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Strategies for Initiating Authentic Discussion

Authentic discussion is "classroom talk that is purposeful and engaging," writes Larry R. Johannessen. He shares two activities that he has used to create classrooms that are inquiry driven and characterized by an emphasis on dialogue rather than monologue.

James Barton points out that "leading a discussion can be one of the most difficult tasks of teaching" (346). One reason may be that many of our students have genuine difficulty making connections with the literary texts that we ask them to read. In addition, as research suggests, students are rarely asked to discuss and teachers tend to do most of the talking anyway (Nystrand). Students may wonder, "Why should I bother saying anything?"

Martin Nystrand distinguishes between authentic discussion, which is dialogic, and recitation, which clarifying reasoning, answering potential objections is monologic (5-7). With recitation, there are pre-specified answers to the teacher’s questions. In contrast, authentic discussion is more like a conversation in which there is a genuine dialogue or inquiry into a problem or issue with no predetermined answer. I like to think of authentic discussion as classroom talk that is purposeful and engaging.

Activities to Initiate Authentic Discussion

LOST AT SEA: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?
The first activity is adapted from Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen. "Lost at Sea: What Would You Do?" (see fig. 1) is designed as a prereading activity for works such as William Golding’s Lord of the Flies, Richard Connell’s "The Most Dangerous Game," Jack London’s “To Build a Fire” and The Call of the Wild, or any work or group of works that involve(s) the theme of “survival: values under stress.” The activity is intended to put students in a "survival mode"—to make them think about what it takes to survive in a given environment. In addition, this activity also gives students practice in the skills and thinking strategies involved in argumentation. One of the key features of this activity is that it involves a challenging problem with built-in controversy. In other words, there is no simple answer. In addition to preparing students to read about characters who find themselves in challenging situations in the natural environment, the activity helps students practice rhetorical strategies such as generating evidence to support a claim, challenging others’ viewpoints, clarifying reasoning, answering potential objections from the audience, and criticizing faulty logic.

I put students in small groups and ask them to come up with their solutions. After fifteen or twenty minutes, or longer if they need it, I re-form the class for discussion. Students present their solutions and discuss differences. Usually this activity generates such a lively discussion that I need only ask one question and the debate begins. But here is a set of guide questions I use if necessary to keep the discussion moving and keep students on task.

> What is one thing your group decided you could definitely get rid of? Why?
> What is one thing you should definitely keep? Why?
> What item on the list has not been mentioned? What would you do with it? Why?
> How does your list give the group the best chance for survival? Why?

This excerpt draws from the class discussion of a group of ninth-grade students. They are discussing...
FIGURE 1. Lost at Sea: What Would You Do?

A ship is sinking, and you have managed to board a lifeboat with twelve other people. Most of the people were not able to reach the cabins to get warm clothing so they are in street clothes. One woman is in a bathing suit. The ship is in the North Atlantic, the temperature is about 32 degrees Fahrenheit, and there are strong winds and high waves. The lifeboat has no motor, so it must be rowed. You may have to spend several days at sea depending on when the boat is spotted. The ocean is foggy with low, heavy clouds. The boat is dangerously overloaded so you must dump 60 pounds of weight. You must decide which items you will remove. For safety reasons, you may not suspend any items from the lifeboat. You may not remove any of the people.

These are the items from which you must choose: 5 slicker raincoats with hoods, each 2 lbs.; 30 cans of tuna fish (flip tops), each 1 lb.; a 2-gallon container full of water, 10 lbs.; 3 skin-diving wet suits, each 5 lbs.; 2 batteries for signaling, each 3 lbs.; 4 wool blankets, each 2 lbs.; a large S.O.S. flag, 3 lbs.; a first aid kit, 10 lbs.; 8 oars, each 5 lbs. Total—140 lbs.

the necessity of keeping some or all of the emergency food.

Student 1: We [our small group] decided to get rid of eighteen cans of tuna fish.

Student 2: But what are you going to do for food?

Student 1: You don’t, like, die of starvation because you don’t have food for a couple of days.

Student 3: Yeah, but it says here you could be at sea for several days before someone spots you. We thought it would be a good idea to keep most of the food.

Student 4: That’s exactly why we decided to keep the water and get rid of most of the food. It’s more important to have water than to have food. The water was more important.

Student 1: We didn’t think of that.

Student 5: But it says the weather’s really bad. We thought it’d be important to keep the food, so that we could keep our strength until somebody finds us. You know, we could be out in the ocean for quite awhile.

Giving students a concrete situation results in emotional involvement in the problem. It is also important that there are several possible solutions. Had the list of items included clearly nonessential items such as benches, food storage boxes, and an anchor, the solution could be too clear-cut to be arguable. In this discussion, students consider what it will take to survive, given the harsh weather conditions in the North Atlantic, a situation parallel to that of the unnamed protagonist facing a winter storm in the Yukon wilderness in Jack London’s “To Build a Fire.” Even though the activity focuses primarily on the physical necessities for survival, the activity often reveals values inherent in the problem, and the discussion then centers on the social dimensions that accompany situations in the literature. For example, some of the students do not seem concerned about the dangers posed by harsh weather conditions much like the brash young protagonist in Jack London’s story, who fails to heed the wisdom of the advice from the old-timer about surviving in the frigid temperatures of the Yukon.

Once all students have had a chance to express their views, I often have students discuss arguments that seemed particularly strong and what made them strong, what kinds of arguments seemed weak and why, and how certain arguments could be refuted. As a follow-up, students write to convince others that certain choices of what to keep and what to throw away will give the group the best chance for survival.

The activity creates controversy because it does not offer an easy solution and the problem connects to students’ lives. Students become emotionally engaged in arguing their viewpoints, so much so that sometimes one student will say to another, “Hey, calm down, this isn’t real.”

THE SOLDIER’S DILEMMA

Another activity that I have used with considerable success to engage students in authentic discussion is “The Soldier’s Dilemma” (see fig. 2), which I adapted from Barry Kroll, who told me that it is based on a real problem that the U.S. Army uses to train prospective officers for leadership. I use the activity for a number of purposes but primarily as a prereading activity for modern war combat narratives such as Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms or Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried. It is set up to prepare students for what soldiers have to deal with in modern warfare and some of the themes, issues, and moral dilemmas
During the Vietnam War, an infantry squad was patrolling deep in enemy-controlled territory near the Cambodian border. At one point in this operation, the squad leader, Sergeant Johnson, decided to scout along a trail that ran through a valley, leading toward a village a short distance away. Johnson told one of his riflemen, a private named Dillon, to stay on a small hilltop as a lookout, while the rest of the squad followed along the trail in the valley below. Johnson expressed concern about a possible ambush on the trail and reminded Dillon that their platoon had been ambushed in this same area and suffered a number of casualties some weeks prior to the present operation. "Don't take any chances," Johnson warned. "Better to kill a few of those murdering villagers than to let any more Americans die."

As Dillon watched the squad make its way along the trail, he saw a Vietnamese woman suddenly appear on the trail just ahead of the squad, but around a bend so that they could not see her. From his vantage point, the woman appeared to lean over the edge of the trail and then quickly move back into the underbrush—out of sight of the squad but still visible to Dillon.

Dillon was immediately suspicious. This was enemy-controlled territory, and the woman could easily be part of the local guerrilla forces. On the other hand, many innocent peasants lived in and around the villages. Was the woman a guerrilla soldier who might set off a mine or spring an ambush when the squad came around the bend in the trail? Or was the woman simply a peasant who had perhaps dropped something on the trail in her haste to hide from the advancing American soldiers? Also, what about the things Johnson had told him? As a soldier he was taught to obey all orders of his superiors. To disobey is a crime.

As these thoughts went through Dillon's mind, the squad kept moving and now was almost at the spot where the woman was hiding. The squad was too far away for Dillon to call out to them. Even a warning shot would probably not stop them from proceeding around the bend. Dillon raised his rifle and lined up his sights on the woman in the brush. But as his finger tightened on the trigger, he hesitated.

If he shot the woman and there turned out not to be a mine or booby trap on the trail, he would have murdered an innocent person. But if he didn't shoot her, a number of his friends might be blown to bits if the woman detonated a mine.

Questions
What should Dillon do: hold his fire or shoot the woman? Why is that the right thing for him to do? Do you agree with what Sergeant Johnson told Dillon? Why or why not?

that students will encounter in their reading. The activity helps them to understand the characters, their motivations, and their actions.

Students read the case and then write a short composition answering the questions posed at the end. The next step is to have students meet in small groups, read their papers aloud in their groups, and try to reach a consensus on what they think Dillon should do and why. After fifteen or twenty minutes, I re-form the class for discussion. Depending on the class, I either have the groups start by reading the paper that best represents their viewpoint or have students present their solutions and discuss differences. In either case, the result is usually a lively discussion. Here is a set of guide questions I use to keep the discussion moving and keep students on task.

> If Dillon holds his fire, why does the fact that the people in his squad are his "friends" make a difference (or does that make a difference)?

> If Dillon decides to kill the woman, and it turns out that she was just an innocent peasant woman caught in bad circumstances, do you think he has done anything wrong? Why or why not?

> If Dillon killed an innocent civilian, would you be willing to call him a murderer? Why or why not? If yes, what should his punishment be? Why?

> If Dillon decides not to shoot the woman, and it turns out that she is a guerrilla soldier who sets off a mine or booby trap, and some of his fellow soldiers are killed and wounded, do you think he has done anything wrong? Why or why not?

> If Dillon fails to shoot the woman and some of his fellow soldiers are killed and wounded as a result of his failure to shoot, would you be willing to say that he has committed a crime? Why or why not? What crime has he
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What is particularly striking about the nature of the discussion, and what makes it stand out as authentic discussion, is that students are actively engaged in an inquiry into the problem posed and issues raised. Students discuss and debate whether Dillon should follow the orders Sergeant Johnson gave him or whether there is a higher order, or morality, that he must follow. Students discuss and debate the extent to which the orders Johnson gave him are lawful and legitimate. Ultimately, I have students consider the possibility of a set of guidelines for right action in war, and we generate a list of those guidelines. Later, we use the guidelines to evaluate the actions of the characters in our course literature. As part of the discussion, we also examine the actions of real soldiers. For example, I have asked students to evaluate former Senator Bob Kerrey and his actions as a Navy SEAL Team Commander during the highly controversial Thanh Phong incident on February 25, 1969, during the Vietnam War.

What is particularly striking about the nature of the discussion, and what makes it stand out as authentic discussion, is that students are actively engaged in an inquiry into the problem posed and issues raised. One of the strengths of the activity is that the problem is presented in real terms and connects to their lives.

As in authentic discussions outside of the classroom, students rarely agree on what Dillon should do. One natural follow-up writing activity is to have students return to the case and, in light of our discussion and having developed a set of criteria for deciding right action in war, have them determine what Dillon should do in this situation. Should he hold his fire or shoot the peasant woman? More important, why is that action the right action for him to take based on the criteria a soldier can use to live by in war? I also ask them to consider what Sergeant Johnson told Dillon.

In one sense, students are revising their original compositions, but most students do not see this follow-up assignment in this way; most of them write substantially different essays than they originally wrote. Their arguments are much more fully developed and complex as a result of the small-group and whole-class discussions and, unlike in many of their first attempts, most students now consider the full implications of Dillon's situation. Here is an excerpt from a longer paper written by one of my undergraduate university students. Notice how this twenty-year-old student considers the implications of her decision that Dillon should shoot the woman. This part of her paper is clearly derived from the class discussion of the case.

You see, I put myself in Dillon's shoes and it all came down to what I could live with once I got home. Now I don't know if I could live with shooting the woman if she turned out to be innocent. I really don't. Maybe I could have, maybe it would have destroyed me. Even if the woman wasn't innocent, I probably still would have regretted what I had done for the rest of my life. I don't know. However, what I do know is that if men died because I didn't shoot her, I never could have lived with that. I know that I could not live with the fact that I could have prevented them from going home in body bags. Now, I know that killing another person is wrong, ethically and morally wrong, no matter what the circumstances. But, if I had to compromise some of my beliefs in order to assure that my fellow soldiers, my friends, spent one more day alive, I'd do it. I probably would hate myself for it the rest of my life, and so would Dillon maybe, but that's not really the point. The point is those men spent another moment on this earth.

This excerpt suggests a number of things about the nature of the discussion that preceded it and what students are learning through the discussion. Students become emotionally involved in discussing and arguing their views about the right thing to do in this situation. As a result of discussing the problem presented in the activity, students are now prepared for reading about a similar issue in the literature. The excerpt also reveals the high level of critical thinking that students are engaged in as they...
wrestle with the moral and ethical issues associated with the problem. This kind of thinking is essential when they must interpret and write about literature.

**Strategies for Initiating Authentic Discussion**

The two activities I have discussed utilize the following seven strategies that I have found to be helpful in initiating authentic discussion.

1. **CREATE CONTROVERSY.**

   The instruction needs to present a puzzling event, question, or problem. It must engage students in exploring problems that are intrinsically interesting to them, that have no quick or easy solutions but are open to a variety of solutions and/or interpretations, and that are complex but not too complex or abstract for their particular level (Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen). An important dimension of instruction is that the teacher provides a set of data such as the items on the boat or the specifics of Dillon’s situation (or devises a means for students to collect data) that they can bring to bear in attacking the problem.

2. **USE SMALL-GROUP COLLABORATION.**

   This element is important because it helps students gain a greater understanding of other perspectives. As students’ ideas or hypotheses are challenged by others, they revise and refine their thinking. Small-group collaboration also provides scaffolding for students while they are learning new strategies so that ultimately they internalize procedures and are able to tackle new tasks effectively on their own (see, for example, Hillocks; Johannessen; Johannessen and Kahn; McCann; Smagorinsky, “Small Groups” and “Preparing Students”; and Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern).

3. **POSE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS THAT DO NOT HAVE EASY ANSWERS OR SOLUTIONS.**

   If the solution to a problem is one that can be arrived at easily or quickly, then the question or problem should be redesigned. Design problem-based activities that encourage multiple perspectives. For example, if the class is studying Shakespeare’s *Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, a problem-based question such as the following may encourage authentic discussion: How would you define “true love,” and, based on your definition, how would you know if Romeo or any adolescent is really in love? The question is open to a variety of possible definitions of true love and interpretations of what Romeo experiences in the play.

4. **CONNECT THE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS TO STUDENTS’ LIVES.**

   It is vitally important that we design our questions and problems so that they connect to the lives of our students if we hope to engage them in meaningful classroom discussion. As Michael Smith warns in *Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature*, the real danger is that when we focus on what we think is important, we might very well end up “torturing” our students with questions or problems that are important only to us, as he did when he had his students read *The Scarlet Letter* and asked them to discuss the hat motif and other symbols and motifs in the novel (Rabinowitz and Smith 103). His students hated it and were interested in a set of other questions, like, “Why the hell didn’t she leave if they treated her that way?” (103).

5. **CONNECT STUDENTS’ KNOWLEDGE TO THE LITERATURE THEY STUDY.**

   Peter Smagorinsky, Thomas McCann, and Stephen Kern remind us that when designing questions or problems we need to make sure that we are tapping into our students’ prior knowledge or connecting what they are learning in the activity to the literature under consideration. One of the points illustrated by the two activities is related to this issue. Students have difficulty connecting with Jack London’s story, “To Build a Fire,” in part because most students have never had to face a life-threatening situation from severe weather conditions. The “Lost at Sea” activity puts students in a survival mode and forces them to consider their actions. Once students have done this, it is easier for them to connect to the situation in the literature.
6. STRIVE TO MAKE SURE THAT THE QUESTIONS ASKED OR PROBLEMS POSED REQUIRE CRITICAL THINKING.

It is not enough for teachers to design interesting and challenging questions or problems that are important to students; these questions or problems must also encourage or require students to engage in critical thinking. They must ask students to use the procedural knowledge that will help them to develop analytical and critical thinking skills important in problem solving, analyzing literature, and writing thoughtful papers. As Judith Langer reports, language arts programs that promote frequent, meaningful discussion among students, discussion that requires critical thinking, will make a significant difference in learning and achievement. George Hillocks Jr., in The Testing Trap, reports further that “research shows that students reach the kinds of goals recommended by the Commission [National Commission on Excellence in Education] best when they are engaged in discussion with their peers and the teacher about complex materials and problems’ (3).

We need to recognize that complex questions require more time for students to think and formulate a response and that some classroom silence is not all bad, particularly when asking a question in a discussion.

7. GIVE STUDENTS ADEQUATE TIME TO RESPOND TO COMPLEX QUESTIONS.

Mary Budd Rowe notes that research indicates that one of the mistakes many teachers make is not allowing students enough time to answer complex questions. Indeed, many teachers, particularly new ones, seem to be deathly afraid of silence in the classroom. However, it is important that we recognize that when we ask complex questions, we cannot expect students to be ready immediately with an answer. Rowe found that many teachers are impatient with students when asking questions. She reported that the wait-time between asking a question and either answering it for the student or calling on another student was only a few fractions of a second. We need to recognize that complex questions require more time for students to think and formulate a response and that some classroom silence is not all bad, particularly when asking a question in a discussion. Some research, as Joseph Riley indicates, even shows that failing to provide adequate wait-time with higher-level questions can lead to low-level student responses.

The New Discussion-Based Classroom

The strategies I have discussed here are only a place to start, to begin to promote authentic classroom discussion. At the heart of what I have argued is that we need to create a new kind of classroom, a classroom that is inquiry driven and is not dominated by teacher talk. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire writes about the change that occurs in a discussion-based classroom:

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (67)

For me, the most exciting part of teaching is having dialogues with my students about the literature we read. I cannot wait to hear what they have to say, to engage them in conversation about what we are reading, because I know that I will be just as likely to learn from them as they will from me.

Works Cited


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More Ways to Handle the Paper Load—on Paper and Online

NCTE invites original essays for a sequel to How to Handle the Paper Load (NCTE 1979). Because this issue continues to be a challenge for teachers—one to which electronic technologies add a whole new dimension—we are looking for fresh, original descriptions and accounts of “new and improved” ways of handling the paper (and now electronic) load. Your essay may explore questions such as, How do you evaluate students’ papers? What aspects of students’ writing do you focus on? How has technology changed your handling of the paper load? How do you cope with the paper/electronic load resulting from journal writing? Research papers?

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