LET US not abandon our older readers

In the current rush to support reading achievement in the primary grades, we as a nation are in danger of abandoning a generation of children. These are the students in grades 4 and higher who need to learn and practice a whole set of complex reading, writing, and language skills so that they can handle the variety of texts they will encounter and produce as they go through school and beyond.

If we do not balance our concern for young readers with a continuing investment in upper elementary through high school students’ reading achievement, we risk capsizing our boat. And we do so at the very moment we as a nation seem to have come on deck ready to ensure that all our children become able readers.

The focus on early reading is demonstrated in part by the last round of funding awarded under the Interagency Education Research Initiative (IERI), a partnership of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the Department of Education, and the National Science Foundation, which targeted funding for research on reading only at the pre-K through grade school level. And the only reading goal stated in the Bush Administration’s “Education Blueprint,” No Child Left Behind, is that every child will be reading by the third grade.

Federal resources for research into the development of reading and writing abilities throughout the later school years seem to be drying up. If so, this represents giving up on an effort that goes back at least to the Reagan administration, when the first National Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature* was funded. Should we stop investigating the learning needs of older students, we not only risk abandoning the current generation of young people, but, because the skills needed for reading academic texts are different from those required in the early years, we risk short-changing future generations, as well.

The current need

One of the biggest challenges facing English and language arts teachers and the administrators who support them is finding the best ways to help adolescents develop the reading abilities they need to become independent readers of academic and other texts. Teachers and administrators call and write us seeking advice about older readers. Language specialists in state education departments and large school districts report that “many teachers are struggling with how to teach/reinforce reading in the middle grades.” Sometimes their concern is struggling readers, but sometimes it is typical students, who need to learn the variety of skills and strategies required to read, comprehend, and construct meaning from their history, science, mathematics, technical, and/or literary texts. (See the Spring ’01 issue of English Update for more on helping struggling readers.)

Since the NAEP 4th grade reading scores were released in April, much has been written in the popular and professional press bemoaning our national lack of progress in reading comprehension. The 2000 results show a stagnation in scores

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Currently CELA’s primary research study is an implementation study called the Partnership for Literacy (See English Update, Fall ’00) in which researchers and facilitators are working with teachers in 18 middle schools in New York and Wisconsin to put into place the instructional features that previous research has shown to be important to student literacy achievement.

The Update is highlighting some of the research on instructional and professional development on which the Partnership rests. In particular, six sets of findings from previous research provide the knowledge base CELA brings to instructional development. These findings emphasize the importance of:

- Using diversity to enhance learning,
- Increasing the cohesiveness of curriculum and instruction,
- Raising the level of student engagement in higher order talk and writing,
- Aligning curriculum with assessment,
- Scaffolding student performance of new and difficult tasks, and
- Helping struggling readers.

This article shares some of the findings about the effects of raising the level of student engagement in higher order talk and writing. An accompanying article offers teachers’ perspectives on the challenges of initiating and sustaining meaningful classroom discussion of the kind that can increase student literacy achievement.

For a fuller version of this article as well as other features of successful classrooms, go to http://cela.albany.edu/partnership.htm.

M any studies conducted by CELA and other researchers have documented the indirect effects of a rich discourse environment on developing literacy skills, both in and out of school. Together these studies affirm the important formative role played by the sociocultural environment in the development and acquisition of literacy. Yet while discourse is ubiquitous in English classrooms in the U.S., it is typically neglected as a resource for learning. It is ubiquitous in that it is the modus operandi of whole-class instruction. It is neglected in that teachers typically focus on instructional objectives unrelated to the quality of the talk. Classroom discourse is seen simply as the medium for getting things done rather than as a tool for enhancing achievement.

For example, in the largest empirical study of classroom discourse ever undertaken, CELA researchers found that 85% of all instructional time in a comprehensive sample of eighth- and ninth-grade English language arts classrooms is some combination of recitation, lecture, and seatwork. The prominence of recitation is not a new finding. Indeed, as early as 1860, Morrison complained that “young teachers are very apt to confound rapid questioning and answers with sure and effective teaching”.

Building on work by Heath and Britton, who viewed classroom discourse as “the ocean on which all else floats,” we now know that the quality of classroom talk is significantly related to student achievement in English language arts. In his meta-analysis of research on writing instruction, for example, Hillocks found that the classroom discourse most conducive to supporting writing skills involved peer-response groups with an “inquiry” focus: assigned topics involving analysis of readings or other “data” and attention to rhetorical strategies. Lee’s study of signifying in literature instruction with African American students shows the pedagogical importance of discourse genres related to students’ communities and cultures. Sperling’s study examining a single secondary lesson in great detail traces the clear influence of classroom talk on student writing, even involving the talk of some students who chose to do no writing.

The relationship between classroom discourse and achievement in both literature and writing has been a major focus of CELA researchers for more than a decade. Overall, these studies find that
learning is most effective in classrooms where teachers emphasize knowledge derived from active participation in meaningful conversations within important fields of study. For example, Langer’s findings show a relationship between high literacy and classroom environments that are inquiry based, response based, and support students in the role of problem finders as well as problem solvers. Langer and Applebee have shown how writing development is clearly shaped by the underlying philosophy of instruction as enacted through the discussion of literature and other instructional activities. Moreover, Applebee’s work illuminates the important role that classroom discourse plays in shaping curriculum and what students learn.

In their large-scale, two-year, quantitative study, Nystrand and Gamoran found that discussion was one of the rarest activities in English classes, yet when present even in limited amounts, classroom discourse accounted for significant gains in student achievement in literature as measured by tests assessing recall, depth of understanding, and response to aesthetic elements of literature. In addition, the students studied tended to make significant gains to the extent that teachers asked authentic questions (open-ended, interpretive questions with unprescribed answers) and followed up student responses with probing questions about their responses. In subsequent work on the same data researchers found such dialogic patterns of classroom discourse are significantly supported when teachers allow and encourage students to ask questions about their work. (See accompanying article for more about the teacher perspective.) In all, research clearly shows that classroom discourse mediates the development of high literacy because it is the chief mechanism in the construction of classroom epistemology: What counts as knowledge is largely shaped by the questions teachers ask, the responses they make to their students, and how they structure small-group and other pedagogical activities.

1. E.g., Greenleaf & Freedman, 1993; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995; Wells, 1999
2. Nystrand, 1997; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991
3. Cited in Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969
4. E.g., Goodlad, 1984
5. 1983
6. 1969
7. 1986
8. 1993
9. 1995
10. 1987
11. 1995
12. 1996; Applebee et al., 2000
15. Nystrand, 1999

ONE teacher’s transition towards a dialogic classroom

As reported elsewhere in this newsletter, an early, large-scale quantitative study by Nystrand and colleagues (Nystrand 1997, Nystrand & Gamoran 1991) revealed that discussions rarely happen anywhere in middle and high school classrooms, and even less in low-track classrooms.

Building on this earlier study, Nystrand and Julie Christoph spent most of a semester in a low-achieving inner-city high school English class whose students read at the third- or fourth-grade level and for most of whom Spanish is the first language. Although most discussion was tightly controlled by the teacher, the researchers captured one genuine discussion—a spontaneous debate among students about which was the most important character in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and why. Although brief, this exchange became the high point of the year for both teacher and students, and students continued the discussion later outside of class.

The resulting report on this study, Taking Risks, Negotiating Relationships, suggests several factors that made the initiation and sustaining of this successful event possible.
In his 1997 book *Opening Dialogue: Understanding the Dynamics of Language and Learning in the English Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press), CELA researcher and director Martin Nystrand differentiates between recitation and discussion, both of which are called “discussion” in most schools. Recitation, by far the more common practice, tends to be a controlled series of exchanges in which teachers lead students to a pre-ordained conclusion. Discussion, on the other hand, occurs when information is freely exchanged between three or more participants; it is marked by an absence of teacher “test questions.”

In their research, Nystrand and colleague Adam Gamoran found that discussion of subject matter is highly correlated with student achievement, even though it occurs rarely: less than a minute per class per day, on average.

Discussion is more likely to occur in classrooms where the discourse has other dialogic qualities, as well: for example, teachers ask authentic, open-ended questions; take up students’ comments and ideas and weave them into the discourse; and encourage students to ask questions. Attempting to get a closer picture of how this works, Nystrand and colleagues have used sophisticated statistical analysis of hundreds of classroom interactions to see what sparks discussion. They find that discussion is usually preceded by periods of more dialogic interaction, including open-ended teacher questions and clusters of student questions. Qualitative studies of teachers who are making the transition toward a more dialogic classroom highlight the difficulties and rewards of such work (see list of related reports on page 7).

**AN OPEN EXCHANGE**

Last March, Nystrand invited teachers from urban middle schools to join him for a day of open exchange about discussion in their classrooms. He was seeking their perspectives on his research findings, hoping to come to better understand how they defined discussion and some of the problems they faced in trying to foster it. This knowledge would assist Nystrand and other CELA researchers in planning for CELA’s current implementation study, the Partnership for Literacy.

The teachers taking part in this discussion were all interested in promoting productive discussions in their classrooms, and the day-long exchange of strategies and possible solutions gave them new ideas for their own practice. However, it also was clear that though they pursue the ideal of free exchange about important concepts, there are many reasons why such discussions are rare: students’ reluctance to participate as well as lack or unevenness of student prior knowledge; time pressures resulting from a need to cover curriculum content and prepare students for standardized tests; and their own difficulties in relaxing control to allow for freer exchange, to name a few.

**GETTING DISCUSSION STARTED**

One area of concern was the topics students are interested in and students’ willingness to discuss controversies and defend their own points of view. Some teachers described situations that had limited discussion in their own classrooms: lack of common prior knowledge; a diversity of student backgrounds; or students who hadn’t done the assigned reading. In response, other teachers shared strategies they had used to surmount such challenges: using discussion to explore and generate prior knowledge (about popular culture, for example), or using class readings as common experience.
One important motivation for the teachers is the value of discussion in promoting student thinking at a higher level than recitation does. Learning to deal with ambiguity is important at the middle school level, and several spoke of using small-group or whole-class discussion as an opportunity to examine all sides of an issue, whether it be as focused as the options available to a fictional character or as broad as “What unifies this country?” In such cases, teachers can model exploring an issue without the possibility of one correct answer. Nystrand emphasized that reaching agreement is not as important as grappling with issues in a dialogic context. For example, he noted that small group work that is tightly structured by the teacher (answering factual questions, for example) is not as highly correlated with achievement as that in which students have a chance to solve more open-ended problems together.

**Keeping it going**

Once started, maintaining a discussion is another challenge, and research has made us aware of ways in which teachers can chill discussion, such as disregarding topics that students raise out of order, or making it clear that a teacher asks a question with only one right answer in mind. As one teacher said, “I think to have discussion to find one right answer defeats the purpose.” Discussions that make use of student questions (sometimes written in advance) or in which the teacher does not have a decided opinion on an issue are less likely to be shut off than those in which the teacher is fishing for a definite answer. To illustrate this latter point, Nystrand showed the recent collaboration in an in-depth study of one teacher who is striving to adopt more dialogic methods (see p. 3). The clip showed an argument about who the most important character in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is. (The teacher in the clip had not yet made up her own mind about this question.)

The viewers’ reaction to this videotape opened the most contentious topic for the group: the proper role of the teacher in class discussion. How much control is too much? When does student autonomy become chaos? One found the argument on the tape “out of hand.” Another suggested that she would have organized the discussion in small groups with guidelines. There was a range of opinions on this issue of control. Some teachers were frankly skeptical about how much students could be trusted to stay on topic or come to a conclusion. Yet Nystrand described a body of research showing the importance of open discussion, and some teachers told stories of students’ passionate involvement in certain questions, such as those dealing with evil and the Holocaust.

Generally, teachers agreed that it was important to establish ground rules for discussion, teaching “appropriate behavior in literate conversations.” Teachers shared techniques for teaching listening, assigning roles for small-group work, using graphic organizers or board work to structure discussion, or keeping discussion centered on the text. Two approaches to developing student knowledge about discussion itself include Socratic seminars and rubrics for observing and assessing group discussions. While opening up the classroom to more open exchanges will never be risk-free, tools like these make it more manageable.

**Nystrand asked about institutional influence on classroom activity, such as class size and the pressures on teachers associated with standardized tests, especially in those schools being pushed to raise scores. Teachers saw class size as a determining factor in what could be done in a particular classroom. As one observed: “If you can’t get class size down, you’re going to have to accept the fact that those less likely to participate will continue to be less likely to participate.”**

Schools vary in the amount of emphasis they place on test scores; teachers from one school complained they never even saw their students’ scores, while others complained of more or less constant administrative pressures to improve test performance.

In such an environment, it becomes difficult to find room for open discussion. Research findings can be useful in arguing for its place as a vital part of classroom life, and the teachers at this meeting certainly were interested in the impact Nystrand’s statistics might have on their administration. But their principal motivation for promoting discussion is what it does to engage students in learning. As one teacher put it: “Once you feel what classroom discussions can bring out in the kids, the learning that takes place, even how they begin to get along and disagree with each other — it’s hard for me to stop something this good for the classroom and learning environment.”
overall and an increasing gap between high and low performers. In 1998, scores for twelfth graders showed not only that the poorest students are doing poorly (a drop from 80% to 77% performing at or above basic from 1992 to 1998), but also that only 6% of students perform at the advanced level (as compared with 20% below basic). Overall, 40% of adolescents have difficulty comprehending specific factual information. Need I argue any further for the need for research and development in this critical area?

**What are some of these more complex skills?**

It is one thing to learn to read, quite another to become good at it. Once students reach fourth grade, expectations for their reading changes. Now students are expected to distinguish between the various academic disciplines and to understand and use the specialized language and conventions of each. For example, they must learn the distinctions in meaning between the same word used in different disciplines (e.g., “range” in mathematics vs. geography vs. music).

As they progress through the grades, students will read increasingly longer and more complex literary works, seeking to understand worlds beyond their own, both imaginary and real. They will need to be able to make connections from one body of knowledge to another, using one to deepen learning in another. They need to know where and how to seek information for academic and other purposes — and to become increasingly independent and better able to judge the reliability of their sources, including those on the Internet.

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needs to be different. It must help them build fluency, boost comprehension, acquire vocabulary, and learn to recognize different kinds of text and how to read and learn from each. We need continuing research into the best kinds of instruction to insure that all students acquire these abilities.

**What has been learned to date and what more we need to learn**

While some of this complex of activities is understood, previous research studies need to be replicated in additional settings and more studies designed to bring us to a fuller understanding of how to help more students achieve them. For example, although CELA researchers have learned that students are more successful in acquiring essential literacy skills when their teachers use multiple lesson types — direct instruction, simulated practice, and authentic tasks — more work needs to be done in schools and classrooms to better understand these processes and to develop the materials that will help teachers and administrators put them in place.

Research has also found that the most effective classrooms engage students in the debates and activities that are central to the field being studied: An effective science lesson has students engage in scientific inquiry — learning the proper methods of exploration and employing the vocabulary and language of the scientist. Thus the effective teacher of science inducts students into the scientific community. This science teacher is not only helping students become scientifically literate, but she or he can be a true partner of the language teacher in helping students develop broader literacy skills. Again, however, we have much yet to learn about the best ways to foster literacy development across the curriculum.

**False assumptions**

One danger of having the popular press take up a cause in education is the unfortunate spread of false assumptions. Not long ago, many came to believe that brain development stopped at the age of three. A current false assumption is that if a child has learned to decode by the end of grade 3, she or he will be a good reader for life. Another is that if a student has not become a good reader by grade 8, it is too late. Although we can probably all cite individual examples that are exceptions to these “rules,” those exceptions alone tell us that we must continue our efforts to understand better what works and why so that the goal of ensuring reading success for every child can become a reality. We need a continued national investment in research into how to help students handle their academic course work in middle and high school and beyond. We owe it to today’s and tomorrow’s students, indeed to our own future.

* The Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature (CLTL) was the precursor of the Center on English Learning & Achievement, whose funding is due to expire 2/28/03.
You may download CELA publications or order a print copy. Online: Visit our website (http://cela.albany.edu) and go to the publications area. Print: Call or write for a publications catalog and/or use the space below. All orders must be prepaid.

**REPORTS RELATED TO CLASSROOM DISCOURSE** (articles pp. 2-5)


**OTHER RECENT REPORTS**


#13011  *Effects of Reading Policy on Classroom Instruction and Student Achievement.* R. Allington, 26 pages, $6.

#13010  *What Do We Know about Effective Fourth-Grade Teachers and Their Classrooms?* R. Allington, P. Johnston, 30 pages, $5.

**BOOKLETS**

Pricing: 1–4 copies: $2 each; 5–9 copies: $1.50 each; 10 or more copies, $1 each. Call for bulk rates.

- *Guidelines for Teaching Middle and High School Students to Read and Write Well: Six Features of Effective Instruction.*

- Effective literature instruction develops thinking, reading, writing, and other literacy skills — but that is easier said than done. A new booklet by Judith Langer and Elizabeth Close shares some of the most effective strategies, drawing on the research and including real classroom examples. *Improving Literary Understanding through Classroom Conversation* is now available on line. Click the download button at http://cela.albany.edu or use the form below to order copies.

The booklet is designed for teachers and administrators who wish to improve their English language arts program. It can also be used to supplement the Annenberg/CPB professional development series, Conversations in Literature, to begin airing in January. A complementary four-page brief is also available.

**For additional publications, visit our website or call 518-442-5026.**

___ Please send the following reports: __________________________, ________ copy/copies of the Guidelines booklet, and ________ copy/copies of *Improving Literary Understanding* booklet. I’ve enclosed a check payable to the Research Foundation of SUNY. Prices include postage and handling. Total: $______________

___ Please put me on your mailing list to receive all publications catalogs and newsletters.

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Look for us at . . .

New York State English Council Annual Conference

New York State Reading Association Conference
November 7-10, Syracuse, NY – J. Marino, S. Waormsley.

National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention

HIGHLIGHTS: Please join CELA researchers and staff at the following Saturday (Nov. 17) sessions:
12:45 Improving Learning and Achievement in English Language Arts
3:45 panel discussion about the upcoming Conversations in Literature TV series
5:15 presentation, conversation, and reception
and in the Exhibit Hall: Booth #500

Sloan Foundation Conference on Asynchronous Learning Networks
November 16-18, Orlando, FL – K. Swan.

National Reading Conference
December 4-7, San Antonio, TX – V. Goatley, G. Kamberelis.

Conference on Interdisciplinary Qualitative Studies

Wisconsin State Reading Convention
February 2, Milwaukee – E. Kaiser.

For more information about these presentations, check the upcoming presentation information on our website.