with a poem and a music selection of your own. Be certain to explain your expectations for music selections and what you consider to be appropriate for your classroom.

Expose students to music that represents the time period or setting in the literature you are reading. For example, if you were studying the poet Langston Hughes, jazz music from the Harlem Renaissance would be appropriate.

The Melanie Strategy: In the workshop video, Barry Hoonan describes a naming strategy he uses called “the Melanie strategy.” This is his way of giving a student name to an observation technique. He observes students’ discussions and towards the end of the conversation, he highlights what he thought was really powerful. This could be his observations of small-group discussions as he moves around the classroom, or it could be from a whole-class discussion. If a student demonstrates a particular approach to examining meaning in a piece of literature, he defines what the student has done for the class and then gives that strategy the student’s name. For instance, if a student, Melanie, relates the literature to a personal experience, he may define what the student did, complement the student, and tell the class this is the “Melanie Strategy.” Not only does this help students think about the literature discussion and how they can contribute, but it also celebrates student participation, multiple perspectives, and risk-taking.

The next time your students participate in a literature discussion, observe the dialogue and noteworthy student contributions. Debrief the students at the end of the conversation, highlight powerful student insights, and “name” their responses.

Between Sessions, cont'd.

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.

Close, E. E. "Literature Discussion: A Classroom Environment for Thinking and Sharing." *English Journal*, 81(5), 65-71, 1992.

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.

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.

Some literature titles referred to by teachers in this workshop program include:

Novels:

On My Honor by Marion Dane Bauer

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis

Tears of a Tiger by Sharon M. Draper

Among the Hidden by Margaret Peterson Haddix

Necessary Roughness by Marie G. Lee

The Giver by Lois Lowry

Dangerous Skies by Suzanne Fisher Staples

Short Stories:

"Passing" by Langston Hughes

"Guests in the Promised Land" by Kristin Hunter

For additional resources, go to www.learner.org/envisioningliterature. Select *Making Meaning in Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 6–8*, Workshop 3, and Additional Reading.