

Workshop 6

Beginning the Year

“I like the idea of blank space in the classroom...not necessarily filling it up for yourself, because I want students to get the idea that whatever they do in this room is important.”

—Rich Thompson, Fourth-Grade Teacher, Canyon Elementary School, Hungry Horse, Montana

Introduction

Establishing routines and expectations, creating a learning community, setting a comfortable and positive tone—these are among the tasks experienced teachers set for themselves as they prepare for the beginning of a new school year. They know that thoughtful planning during the first days of school goes a long way toward ensuring a successful year for their students. In this workshop program, you will listen to eight skilled practitioners identify their central concerns for those early days and discuss ways they position students for the rich learning experiences to follow.

Key Points

- During the beginning days and weeks of school, foundations are laid for the rich literary experiences to follow.
- Creating a classroom community that values the voice of every student and supports the open exchange of ideas is key to developing an effective envisionment-building classroom.
- From their very first encounter with students—sometimes even before the first day—the teachers in this workshop set expectations for student participation by emphasizing the reading and talking about books that are at the core of their curricula and modeling expected behaviors.
- For effective literary conversations to occur, students have to trust that their voices are valued and that they can safely express dissenting ideas.
- The physical environment of a classroom conveys strong messages to students about what is important and what their roles in the classroom will be.
- Some of the teachers portrayed in this workshop session make sure that students have a role in the arrangement and decoration of their classroom as well as in establishing classroom rules and resolving problems together.
- Careful consideration of classroom arrangements includes issues such as class size, room size and shape, the kinds of activities that will take place (silent reading, small-group discussions, whole-class discussions) and how the spaces can be arranged to accommodate those activities.
- Linking the classroom to the home lives of the students by asking them to talk about those lives, bring in favorite books from home, or by inviting parents into the classroom strengthens the developing classroom community.
- Teachers often have to help students learn ways to participate as effective conversationalists. They may need to learn principles of turn-taking, how to disagree and voice alternate opinions gracefully, or how to connect their ideas with what has been said before.

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe several characteristics of envisionment-building classrooms as portrayed in this workshop program.
- Identify classroom management strategies that you might use during the first weeks of school in order to build a positive and effective learning world for your students.

Background Reading

In preparation for Workshop 6, read “A Practical Pedagogy” 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 6.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready (30 minutes)

In this video, you will listen as the workshop teachers discuss their preparations for the beginning of a new school year. Some of their comments are philosophical: What values do they hope to communicate to their students during those first few days? How do they understand the relationship between themselves and their students? Among their students? Other concerns are practical: How should they plan their physical space? How much decorating should they do in the room, and how much should they leave to the students? What performance expectations do they need to establish? What about behavior and rules? As you follow the discussion, think about your own classroom. Which of these questions form part of your planning for a new school year? Do you wish to rethink your answers in light of the discussion? Are there additional questions you might consider?

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.

Discuss:

Discuss the following questions:

- What are some strategies you use to help students feel comfortable in your classroom at the beginning of the year?
- What would you like students to say they have learned in your class at the end of the first week?

Reflect in Workshop Journals:

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- The most important thing(s) for me to do before the beginning of school are....

Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

Watch and Discuss:

Pause at the title card "Building Community."

- How do you help establish a welcoming tone in your classroom during the first few days and weeks?
- What is the main message that you want your classroom to convey when your students first come into the room?
- What environmental difficulties does your classroom present? How have you resolved them?
- What are the first two or three principles you hope to establish in the first weeks of school?
- 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.

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

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

Pause at the title card "Setting the Tone."

- How do you help students understand that their individual voices will be valued in your classroom?
- How do you help students get to know you? Get to know one another?
- How do you begin to learn about your students?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

Pause at the title card "Management Systems."

- How would you describe the tone you hope to establish in your classroom?
- What are some strategies you have found successful as you work to establish that tone?
- How might you help students understand that reading literature and talking about it will be central features of your classroom?
- What key expectations do you try to establish with students during the early days of the school year? How do you do so?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

Pause at the title card "Starting Discussion."

- How do you handle difficulties that develop in student routines?
- What do you think about the idea of asking students to establish some of the classroom rules? If you have done this, share your experiences with your colleagues.
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

View program until the end.

- What are some effective strategies to help students enter into literary discussions early in the year?
- How do you teach your students appropriate discussion skills? Which seem to pose the most difficulty? How do you resolve those difficulties?
- What are some useful ways to assess your students as readers at the beginning of a new school year?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

Going Further (30 minutes)

Discuss:

In groups, share some of your getting started strategies. Identify one or two of the most interesting to share with the entire group.

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Journal:

Respond to the following in your journal:

- What are the three or four core characteristics you would like to establish in your classroom? What are some ways you can introduce and promote those characteristics at the beginning of the school year? (You might think about how you would like others to describe your classroom and the steps you could take to establish those characteristics at the beginning of the year.)
- Identify several specific activities you already include in your introductions to a new school year. Are there new ones you might try after viewing this video?

Reading:

In preparation for Workshop 7, read “Literature for Students the System Has Failed” 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.

- Use a camera to record moments when your students are engaged in the literate behaviors you hope to promote. Use those photos to support those behaviors with a display that says, “This is what silent reading looks like,” or “This is what book discussions look like.”
- At the beginning of the year, help students create places where they can habitually collect their work like Rich Thompson’s “Celebration Folders” or Jonathan Holden’s “Book Lover Books” for recording observations and questions.
- Post a list of books the class has read together during read-alouds. Katherine Bomer has student illustrations of each title prominently displayed above the chalk board.
- Ask students to bring in their favorite books from home to share. See Sharing Favorite Reads in the Appendix of this guide for sharing ideas.
- Organize a scavenger hunt to help students explore the classroom during the first days of school and learn what books and materials are available for their use. Use the Sample Scavenger Hunt found in the Appendix of this guide to help you develop a scavenger hunt for your students. (You may wish to create lists of different items for different groups.)

Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner:

Pretend you are one of your students at the beginning of the year. Write the story of the first day in your classroom. (You may wish to write this to reflect existing realities or idealize the story to match future intentions.) Put your writing aside for a day or so, and then return to it with a critical eye. Does the experience you portrayed match your intentions? If not, what might you change to bring intention and reality closer together?

Additional Reading

- Bridges, Lois. *Creating Your Classroom Community*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 1995.
- Buehl, Doug. *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2001.
- Clayton, Marlynn K. and Mary Beth Forton. *Off to a Good Start: Launching the School Year*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, 1997.
- Denton, Paula and Roxann Kriete. *The First Six Weeks of School*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, 2000.
- Golub, Jeffrey. *Making Learning Happen: Strategies for an Interactive Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000.
- Graves, Donald H. *Build a Literate Classroom: The Reading/Writing Teacher's Companion*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991.
- Hansen-Krening, Nancy, Elaine Aoki, and Donald Mizokawa, eds. *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Booklist for Grades K-8*. 4th ed. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001.
- Kohn, Alfie. *What to Look for in a Classroom...and Other Essays*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- Kong, Ailing and Ellen Fitch. "Using Book Clubs To Engage Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners in Reading, Writing, and Talking About Books." *The Reading Teacher* 56 (2002/2003): 352-362.
- Langer, Judith A. *Envisioning Literature*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1995.
- Noe, Katherine L. Schlick and Nancy J. Johnson. *Getting Started With Literature Circles*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 1999.
- Paterson, Kathy. *How Do I Teach?...and Keep My Sanity!* Markham, ONT: Pembroke, 2002.
- Perlmutter, Jane and Louise Burrell. *The First Weeks of School: Laying a Quality Foundation*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.
- Ross, Carol. *Making Your Classroom Work: Tried and True Organization and Management Strategies*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 1994.
- Styles, Donna. *Class Meetings: Building Leadership, Problem-Solving, and Decision-Making Skills in the Respectful Classroom*. Markham, ONT: Pembroke, 2001.
- Trelease, Jim. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- Waterland, Liz. *The Bridge to School: Entering a New World*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 1995.
- Wong, Harry K. and Rosemary Tripi Wong. *The First Days of School: How To Be an Effective Teacher*. Mountain View, CA: Harry K. Wong Publishing, 1998.

Additional Reading, cont'd.

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 in this workshop program:

Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing by Judy Blume
Stealing Home: The Story of Jackie Robinson by Barry Denenberg
The Patchwork Quilt by Valerie Flourney
The Color of My Words by Lynn Joseph
The Ordinary Princess by M. Kaye
Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio by Peg Kehret and Denise Shanahan
You Are Special by Max Lucado
Elf Quest by Wendy Pini
The Golden Compass by Philip Pullman
Holes by Louis Sachar
The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein

Authors mentioned by teachers in this workshop program:

Sharon Creech
Walter D. Myers
Gary Paulson

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 6.

Notes
