

Video Clip 9

Whole-Group Discussions

Length of Clip:	18:55
School:	Oyster River Middle School
Location:	Durham, New Hampshire
No. of Students in School:	800
Teacher:	Linda Rief
No. of Years Teaching:	18
Grade:	8th
Subject:	Language Arts
No. of Students in the Classroom:	25

"I want kids to be asking big questions of themselves. I want them to put themselves in characters' roles. I want them to say, 'Where would I fit and what stance would I take if I were a character in this book? And what is this book making me think about myself and about the world at large? And about where I fit in the world?'" — Linda Rief

About This Video Clip

The creation, interpretation, and appreciation of language and literature form the heart of Linda Rief's curriculum. Her major goal is to enable students to develop into literate, articulate young men and women who contribute creatively and productively to society by communicating effectively with others, by understanding the world in which they live, and by finding their places in a complex and diverse world. She believes they become informed, clear-thinking citizens by participating actively as readers, writers, speakers, and listeners.

With this goal in mind, Ms. Rief asks students to read a minimum of half an hour daily. For the first part of the school year, students make their own reading selections, either from a well-stocked classroom library, from the school library, or from sources outside school. By respecting students' choices early, Ms. Rief believes they are more open to choices she makes later in the year.

In addition to making many of their own reading selections, students are given ample opportunities to choose their own writing topics. In both reading and writing, they are expected to sample a variety of genres and styles, broadening their experiences as both readers and writers. In addition to reading their individual choices, students are asked to read together in small groups, using text sets based on themes and levels of difficulty, or together as a whole class, sharing the experience of a novel, play, short story, poem, or essay. Language conventions are taught both in the context of the students' writing and through direct, whole-class instruction.

Recognizing that sometimes teachers become overly concerned about students who are reluctant to enter classroom conversations, Ms. Rief uses writer's notebooks to see how students are responding to their reading or to the class discussion. Eventually, she believes, a student who rarely participates will join the conversation and have something wonderful to say.

During discussion, Ms. Rief acts as a facilitator. She likes students to keep the conversation going on their own, listening to one another and adding to earlier comments or responding to questions posed by a classmate. If that doesn't happen organically, Ms. Rief is ready to urge the discussion along by asking a particular student what he or she thinks, or by wondering if anybody wants to comment on a point that was just made.

In this particular lesson, the entire class reads and discusses Lois Lowry's Newbery Award-winning novel, *The Giver*. Ms. Rief uses class discussion to help students connect the world of the novel with their own experiences. She asks them what the book made them think—about themselves, other people, and the world they live in. She asks them to consider the implications of living in a world in which many of their important choices would be made for them. Ms. Rief thinks it is important for students to hear what others believe. She hopes to see students responding to ideas raised by classmates and then rethinking their understandings based on those comments.

Visit the *Making Meaning in Literature: A Video Library, Grades 6–8* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature to access the lesson plan Ms. Rief used to organize this classroom experience, as well as other related resources.

Featured Texts

The Giver by Lois Lowry

In this contemporary, Newbery Award-winning novel, Ms. Rief has chosen a text that raises a number of real-life questions for her students. The main character, Jonas, lives in what might be considered a perfect world. There is no war, no fear, no pain. However, neither are there any choices. Every person is assigned a role in the Community and must fill that role without questioning it. Ms. Rief hopes that the book, and the discussions surrounding it, will help students confront questions of choice in their own lives.

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 see how one teacher helps students engage in discussions—both in small groups reading books on a common theme and in whole-class discussion about a shared novel. Viewers might note ways in which student responses are supported and encouraged as well as ways in which students connect their observations to earlier comments.

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 a student-centered literature discussion might work.

Curriculum planners can use this video as a model for integrating self-selected reading, small-group thematic readings, and whole-class shared reading within the curriculum as a way of helping students make personal connections a central part of their literary experiences.

Administrators can use this video to generate awareness of strategies for using and facilitating whole-class literature discussions to support students' developing literary understandings.

Before Watching

Before viewing this video, consider the following:

- What are the characteristics of a “good” literary discussion?
- How can teachers help students respond personally to their reading in preparation for class discussion?
- How can teachers encourage students to respond to one another during a discussion instead of directing their responses to the teacher?

Suggestions for Post-Viewing Discussion

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

- What are some ways this teacher helps her students “step into” a new novel?
- As viewers, how could you tell that the students were listening and responding directly to one another? Give some examples.
- What is the pedagogical value of a large-group literary discussion? Of small-group discussions? What are some ways a teacher might use each to assess student understanding of, and engagement with, a literary text?
- What ideas did you glean from the video that you would like to try in your classroom?
- What questions do you have about this teacher’s instructional practices?
- How can you use this video to help teachers attempt new ways of facilitating discussion?

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 a classroom discussion such as the one portrayed in the video?
- Did any of the student responses surprise or intrigue you? Why? Give examples.
- How can discussions such as these help students learn?

Viewing Suggestions, cont'd.

Curriculum planners can discuss:

- What themes or key ideas are at the center of your literature curriculum?
- What literary selections foregrounding those themes or key ideas would be most appropriate for this grade level? Is there any current young adult material that might add value to the existing readings?
- Are there ways in which you might make thematic connections between literature in your curriculum and topics developed in other departments?

Administrators can discuss:

- Do teachers have appropriate resources (book sets, for example) to enable a mix of whole-class and small-group discussions?
- How can physical issues (classroom size and configuration, teacher/student ratio, external distractions, etc.) enable or prevent teachers from facilitating effective discussions?
- What professional development is available (or might be made available) for teachers who wish to develop their skills as discussion facilitators?

Suggestions for Post-Viewing Activities

For teachers involved in professional development and preservice education:

- Make a list of activities you might plan for students to help them respond to their reading and prepare for class discussion.
- Make a list of ways that you might check to see how individual students are responding to their reading.
- What strategies have you found effective to help move a discussion “back on track”? Share them with your colleagues.

For teachers reaching out to families:

- Make a list of ways you can help families support their children’s daily reading and their 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 your class.
- Prepare a literature chart for students to keep at home and record books as they complete them. Ask them to share two or three interesting observations about the book with a family member before they add a new title to the list.
- 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 value of student-centered discussion as part of literature discussion. Ask teachers to consider ways in which this lesson succeeds, and to suggest ways in which it might be strengthened. Provide time for teachers to share their strategies for facilitating large-group discussion.

Additional Resources

The classroom lesson plan, 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.

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.

Benedict, Susan and Lenore Carlisle. *Beyond Words: Picture Books for Older Readers and Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992. ISBN 0-435-08710-X.

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.

Busching, Beverly A. and Betty Ann Slesinger. "Authentic Questions: What Do They Look Like? Where Do They Lead?" *Language Arts* (September, 1995): 341–343.

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. *Activities for an Interactive Classroom*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994. ISBN 0-8141-0046-5.

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*. Eds. Newell, George E. and Russell K. Durst. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1993. 23–43. ISBN 0-926842-24-2.

Additional Resources, cont'd.

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

Lowry, Lois. "Newbery Medal Acceptance." *The Horn Book Magazine* (July–August 1994): 414–422.

Moss, Joy F. *Teaching Literature in the Middle Grades: A Thematic Approach*. 2nd Ed. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc., 2000. ISBN 1-929024-14-2.

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.

Tiedt, Iris McClellan. *Teaching With Picture Books in the Middle School*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2000. ISBN 0-87207-273-8.

Trelease, Jim. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995, ISBN 0-1404-6971-0.

Whitin, Phyllis. *Sketching Stories, Stretching Minds: Responding Visually to Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996. ISBN 0-435-08879-X.

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.