

Workshop 8

Returning to the Classroom

Introduction

Implementing the envisionment-building process in the classroom requires teachers to develop “new bones” or ways of planning for and interacting with students to draw out their understanding, ways to connect students to each other, and ways to guide students back to the text, or to question their own readings. By reshaping their approach to literature instruction, as well as rethinking how classroom meetings are utilized, teachers can create a true envisionment-building environment. Here, students’ responses and questions are the focal points for learning, discussion, and exploration. By fostering the growth of a literary community, teachers serve as expert readers and facilitators, moving the process along with layers of questioning, while at the same time connecting students’ ideas, as well as challenging them. Equally important in the process is the ability for students to recognize that their input is invaluable and that their unique perspectives are not only welcome, but also critical in moving the class thinking and learning along.

Envisionment-building classrooms invite students to share their multiple perspectives, stressing that diversity is a strength. Students are engaged in discussions where multiple vantage points are explored for the sake of building a rich understanding for each student. This learning environment creates the expectation that students are to challenge one another, as well as challenge their own ideas.

While not all envisionment-building classrooms have to look and feel the same, they are guided by some basic principles:

Principles of Practice:*

- Students are treated as life-long envisionment builders.
- Questions are treated as part of the literary experience.
- Class meetings are a time to develop understandings.
- Multiple perspectives are used to enrich interpretation.

* from Judith Langer’s *Envisioning Literature*

The teacher's role in an envisionment-building classroom is to:

- serve as an expert reader, guide, resource, and facilitator, bringing about complex discussion and questioning and lending the expertise of an experienced reader.
- provoke students to think, write, and talk about their ideas, their responses, questions, and their understandings of the text itself, and to listen to others' ideas and leave room for exploring other possibilities.
- validate as well as challenge students' responses and interpretations.
- pose complex questions to lead readers towards their own understanding of the text.
- introduce texts that are accessible for students and in a way that speaks to their interests and life experiences.
- assist students in making real-world connections between the literature and their own lives.
- create a classroom community where questions and responses from all students are valued as part of the learning process.
- encourage and facilitate participation from all community members.
- approach discussion without being married to previous understandings of the text.
- provide a variety of multi-text readings, which allows students to compare and contrast literature experiences in order to build complex understandings.

Key Points

- Reading literature is about exploring universal human experiences, such as love, the power of life, relationships, death, success, and misfortune.
- All readers, no matter what their reading ability, can engage in the envisionment-building process.
- Literature instruction must involve discussion and questioning.
- Conversation in an envisionment-building classroom provides opportunities for respectful challenges and conflict.
- Classroom community members help one another to develop their own understanding through dialogue and questioning, pushing along one another's envisionments.
- "Received interpretations," or ones that are widely known in the literary community, are still important in the envisionment-building process, as long as students are first allowed to develop their own interpretations.
- There are "misreadings" where students create faulty understandings. In these cases, students must be asked to back up their interpretations with logical reasoning and with textual examples. The community often reins in misunderstandings through dialogue.
- The questions teachers ask in an envisionment-building classroom are key to the process. These questions need to help students enter the text, move around in it, take lessons from it, and then objectify their responses from a critical perspective.

Learning Objectives

After viewing this program, participants will be able to:

- Determine and understand the role of the student, the teacher, and the community in an envisionment-building classroom.
- Select and implement instructional approaches that support the envisionment-building process.
- Utilize the process of envisionment building in their own classroom, making informed instructional choices about how to approach texts, how to implement classroom activities, how to structure whole-class and small-group discussions, and how to create a productive literary community.

Background Reading

In preparation for this workshop, you may want to read Chapter 6, "Strategies for Teaching," in Judith Langer's *Envisioning Literature*.

For other resources, look under "Additional Reading" for "Workshop 8. Returning to the Classroom" on the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready 30 minutes

Brainstorming and Discussion: The Envisionment-Building Classroom

Based on the diagram, brainstorm what you think the role of the teacher is in an envisionment-building classroom. What is the role of the student? What is the role of the text? How are these elements interrelated to one another in creating an envisionment-building classroom? Give specific examples.

Share your ideas and create a collective diagram. Discuss how the different elements on the diagram are interrelated in the envisionment-building classroom.

Site Leader: Distribute **The Envisionment-Building Classroom Triangle Model** activity sheet to the participants. Have the participants brainstorm independently, then share their ideas. Create a collective diagram on a flip chart.

Watch the Workshop Video..... 60 minutes

Now you will view the video program “Returning to the Classroom,” in which the panelists discuss how the envisionment-building process works in their classrooms and examine the roles teachers, students, and texts play.

While viewing the program, add ideas to your envisionment-building triangle models. Continue to think about the role of the students, the teacher, and the community in an envisionment-building classroom.

- What components discussed in the program hold true for your classroom experiences?
- Which ones apply to your classroom and which ones do not?

As you view the video program, consider the questions below.

Segment One

[Site Leader: Pause after Dr. Langer comments, “They are complex ‘what if’ and ‘why’ questions that require thought, the kind that demand more than one-word answers, the kinds of questions for which teachers don’t always know the answers, as Carol said, the kinds of questions that lead to rich and empowering thought and discussions.”]

- What do you hope to accomplish in your literature classroom with students?
- What do you think “good” literature instruction looks like?

Site Leader: If you are watching on videocassette, you may pause at the segments indicated below to give participants opportunities to discuss, reflect, and interact with the program. If you are watching a real-time broadcast, have participants consider the questions as they view the program, and discuss them later.

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

Segment Two

[Site Leader: Pause after Dr. Langer says, “Sometimes it is difficult to step into and maintain that role.”]

- What are some ways that students can initiate literary dialogue?
- What is the role of questions in the envisionment-building classroom? How does this compare to your current instructional practices?
- How do you get all students involved in a literature discussion?
- How do you get literary discussion started in your classroom?

Workshop Session, cont'd.

Segment Three

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Jeffrey Wilhelm's comment, "You know, if I want to understand what this guy's saying, then I gotta understand the codes he's using to create that message."]

- How can the teacher and the classroom community validate student responses and ideas?
- How do you deal with "received" or widely accepted interpretations of works of literature in an envisionment-building classroom? How does this compare with your current instructional practices?
- How do you handle misinterpretations of text in your classroom? How can a literary community help in these situations?
- What are the benefits of encouraging and supporting multiple interpretations of texts in a literature classroom?
- How can the teacher avoid the role of being "the keeper of all the knowledge?"
- How can the teacher foster respect for the text in a literary community?

Segment Four

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Jeffrey Wilhelm states, "And the kids take great joy in that growing competence." This concludes the discussion about the use of writing in the envisionment-building classroom.]

- What is the value of intertextual reading in a literature discussion?
- What is the value of teaching literature around themes in a literature classroom?
- How can teachers use writing as an integral part in helping students participate in a literate community? What are some ways you use writing in your own literature classroom?

Segment Five

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Bobbi Houtchens comments, "...they have a week off from journaling."]

- What are some ways that teachers can help students access and immerse themselves in literature?
- How do you reach out to all literacy levels and interests in your classroom?

Segment Six

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Dr. Langer states, "And we have a variety of classes—we were able to see students who otherwise had been talked about as very poor readers, engaging in the literary conversations, contributing to the growing understandings of the class, building their own interpretations."]

- How do you help your students extend their understandings of literature and make connections to their own lives?
- How do you foster a love for reading in your literature classroom?
- What is the role of silence in a literature discussion?

Segment Seven

[**Site Leader:** View the remainder of the workshop program.]

- What is the value in reading literature with your students? What do you want them to get out of it?
- What are some of your personal teaching goals for trying on "new bones" and building your own envisionment classroom?

Workshop Session, cont'd.

Going Further 30 minutes

Discussion (15 minutes)

Revisit the envisionment-building triangle model and share any additional ideas gained from viewing the program.

- How do you engage all students in your classroom in a literature discussion?
- How do you select the texts you use in your classroom? What is the student's role in this process?
- What are some particularly engaging texts that you have used in your classroom? Why do you think the students enjoy them? What classroom activities made these texts accessible to the students?

Activity and Discussion: Taking Stock: The Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner (15 minutes)

Using the Taking Stock activity sheet, think about the categories and fill in your ideas based on your own literature instructional practices. Then, share your thoughts.

Site Leader: Distribute the **Taking Stock** activity sheet to assist the participants with this activity.

- List some of the instructional practices that you are already implementing that support an envisionment-building classroom. Consider learning activities, assignments, assessments, and classroom discussions.
- List instructional practices that do not support envisionment building. Consider learning activities, assignments, assessments, and classroom discussions.
- What are some changes you can make in your own literature instruction that can lead to an envisionment-building classroom? Consider short-term and long-range goals.

Online resources related to the "teacher as a reflective practitioner" can be accessed at the workshop Web site. Go to the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/ and click on "Workshop 8. Returning to the Classroom" and "Additional Reading."

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Journal

In your workshop journal, respond to the following:

What are three ways you can begin to incorporate envisionment building in your own classroom and to foster a productive literary community?

Reading

You may consider reading additional chapters from the book *Envisioning Literature*, by Dr. Judith Langer. Supplemental online articles on teaching and the envisionment-building process can be accessed at the workshop Web site. Go to the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/.

Between Sessions , cont'd.

Ongoing Activities

Channel-Talk

Remember to post comments and questions on Channel-TalkLitConversations. Go to www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/ and click on "Channel-Talk."

Extension: Classroom Connection

Activity One

Ask your students to create three open-ended, thought-provoking questions related to the literature you are currently reading. A good time to do this is at the end of a segment of reading, where students are more likely to have thoughts, questions, and hunches about what they just read. Use these questions as the basis for classroom dialogue the following day. Consider organizing students into small literary discussion groups and then inviting whole class discussion afterwards. When organizing the literary discussion groups, you might implement ground rules, as well as specific roles for each student to take within the groups. Another variation of this activity is to place students' questions into a basket for drawing. Students can take turns posing questions and leading parts of the discussion, calling on classmates, as well as adding their own responses. Literature Circles online resources can be accessed at the workshop Web site. Go to the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/ and click on "Workshop 8. Returning to the Classroom" and "Extension: Classroom Connection."

Activity Two

When thinking about your current unit of study, what instructional approaches can you immediately implement that would lead towards an envisionment-building classroom? Keep in mind the following student learning goals, based on Judith Langer's *Envisioning Literature*, as you consider immediate instructional strategies:

Students will be able to:

- Share initial impressions after reading.
- Ask relevant questions about the work being read.
- Go beyond initial impressions in order to rethink, develop, and enrich understanding.
- Make connections within and across texts.
- Support interpretations with logical reasoning and with textual examples.
- Consider multiple perspectives within the text and across groups of readers.
- Reflect on alternative interpretations and critique or support them.
- Use literature to gain understandings about self and life.
- Engage in ways of reading that indicate sensitivity to other cultures and contexts.
- Use writing as a way to reflect on and communicate literary understanding.
- Talk and write about a piece in ways that are characteristic of discourse about literature.

Between Sessions , cont'd.

Activity Three: Dramatic Variations

Use *reader's theater* to invite student interpretation of the text you are currently reading. Students should be given time to prepare their lines, as well as props and facial and voice expression. Reader's theater online resources can be accessed at the workshop Web site. Go to the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/ and click on "Workshop 8. Returning to the Classroom" and "Extension: Classroom Connection."

A *tableau* is a dramatic representation of a literary scene. As the actors move into position, they pose in a "freeze frame." The scene typically represents something meaningful, or at least an interpretation of the scene from the text.

- Divide students into acting groups of four or five.
- From the literature the students are currently reading, ask each group to discuss a character's dilemma, actions, or choices. Students should discuss why they think a character acted a certain way and what they would have done in that character's situation.
- Based on the discussions, each acting group will create a tableau that represents the character's dilemma or actions. Then, one student from the group may step outside of the tableau and provide commentary on the scene, as well as what the group would have done in the character's situation. This same activity can be adapted for use with poetry. Typically, this form of dramatics is impromptu, but if planning is allowed, students might consider using props.
- A variation for organizing this activity is to ask student groups to draw scenes and characters out of a hat. Ask student groups to dramatically present their interpretation of the character or scene from the text they are reading. Invite the group and class to provide commentary.

Activity Four

Consider utilizing multiple texts in your classroom, based on student reading groups. Allow student groups to select their own text. Create response-based activities around broad themes or learning concepts, lending themselves to discussions about life and the human condition. Some possible themes you might consider include friendship, family relationships, death, romance, growing up, and a variety of adolescent conflicts. Create activities that provide opportunities to compare and contrast texts, considering how each one informs the other.

Activity Five

Visit the online Lesson Builder, which assists teachers in renewing current instructional practices with envisionment-building strategies, on the *Conversations in Literature* Web site. Go to www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/ and click on "Lesson Builder."

Additional Reading

For other resources, look under "Additional Reading" for "Workshop 8. Returning to the Classroom" on the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/.

Activity Sheet: Taking Stock

The Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner

Directions: Reflect upon your own classroom instructional practices. Which ones support the envisionment-building process? Consider learning activities, assignments, assessments, and classroom discussions. Which ones do not and why? What changes would you like to implement in your classroom instructional approaches? What changes can be made immediately and which ones need to take place over time?

Practices Supporting Envisionment Building	Practices Not Supporting Envisionment Building	Changes I Would Like To Implement, Both Short-Term and Long-Range...

Activity Sheet: The Envisionment-Building Classroom Triangle Model

Directions: Brainstorm your ideas about the following:

- What do you think the role of the teacher is in an envisionment-building classroom?
- What is the role of the student?
- What is the role of the community?
- What is the role of the text?
- How are these elements all related to one another in creating an envisionment-building classroom?
- How are these roles similar to or different from your current classroom environment?

