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Literature Discussion: A Classroom Environment for Thinking and Sharing

Elizabeth Egan Close

Jeremy (Above Average): As a thinker in a literature discussion I don't really speak out a lot, but there is always a bunch of stuff going on in my head. Then when I feel I have a strong point, I say something . . . It's not easy thinking in front of a large group, but most of the time I really enjoyed having literature discussion. I learned that there isn't only one way of looking at a story. There are tons of different ways, it just depends on what kind of a person you are. When I think about a story or poem, I try to find the deepest meaning so it means something to me and I think about it more.

Eddie (Average): Literature was new to me this year. I liked the class discussions because we all got to think about ideas together. In the class discussions I would make sure there was always an interesting topic going on. When I see myself in the literature discussion group, I see me asking many questions and participating. I learned in the small groups we can work together as a team. When I see literature, I always like to see both sides of the story, then view both sides based on the information given me by my peers, then choose a side.

Arthur (Average): I love the group discussions. I like to express the way I feel about something to a group. Not only do I share my ideas, I learn what other people think and compare them.

Ben (Below Average): I enjoyed literature discussions this year because they were quite interesting. All of the literature pieces we read this year seemed to teach us a lesson. In the literature discussion I was a listener. I really paid attention and what other people were saying in the discussion made me understand literature much better.

For the past three years I have had the good fortune to work with researchers from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature at State University of New York at Albany. Under the direction of Judith Langer, our research strand has looked at ways that classroom teachers can help students to think more deeply about the literature they read. As part of this project, classroom teachers were paired with university-based researchers, and the teachers and their students became important elements of the research team. Meeting weekly with the director and the university researchers, the teacher/researchers had the opportunity to discuss strategies, successes, and failures, and to support one another as we grew in our ability to share literature with students. The students were also treated as collaborators, sharing their reactions to classes in frequent interviews with the university researchers.

Participating in this research has not always been easy, and at times I wondered why I had let myself in for so much work and self-examination. But as I look over students' responses to the question: "What did you learn this year?" I can see that the effort has resulted in tremendous growth for all of us. My students and I have learned that

1. Literature can be understood in different ways.
2. It is valuable to hear what others think and to consider various possibilities before reaching a final determination of what the piece says to you. Understandings are not complete when the reading is finished.
3. Literature is real; the problems and issues discussed in class relate to problems and issues that people experience in real life.
4. Literature discussions are an arena for sharing and testing ideas without fear of being attacked for having an opinion that differs from those of others.
5. Thinking deeply about reading and sharing that thinking is an expected part of the class.
6. Ideas of all class members are valuable.

“What exactly is it that you do to get the students to think more deeply about literature?” is a ques-
tion I have been asked by my colleagues and is one that is not so easily answered.

Theory

Working with people from the university forced me to stay abreast of research in English education. As preparation for our weekly meetings, we were expected to read related articles and books that would help us understand the theory behind the strategies we were trying. At first, I resented the reading demands. How could I possibly have time for this? I meet with about 110 students each day, plan with my teammates for our activities, co-chair the technology committee in our building, serve on the building cabinet, and advise the newspaper and literary magazine. This was asking too much! I soon realized the importance of being up-to-date and of the tremendous resources available in professional journals. Now, each time a new journal arrives, I try to read as many articles as I can. There is so very much to learn.

Early in the project, we read an article about instructional scaffolding which made a tremendous difference in my thinking (Applebee and Langer 1983). There had been times when I had planned a “fantastic lesson” only to find the students didn’t have a clue as to what I expected. As I internalized my understanding of instructional scaffolding, I began to realize that I needed to examine my lessons more carefully. What skills did my students need to complete this task? What questioning and modeling did I need to do to help them learn? How could I help them to internalize the strategies necessary for this task? Instructional scaffolding became the glue that connected all my lessons. Completing one story, poem, or writing assignment was not the goal. Rather, each activity was another step in the students’ growth toward independent learning and better understanding of literature.

As we worked together, we began to realize that there were certain principles that ran throughout successful lessons (Langer 1991). When we treated our students as thinkers, expected them to raise questions, tapped student knowledge, used class time to develop understanding, scaffolded the students’ process of understanding, and gave control to the students to work through their understandings, we found our students thinking far beyond our expectations. These principles have become a guiding force as I plan my lessons.

Coming to an understanding of a literary piece is different from other reading. Students need to consider a wide variety of interpretations. Langer calls this reaching for the “horizon of possibilities” (Langer 1989). I want my students to come to literature discussions ready to share their understandings or “envisionments” (Langer 1987), to be willing to consider the interpretations of others, and to question the text and one another as they develop and grow in their understanding and appreciation of literature.

Community Building

Students need to believe that the English classroom is a place where they can freely share understandings about pieces of literature, where all questions are important, and where students of all ability levels have important contributions to make.
to the discussions. Establishing that environment of trust has become one of my first concerns at the beginning of the school year.

I teach in a middle-class community that borders the state capital of Albany. Our district sprawls from the tightly developed areas near the city to suburban developments and then to the rural hills on the outskirts of our district. My classes are all heterogeneously grouped, and each class is made up of approximately twenty-eight students. This year they included handicapped students with an aide (Bev is one of those students), hearing-impaired students with an interpreter, remedial-reading and -writing students, as well as students functioning at and above grade level. My first goal, then, is to see that students feel they have valuable thoughts to contribute and that the classroom is a safe place for expressing those ideas.

From the very first day of the school year, I try to weave the skills students will need for discussing literature into my classroom activities. Even my room arrangement is now designed to encourage communication. Instead of desks, I have eight large tables arranged in an octagon, leaving a large open space in the center of the classroom. Students learn to function in small groups of three or four and to move into a circle inside the octagon when a class discussion is to take place.

My seventh graders come to me from two sixth-grade teams, so each student may know about half of the students in any given class. This means that I need to devote some of the early days of school to activities that will help the students become better acquainted. Community-building activities help the students and me know each other. As we work through the activities, we listen and respond to one another, a good base for later literature discussions.

In one activity the students and I share answers to simple questions. The questions might be about birthplace, favorite ice cream, or any other topics that will not make us uncomfortable. Once the papers have been exchanged, and this exchange can be accomplished in any number of ways, we move our chairs into the discussion circle. Each person is required to share one piece of information about the individual named on the paper. When students share something with the class, they quickly learn that more than the information is required. “What made you choose that to share?” “Why did you select that piece of information from John’s sheet?” It doesn’t take long for students to realize that why is an important part of the discussion. I also ask students what they can remember about one another and which students share similar interests. Students begin to connect their ideas with those presented by others.

Collaborative groups are an important element of my class. I form initial groups before the students sit down on that very first day, so they know from the very beginning that they will be expected to work with their classmates. I prefer groups of four for several reasons. Seventh graders can be exclusive, leaving less popular students isolated, and that seems to happen more easily in groups of three than in a group of four. I can balance gender in a group of four where I cannot in a group of three. Four heads seem to come up with more ideas. Finally, when one student is absent, the group can function better with three than two. Once the groups have been established, students conduct interviews with one another, take pictures, and write biographical sketches of group members that are shared with the rest of the class. These activities help to establish a feeling of community within the groups as well as with the whole class.

At the beginning of the year I assign roles to each group member (Cohen 1986). One student is the facilitator or person who keeps the group on task. Another is the recorder, taking notes of the important ideas discussed. The third is the reporter who must be prepared to present the group’s ideas to the entire class. The fourth is the organizer, the person responsible for distributing necessary materials at the beginning of the class and collecting them at the end. This person may also collect and record assignments, check on reading progress, and even monitor members’ participation in small-group discussions.

Assigning the roles is important scaffolding for the groups. The students need to have a clear understanding of what they are expected to do. Having specific tasks makes each of them more comfortable. The assignments are rotated on a reg-
ular basis so that all the students have the opportunity to experience all of the roles.

As the students go about the assigned group tasks, I monitor by moving from group to group and joining in their discussions. If a group seems to be having difficulty, I listen and try to ask questions that will redirect their thinking. I interact with groups that are moving forward and try to assist those that are having difficulty making progress. Students soon learn to include me in their discussion when they need me and to ignore me if they are satisfied with their progress. This monitoring while the group work is in progress also helps me have a sense of the directions the groups are taking. I then know what areas I may have to introduce that the groups may have neglected. I also know when the entire class needs additional help to refine the tasks so that the students can achieve the results I desire. It also helps me process the entire activity with the students at the end since I am aware of problems that have occurred.

For two years, a university-based researcher provided a valuable second set of eyes and helped me see important aspects of these group activities. As we worked together under the guidance of the project director, we realized the important role these groups played in literature discussion. The groups were a place where students gained confidence in their ideas and where they could work out confusions and share puzzlements. Early in the year students appeared to be off-task at times, but observing their interactions, we realized that they were actually sharing experiences that helped them build a stronger sense of community. Careful monitoring can help nudge these discussions back on track when they have moved too far afield or can allow them to continue when they seem to provide important support for group development.

Preparing for Discussion

By the second week of school, the students are ready to look at a piece of literature. The first time we do this, I choose a story of personal interest to the students. One that works especially well is "My Athletic Career" (Boyd 1956). This is an autobiographical essay about a young girl who is selected last for a gym-class softball team. The students enjoy this story because they can understand and relate to the characters. To ensure that it is accessible to all the students, I do the first reading aloud, and then ask the students to do the second reading silently.

At the end of the second reading students are asked to complete two tasks: write down what they are thinking at the end of the story (final envisionment) and list any questions they have about the story. I try to allow students an opportunity to gather their individual thoughts before they move to small groups so that they come to the group with a sense of their own final "envisionments." If they have not had this opportunity, they may yield to the more forceful students in the group and not share their interpretations. When students have had a chance to write about their thoughts, they have confidence that they have important ideas and are more willing to share them. When the individual tasks are completed, the students meet in groups to discuss their thoughts and share their questions. The group compiles a list of questions it feels

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should be brought to the entire class, and the reporter brings them to the class discussion.

1. Why were the girls mean to Betty?
2. Why did Miss Brown make Betty choose the team?
3. Why didn’t the teacher stop the girls from being mean to Betty?
4. Why did the parents feel that gym was so important?
5. Why is this story called “My Athletic Career”?
6. Why didn’t Betty run when she hit the ball?
7. Why didn’t Betty try harder?
8. Why did Betty write this story about herself and about getting picked on?
9. Why did the story end so suddenly?
10. Why didn’t the girls lose out by not giving Betty a chance?
11. What is an Amazon?
12. Why did Betty act so negatively?

As the reporters share the questions, I write them on the board. No question is rejected. Some questions will indicate a need to explain important vocabulary or literary elements. It is important to recognize the need to deal with these issues as well. As I list the questions, I ask the students to think of ways to group the questions and to see how some questions are different from others. When question thirteen was presented, I asked Gail if she could see a difference between her question and the question, “Why did Betty act the way she did?” That led to a discussion about the way the wording of questions can actually state an opinion. We focus on collecting and clarifying questions and hold the discussion of the responses until all groups have reported their questions.

**Students ask important questions and, if given the opportunity, will frequently ask the same questions I would have presented to them.**

Using questions that students have generated brings the discussion closer to the students. It is important for them to realize that their questions have value and can spark thinking and discussion. Students ask important questions and, if given the opportunity, will frequently ask the same questions I would have presented to them. It is also imperative that the students learn that I do not have the answers to the questions they ask in discussion nor is there necessarily one correct response to their questions. “Nothing can kill a class sooner than to ask a question to which there is a prefabricated answer” (Berthoff 1981, 34).

The questions listed for “My Athletic Career” were generated by students in the middle of September. Before we began to discuss the issues raised, we talked about what the writer was saying when she compared Clara to an Amazon and looked for clues that might help students identify the time period of the story. Students were able to clear up misunderstandings and to find the focus for their discussion which started with my question, “What would you like to discuss?” The discussion expanded to include motivations of Betty and the teacher and the other girls in the story as well as why the author wrote the story and chose to end it the way she did. The students moved back and forth among ideas. The students didn’t cover all possibilities, but they were beginning to understand their role in our class discussions and were learning to trust their ideas, their classmates, and me.

**Scaffolding Discussion**

In this discussion, as in discussions throughout the year, I listen and try to scaffold the ways of discussing (Langer 1991). When students express their answers without explanation, I ask “Why do you think that?” or “What in the story made you feel that way?” Sometimes to be sure a comment was understood, I repeat what the student has said, asking, “Did you say that...?” I also ask, “Does anyone else see the character that way?” or “Does anyone see that differently?” to invite other students to join the discussion. I remind students to look at the students they are responding to and encourage them to acknowledge agreement or disagreement with other students.

As the students begin to internalize the strategies needed for discussion, I begin to scaffold the strategies that will help them think more deeply about literature during the discussion. I ask questions that will focus and shape their discussion. “Are you saying that the girls lost more than Betty lost when they were mean to her?” I ask questions that will help them use information from the text to support or refute a point. “Can anyone find something in the story that will help Craig make his point?” I try to ask questions that will turn the discussion and make them think more deeply.
about the text. "Chad says that the author ends the story suddenly because she wants you to guess about what happened. Why would she do that?" As the year progresses, more of my questions are meant to scaffold thinking than to scaffold discussion, and students assume more and more of the responsibility for discussion. Students realize that they have important ideas to share and that they can learn from one another.

Working with literature in this way is exciting and stimulating. I never fail to marvel at the wonderful envisionments students have formed. Many times I have discovered a new way to look at a piece I thought I understood thoroughly.

Using individual responses and group and class discussions does take longer than merely reading a piece of literature and answering a few questions, but the results are well worth the time and effort. That this approach makes a difference is most clearly expressed by Ben. During testing week the building principal asked each seventh-grade student to write about the year’s best learning experience.

I have had many good learning experiences at FMS this year. The one I think I benefitted most from was during Mrs. Close’s Language Arts class.

Whenever we read any literature, we discussed with the whole class how everybody felt about the literature. Also we learned how everyone interpreted the literature. I feel that I really benefitted from that experience because I could try to see what other people saw in the book. Sometimes I even changed my interpretation because of the different things people said. Ever since we have started examining books this way, when I read a book at home, I think to myself about the characters, plot, and many of the other things that we would discuss in class. If Mrs. Close hadn’t taught me this way to examine literature then I probably would interpret things much differently and not think about them as much. That, I think, was one of the best learning experiences I have had all year.

Activities

A few activities have proved particularly helpful in getting students to think about literature. Many students are unaware of the thinking that should be going on as they read, so I add an active reading component to our class activities. When Geri recently commented, “You make reading so much harder, Mrs. Close. I have to think about it now,” I knew that my efforts were making a difference.

One activity that I have found helpful is to have the students record their thoughts as they read silently. This works especially well when the students can write on the text as they read. When that option is not available, students can use small note squares to stick at points where thoughts occur to them, or they can use any appropriate note-taking strategy that suits them. This is another activity where students have to be trained in order for the strategy to be helpful. “All Summer in a Day” (Bradbury 1947) is one story that works well with my seventh graders. As I read aloud, I stop at several points and ask students to tell me what they are thinking and what images they have.

Doug: It doesn’t look like a foreign planet; it looks like earth.
Joel: It’s blurry. (Why?) It’s looking through the window with all the water on the pane.
Jane: I see a deserted island—a crash site.
Will: I see a bunch of kids . . . really bored because of the rain.

Later in the story, after the description of Margot, the main character, I stop again.

Perry: I see a little girl, real quiet. . . I see her in a window by herself . . . everyone else together at another window.
Fran: I see her in black and white and everyone else in color. . . . She seems scared of what the others think . . . likes to be alone a lot.
Dan: Seems like Margot’s older or more mature than the others.

I continue reading, stopping two more times to draw out the students’ thoughts. As we share their thinking, students hear how others are developing their envisionments or changing understandings and what kinds of thinking others are doing. They also see how their own understandings can change as they continue to read.

The activity of sharing thoughts in writing with other students is very popular. The students have an opportunity to explore ideas they are not secure in expressing aloud even in a small group. I use written conversation as a way for students to share their thoughts (Harste, Short, and Burke 1988). Students are paired and given one sheet of paper. They are instructed that their only communication must be on paper. One student is designated as the first writer and begins with a question, thought, or
concern and writes that on the paper. The paper is then passed to the partner for a response. The paper passes back and forth between the students until all the ideas have been expressed. The students may need twenty to thirty minutes for this activity if the reading is particularly complex. It may take five minutes or more for students to really engage in the thinking and writing the first time they try this activity. Clear directions are necessary.

During our discussion of Girl Who Owned a City (Nelson 1975), students participated in written conversation after a class discussion. In that discussion Bev was paired with Penny who had made a suggestion for solving a problem that had been ignored by the class. In the written conversation Bev offered support she wasn’t secure enough to offer in the whole group.

Bev: I agree with you about how they should get a camper because it would be more convenient for them.

Penny: Also the reason that I think that would be good is because they could store food in it.

In another class, John and Alex touch on several issues at the beginning of their conversation. John is also careful to respect the fact that Alex is reading at a slower pace.

John: Since you’ve only read to page 114, I won’t tell what’s going to happen next. This book is the best one that I’ve read before Island of the Blue Dolphins. How about you?

Alex: This book is good! Lisa really takes charge to defend herself and the other children. The only thing I would have changed is that I would have kept the farm and worked with Craig. Then I would have moved the food and the children to the farm.

John: I wouldn’t move the children and families to the farm because barns aren’t soundproof; schools are. Lisa has really taken charge. She really does know how to put things together. She has a good imagination.

Alex: You’re right, Lisa does have a good imagination! Some of her ideas are actually logical!

Establishing the classroom climate for this sharing requires much thought, planning, flexibility, and time. Allowing students the opportunity to develop and discuss their own questions and to dominate the discussion can be very frightening for the teacher. I worried about losing control and about not covering the “important” areas of the curriculum. What I discovered was that the students could be trusted to ask important questions, to address the important issues seriously in the literature, and to listen and learn from one another.

Kevin: The discussions helped me to understand the book. People interpret different ideas from the book, and you get to hear all of them. If I had a question, someone was there to answer.

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Works Cited


