

Workshop 4

Classroom Dialogues

“What we’re doing is really negotiating the meaning of the text. I believe there’s not one meaning in a text that I have and the students are supposed to get. We all bring what we bring to the book based on what we’ve experienced in our lives and other things we’ve read. And we put all those out into the mix and come out with a totally different reading at the end. So that’s what I’m hoping for.”

—Katherine Bomer, Fifth-Grade Teacher, Pleasant Hill Elementary School, Austin, Texas

Introduction

Many teachers are afraid to promote classroom discussion in which students assume control of its shape. And with good reason. What happens when students set the agenda? How much direction should the teacher provide? What should a teacher do when a discussion doesn’t work? How does a teacher help students learn to treat conflicting points of view with respect? What happens when students veer off the topic, or reveal information of a highly personal—perhaps even private—nature? Clearly, facilitating such discussions is a complex—and sometimes risky—business.

Authentic conversation is, however, central to the success of an envisionment-building classroom. In this video, the teachers discuss the complexities of encouraging such discussions. As they share ways in which they help students develop as proficient conversationalists and strategies they have discovered for dealing with difficulties, think about how their strategies might work for you and your students.

Key Points

- Good conversations about literature help students reach new insights about the text, themselves, and the world around them.
- Good conversations help students become better critical thinkers as they test their understandings and ideas against those of their classmates.
- Enabling good conversations provides teachers with a number of ongoing challenges.
- Good discussion topics—those that are interesting to the students or ones to which they have personal connections—encourage rich conversations.
- Teachers who value good discussions learn to be open to, and supportive of, spontaneous developments in the conversation.
- Teachers have to be sensitive when presented with confidential or highly personal revelations from students, relating those issues back to the text in productive ways.
- Teachers assume a number of roles during discussion, from taking part as a participant to stepping back as an observer.
- Teachers’ roles in a discussion change as they help students become more independent in their discussion groups or as specific groups need additional support and direction.
- Teachers often play a supportive role in discussion groups by letting students shape the discussion and stepping in only as needed.

- During discussion, the focus often shifts from the teacher’s to the students’ agenda as students focus on the issues that matter most to them.
- Teaching specific literary concepts is done most effectively in the context of grappling with a text as a whole.
- Envisionment-building teachers learn to be sensitive to identifying “teachable moments” and using them to present specific concepts within the larger context of the ongoing literary discussion.
- Teachers in envisionment-building classrooms use both large- and small-group discussions depending on their agenda and the needs of their students at a particular time.
- Many teachers use large-group discussions as platforms to teach and model strategies for effective conversation that they expect students to take into their small groups.
- Helping students debrief about what went well or what didn’t work in group discussions helps them develop strategies that will make them more successful in later discussions.

Learning Objectives

After participating in this session, you will be able to:

- Determine ways to make both large- and small-group discussions an important part of your literature instruction.
- Develop ways to help your students become more effective in discussion groups.
- When training students in effective discussion strategies, introduce one new strategy at a time, and remember Jonathan Holden’s advice to use “baby steps” when first exposing students to classroom discussion.
- Identify role(s) you feel comfortable in during group discussions.
- Identify ways you might help your students become more independent in their discussions.
- Be realistic about your initial expectations for implementing student-centered discussions in your class, and patient when doing so.

Background Reading

In preparation for Workshop 4, read “The Classroom as a Social Setting for Envisionment Building” in Dr. Judith Langer’s *Envisioning Literature* from the Teachers College Press, 1995.

For additional online resources, visit the *Envisioning Literature* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature, select *Engaging With Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 3–5*, and look under Additional Reading for Workshop 4.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready (30 minutes)

This program, the second on classroom discussion in the *Engaging With Literature* workshop, enables you to listen in on discussions among skilled envisionment-building teachers who struggle daily to meet the challenges of supporting effective student conversations about literature. They talk about the kinds of topics they have found effective, strategies they use when groups are struggling, and how they handle the personal and sensitive information that students sometimes share.

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

Student-shaped discussions sometimes present organizational and pedagogical complexities. However, these teachers encourage and support such conversations, recognizing their power for student learning. The student voices in this video—either as they participate in peer discussions or as they respond in interviews—convey that power as well.

Discuss:

Discuss the following questions:

- What makes implementing student-centered discussions difficult?
- What are the values of such discussions for students? For teachers?

Reflect in Workshop Journals:

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- How do you use discussion in your classroom? What role(s) do you assume? How do your students respond to such discussions?

Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

Watch and Discuss:

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

Pause at the title card “Stepping In or Staying Out—The Teacher’s Role.”

- Do you agree that it is important for students to feel their voices are heard and their opinions matter? Why or why not?
- What are some topics that you and your students have found to be rich centers for discussion?
- What strategies have you used when students share information of a highly personal nature in your class?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

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 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.

Workshop Session (On-Site), cont'd.

Pause at the title card “The Students’ Discussion.”

- What role(s) do you assume during discussion? How do you know when to participate and when to step back?
- How can you tell when group discussions are working well? When they are faltering?
- What are some good questions to ask to refocus or restart discussion?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

Pause at the title card “What About Literary Elements?”

- How does taking a back seat during student discussion make you feel? Why?
- What strategies have you used to help students assume more responsibility for literary discussions?
- How do you help students develop conversational skills?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

Pause at the title card “Whole Class or Small Groups—What Works Best?”

- If you were asked to list a half-dozen literary elements that your students need to learn, what might they be?
- What strategies have you tried for teaching literary elements?
- How do you recognize a “teachable moment”?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

Pause at the title card “Recognizing Good Discussions.”

- How do you decide when to use large- or small-group discussions?
- What are some of the “baby steps” teachers might use to help students become effective participants in group discussions?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

View program until the end.

- How do you know when a conversation is effective and worthwhile for students?
- What makes a conversation successful for a student?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

Going Further (30 minutes)

Discuss:

Form groups by grade level and make a list of several obstacles to effective classroom discussion. For each list item, brainstorm ways to overcome the obstacles. Share your findings with the entire group. Record key ideas in your workshop journal for future reference.

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Journal:

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- What is your biggest anxiety regarding the implementation of real and substantive conversations in your classroom? What are some things you might do to ease that anxiety?

OR

- What has been your biggest difficulty with real and substantive conversations in your classroom? How did you address that difficulty, or what strategies might you try now that you have watched this video?

Reading:

In preparation for Workshop 5, read “Literature Across the Curriculum” in Dr. Judith Langer’s *Envisioning Literature* from the Teachers College Press, 1995.

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 *Engaging With Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 3–5*, and click on Channel-Talk.

Extension: Classroom Connection

Student Activities:

Try these activities with your students.

- Because some students confuse recitation—exchanges used by teachers to assess learning—with discussion, you may wish to probe the understandings of your class. The Attitude Survey found in the Appendix of this guide can help you do so.
- Choose a book to read aloud that will engage your students. Read, stopping at an emotionally charged moment. Ask them to respond in writing to what they have heard. After they have had several minutes to write, invite them to share their thoughts, first with a partner and then with the whole class. After the first student has shared, ask, “Does anyone have something that connects to what X has just said?” When you feel the conversation has run its course, stop and ask students to reflect on the discussion and the effect(s) of making connections to earlier comments. Suggest that they take this strategy to their small-group discussions.
- Offer mini-lessons in which you discuss effective conversational strategies and teach students how to apply them to their discussions. You may wish to refer to Conversation Strategies: Mini-Lesson Suggestions found in the Appendix of this guide.
- Tracking Student Contributions to Discussion is included in the Appendix of this guide to help you monitor student participation in discussion.

Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner:

Make a list of several important things you learned about yourself, about others, or about the world through conversation. Choose one or two items on the list and analyze how the conversation worked. What was the topic? Who participated? What caused your moment(s) of insight? What application(s) might these experiences have to the kinds of experiences with literature you offer students?

Additional Reading

- 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.
- Buehl, Doug. *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2001.
- 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.
- Commeyras, Michelle and Georgiana Sumner. "Literature Discussions Based on Student-Posed Questions." Ed. Jamie Metsala. *The Reading Teacher*. (November, 1996): 262-265.
- Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. 2nd ed. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002.
- Daniels, Harvey. *Looking Into Literature Circles*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2001.
- Gambrell, Linda B. and Janice F. Almsi, eds. *Lively Discussions! Fostering Engaged Reading*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1996.
- Graves, Donald H. *Build a Literate Classroom: The Reading/Writing Teacher's Companion*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991.
- Hahn, Mary Lee. *Reconsidering Read-Aloud*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2002.
- Holland, Kathleen E., ed. *Journeying: Children Responding to Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.
- Hoyt, Linda. *Snapshots: Literacy Minilessons Up Close*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000.
- 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*. Ed. George E. Newell and Russel K. Durst. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1993. 23-43.
- Langer, Judith A. *Envisioning Literature*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1995.
- Mills, Heidi and Amy Donnelly. *From the Ground Up: Creating a Culture of Inquiry*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.
- Morgan, Norah and Juliana Saxton. *Asking Better Questions: Models, Techniques, and Activities for Engaging Students in Learning*. Markham, ONT: Pembroke, 1994.
- Newkirk, Thomas with Patricia McClure. *Listening In: Children Talk About Books (and Other Things)*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.
- Noe, Katherine L. Schlick and Nancy J. Johnson. *Getting Started With Literature Circles*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 1999.
- Moss, Joy F. *Literary Discussion in the Elementary School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.

Additional Reading, cont'd.

Peterson, Ralph and Maryann Eeds. *Grand Conversations (Grades 2-6)*. New York: Scholastic, 1999.

Raphael, Taffy E., Laura S. Pardo, and Kathy Highfield. *Book Club: A Literature-Based Curriculum*. 2nd ed. Lawrence, MA: Small Planet Communications, Inc., 2002.

Roser, Nancy L. and Miriam G. Martinez. *Book Talk and Beyond: Children and Teachers Respond to Literature*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1995.

Short, Kathy G., and Jerome C. Harste with Carolyn Burke. *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996.

Short, Kathy Gnagey and Kathryn Mitchell Pierce, eds. *Talking About Books: Literature Discussion Groups in K-8 Classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990.

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

Professional journals about literature instruction:

CELA Newsletter: The National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement, State University of New York, Albany, publishes a newsletter in the fall, winter, and spring addressing a wide range of issues concerning literacy.

The National Council of Teachers of English Journals: NCTE publishes many subscription journals including *Language Arts* for the elementary school level.

The Reading Teacher from the International Reading Association typically includes excellent articles about literature instruction as well as regular reviews of new children's literature titles.

Texts mentioned by teachers in this workshop program:

Souder by William Howard Armstrong
The Big Bike Race by Lucy Jane Bledsoe
Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis
Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo
The Breadwinner by Deborah Ellis
"Last Touch" by Donald H. Graves
The Color of My Words by Lynn Joseph
Drawing Lessons by Tracy Mack
A Family Apart by Joan Lowery Nixon
Chicken Sunday by Patricia Polacco
Pink and Say by Patricia Polacco
Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli
Behind the Bedroom Wall by Laura E. Williams
Make Lemonade by Virginia Euwer Wolff

For additional online resources, visit the *Envisioning Literature* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature, select *Engaging With Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 3-5*, and look under Additional Reading for Workshop 4.

Notes
