

# Workshop 3

## Starting Classroom Conversations

*“Language is so generative that as soon as we start talking, as soon as we start having conversations, we reach these new insights. And so if we’re talking about literature, deep levels of understanding and interpreting literature take place when you’re talking about it or when you’re listening to somebody else talk about it.”*

—Tim O’Keefe, Third-Grade Teacher, The Center for Inquiry, Columbia, South Carolina

### Introduction

Think about the last time you and a friend or family member chatted about a book or movie. You probably shared things you each found particularly interesting and talked about what you liked or didn’t like. You may have pointed to incidents you connected to personally. Possibly you raised questions about the way things happened or things that puzzled you. These are the kinds of authentic discussions teachers in envisionment-building classrooms encourage among students.

Helping students recognize, acknowledge, and articulate their responses to texts becomes the focus of instruction for teachers leading students in authentic talk about their readings. Teaching students to value questions as useful points of departure enriches their thinking as they explore and develop meanings from texts.

As you watch this video, you will notice students interacting with texts and with one another in both small and large group discussions. Listen as these teachers discuss their goals for such conversations, and the strategies they use to teach students how to interact in such rich and thoughtful ways.

### Key Points

Authentic discussion is at the heart of an envisionment-building classroom.

The processes of conversation—both talking and listening—help students think deeply about their reading.

- Discussion allows students to hear and respond to ideas different from their own.
- Discussion allows students to test their own thinking in the context of peer feedback.
- Discussion helps students expand their understandings of both a text and the world.

Other key points include:

- Open-ended discussions encourage genuine inquiry, thereby enriching student thinking.
- Because language generates thought, discussions develop and expand understandings of texts.
- Discussions can help participants confront significant moments in their lives.
- Rich classroom conversations develop with practice when students feel the classroom atmosphere is safe and comfortable.
- Students come to class with a rich array of personal experiences on which to draw during literary discussions.
- Encouraging students to bring up their own ideas and experiences helps them assume increasing ownership of their discussions.
- Envisionment-building teachers use extensive modeling of their own literary questions and responses as well as generative, open-ended questions to encourage and extend discussion.

- Tools such as the Consensus Board, response journals, and a Question Board (a place where students write questions as they arise) can help students generate and organize material for discussions.
- Teachers need to help students learn how to articulate authentic questions about texts and use them as starting points for literary conversations.
- Encouraging and reinforcing the importance of good, thought-provoking questions from the students helps them expand their thinking and delve deeper into the literature.
- Open-ended questions encourage the expression of multiple answers and multiple points-of-view, generating rich discussion.
- Sometimes teachers need to ask questions that help students consider aspects of the text they might not have thought of on their own.
- Questions indicate active engagement with a text and an attempt to resolve problems.
- Respect is an essential part of a literary community and a key element in good discussions.
- Placing student ideas, questions, and concerns at the center of the discussion honors student reading processes and their participation in texts.
- Helping students reflect on their discussions—what worked and what needed improvement—helps students improve conversational skills.
- Silences during discussion may mean that a question needs to be rephrased or that students need time to consider it thoughtfully.
- Classroom arrangements where students can gather in a circle and see one another support full-class discussion; tables or desks grouped together for four to six students encourage small-group conversations.
- Asking students to prepare ahead of time for discussion gives them an opportunity to organize their thoughts about their reading and leads to rich conversations.
- Teachers sensitive to individual personalities and the nuances of group discussion find ways to invite quieter students into conversations.

## Learning Objectives

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

- Incorporate discussion strategies that you see demonstrated in the video into your literature instruction.
- Trust the power of student experience as an effective starting point for literature discussions and respect their contributions to conversation.
- Incorporate two or three general, open-ended questions into your classroom conversations.
- Encourage students to share and discuss questions they have about texts.
- Arrange your classroom to encourage rich conversations in both small and large groups.
- Determine ways to help students reflect on and improve the effectiveness of their discussions.
- Be patient and accepting of silences during discussion.

## Background Reading

In preparation for Workshop 3, read “Building Envisionments” 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](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature), select *Engaging With Literature: A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 3–5*, and look under Additional Reading for Workshop 3.

# Workshop Session (On-Site)

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## Getting Ready (30 minutes)

In this video, the teachers talk about discussion as a central component of their literature instruction. All agree that student-centered conversations play a key role in the development of their students' understandings of texts, and they share ways in which they encourage and support those conversations. As you are invited into their classrooms, you will observe how they help students plan for rich discussions, and how they teach students to be aware of, and improve upon, their discussion strategies. You will hear them talk about how they handle silences during discussion, and how they encourage students who may be initially reluctant to join the conversation to participate.

**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](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature), making participants aware of online resources and interactive opportunities.

Think about your own students and your own curriculum. What ideas presented here might transfer into your classroom? What would help your students become more proficient conversationalists?

### Discuss:

Discuss the following questions:

- What are the elements of a good discussion about literature?
- What do students need, and need to know how to do, in order to participate effectively in class discussions?

### Reflect in Workshop Journals:

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- Identify one or two classroom discussions that you participated in, led, or observed. What were they about? What made them effective? How did you feel when they finished?

## Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

### Watch and Discuss:

**Pause** at the title card "Getting Started."

- Why is discussion about literary reading so important?
- Why might such discussions be risky for students? As individuals? As a class? For the teacher?
- 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.

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**Pause** at the title card "Asking Good Questions."

- What do students bring with them to their discussions?
- What role(s) do teachers assume when helping students learn how to participate effectively in discussion?
- What roles do questions play in discussions?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

**Pause** at the title card "Respecting Others."

- What makes a good question?
- How can teachers encourage good questions?
- How can teachers encourage appropriate discussion etiquette?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

**Pause** at the title card "What About Silence?"

- Why is it important to develop an atmosphere of mutual respect in the classroom?
- What does it mean to respect student voices?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

**Pause** at the title card "Preparing for Discussion."

- What is the role of silence in a discussion?
- What are some ways of responding to such silences?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

View program until the end.

- How do particular physical arrangements in a classroom encourage or discourage authentic conversations?
- What role(s) should a teacher assume when helping students choose texts?
- Why is it important to give students the opportunity to prepare for discussions?
- How can teachers ensure that all students have a voice in the discussion?
- What questions or thoughts are raised as you watch the video?

## Going Further (30 minutes)

### **Discuss:**

Divide into groups to discuss one of the following topics:

- Teaching students to ask authentic questions,
- Teaching discussion etiquette,
- Teaching mutual respect, and
- Teaching students to choose appropriate texts.

As each group shares the results of its conversation, note key points in your workshop journal for future reference.

# Between Sessions (On Your Own)

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## Homework Assignment

### Journal:

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- Briefly tell the story of a discussion (in or out of school) that you found extremely interesting and helpful. What was the topic? Who were the participants? Analyze your role and the roles of the others in the conversation. What elements seemed to combine to make this discussion memorable?

### 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.

## 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](http://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.

- After you have had a shared experience such as a field trip, a film, or a school visitor, ask students to write brief responses. Then hold a class discussion in which you invite students to share one or two ideas from their writing. Suggest that they choose when to participate by connecting their contributions to ones that have gone before. When you feel the group has completed the discussion, ask them to talk about the importance of connecting their ideas to those suggested by others in the class.
- Ask four or five of your active talkers to help you prepare a fishbowl discussion or a training video for the class. Give them a poem or a short story to read and ask them to prepare for discussion by marking things they noticed with sticky notes and writing a list of questions they have about their reading. Ask them to begin their discussion by responding to what they liked or didn’t like about their reading while you film. As they continue their discussion, you may need to prompt them with additional open-ended questions, but try to allow them to direct their conversation as independently as possible while the class watches, or while you film for 10 or 15 minutes. Ask the class to pay attention to *how* the conversation developed. In your debriefing discussion, focus attention as much as possible on effective conversational strategies such as turn-taking, listening, connecting to what others have said, posing questions, and positive body language. Suggest that the students work to incorporate these behaviors into their own discussion processes. You may wish to give students a copy of the Discussion Etiquette Checklist (found in the Appendix of this guide) to help them monitor their discussion processes.

### Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner:

Review your class lists. Which students are your most willing contributors to a discussion? Which are the most reticent? Identify several strategies you might use to help the reticent students join in conversations more readily.

# Additional Reading

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## **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 or students in this workshop program:**

*Souder* by William Howard Armstrong  
*The Big Bike Race* by Lucy Jane Bledsoe  
*The Pinballs* by Betsy Byars  
*Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo  
*The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis  
*Yolanda's Genius* by Carol Fenner  
"Last Touch" in *Baseball, Snakes, and Summer Squash* by Donald H. Graves  
*Just Juice* by Karen Hesse  
*Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse  
"The Wall" by Langston Hughes  
*Cold and Hot Winter* by Joanna Hurwitz  
*The Color of My Words* by Lynn Joseph  
*A Family Apart* by Joan Lowery Nixon  
*The Great Gilly Hopkins* by Katherine Paterson  
*Riding Freedom* by Pam Muñoz Ryan  
*Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli  
*Stuck in Neutral* by Terry Trueman  
*Behind the Bedroom Wall* by Laura E. Williams

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