ENGAGING THE ADOLESCENT LEARNER

BY DOUGLAS FISHER AND NANCY FREY

Fostering Classroom Discussion About Complex Ideas and Texts
Classroom discussions should allow students to engage in purposeful talk, manage their use of academic and domain-specific language and concepts, and provide an opportunity for students to learn about themselves, each other, and the world. They must learn to do so in a variety of formats (including small group and whole class) and with a range of partners. Importantly, students should be prepared for these discussions in order to engage in thoughtful, well-reasoned discourse.

The teacher is the central operant when it comes to the quality of the discussion. Given the proper environment, students can and will discuss their perspectives in meaningful ways. However, students will not reach high levels of understanding in a classroom where the teacher is not skilled at, or committed to, facilitating discussion. Langer (1995) identified the following essential teacher dispositions for discussion (cited in Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003):

- Teachers treat all students as capable envisionment builders with important understandings and potential contributions to classroom discussion
- Teachers use instructional activities such as discussion to develop understandings rather than to test what students already know
- Teachers assume that questions are a natural part of the process of coming to understand new material, rather than an indication of failure to learn, and that questions provide productive starting points for discussion
- Teachers help students learn to examine multiple perspectives (from students, texts, and other voices) to enrich understanding rather than focusing on consensus interpretations (p. 690)

Two important teacher behaviors elevate true discussion above more conventional Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) discourse that dominates so many classrooms (Cazden, 1988). The first is that the questions the teacher poses are not restricted to those that have only one “right” answer. The second is that the teacher regularly engages in dialogic instruction through uptake moves (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003) that use student comments to formulate new questions (e.g., “Deka proposed an interesting idea about the limits of tolerance. How does the perspective of the author compare to the view she offered?”).

**Use Questions to Drive Text-Based Discussions**

Complex text requires that readers act on it and maintain interaction with it. Readers of complex texts must generate questions as they read, mentally interrogating the text, the author, and the ideas posed. In other words, a conversation occurs. Readers ask themselves: Why this setting? Why this word? Why does this dialogue occur at this point in the text and not sooner or later?

In other words, students read like detectives. This requires that they zoom in on a sentence in the text for close inspection, and then zoom out to consider paragraphs, passages, and the text as a whole, across multiple texts. Because adolescent readers haven’t yet fully developed this habit, teachers model and think aloud about how they formulate questions as they read. Teachers use guiding questions to assist students in approaching the text more purposefully. Most of all, they create opportunities for students to discuss the text at length with their peers.

---

**Initiate-Respond-Evaluate**

Teacher: “What’s the meaning of the word facile in this text?”

Student: “It means something that’s easy.”

Teacher: “Right! What does noisome mean?”

The familiar exchange of this classroom question-and-answer routine limits student thinking by communicating that the teacher is interested only in a student’s ability to replicate information. Although there is a place for acquiring foundational knowledge, IRE exchanges do not lend themselves to further discussion. In addition, they significantly limit the teacher’s ability to uncover misconceptions or partial understandings of concepts. Consider the aforementioned example. This questioning exchange tells the teacher nothing about whether the student can speculate about why the author chose facile rather than eloquent. Although the initial question may be to check for understanding about a fact, the missed opportunity lies in the teacher’s satisfaction with a low-level answer.
These discussions require that students engage in multiple readings and that teachers use text-dependent questions to prompt students to return to the text. It is important to note that text-dependent questions should not be confined only to the literal meaning of the passage; although important, this does not fully capture the deeper meaning of the work. Therefore, text-dependent questions should also challenge students to examine the inferential levels of meaning, such as noting the mood and tone of a piece, or the author’s purpose, or how the artful choice of words elevates the quality of the reading. These should be developed in advance of the lesson in order to ensure that the discussion regularly guides students back to the reading.

The order in which the questions are presented should not be construed as a template for marching through the questions lockstep with little regard for what students are saying. Although the questions themselves move from literal to implicit levels of meaning, it is necessary to move between and among these types in order to guide students through a process of deconstructing the text in order to reconstruct it as a whole.

For example, when the conversation in a sixth-grade social studies class faltered, the teacher posed another question to jump-start the group. The students were reading a text about women’s roles in ancient Troy and Sparta. They had been talking for several minutes about participating in the Olympics, and they understood from the text that women were not allowed to participate, even in these societies in which women had comparatively more rights than peers living in other places.

The teacher asked a strategic question to reengage her students in discussion, wondering aloud, “If they couldn’t participate, surely they must have gone to watch the games, as spectators.” Several students quickly caught on, realizing that the text actually said that women were not allowed to participate in the games, either as contestants or as spectators. As Jamal said to his group, “I think we missed this. We were all about being in the Olympics, but women weren’t ever allowed to attend and watch.” Marla added, “Oh, now this part later makes sense. It says that they sometimes dressed up as men to see their family members compete. That’s because they weren’t allowed in.”

Sophisticated readers understand that the nature of some texts requires that they be read more than once. Even with less dense text, it is essential to glean the details at both the explicit and implicit levels in order to fully understand the reading. So first and foremost, text-based discussions require a willingness to return to the text to read it more than once. The questions posed while discussing a reading are primarily text dependent and designed to construct opportunities to examine the text rather than simply draw on previous experiences that do little to forward new learning.

The Teacher’s Conversational Moves in Discussion

Discussions can be difficult for some students to follow. The moves a teacher enacts during discussion provide a scaffold for organizing the information that emerges. In addition, skillful use of conversational moves by the teacher can propel the discussion, evoke reasoning, refocus attention on citing textual evidence, and clarify understanding. Taken together, these form the heart of accountable talk (Michaels, O’Connor, Hall, & Resnick, 2010). Over time and with consistent daily opportunities to practice, these principles mark the way students engage in peer-led collaborative conversations. Michaels and colleagues (2010) recommend that teachers use the following conversational moves to promote accountable talk:

- **Marking:** “That’s an important point.” Throughout a discussion, important turning points occur, as when a speaker makes a pivotal observation that matches the learning goals of the teacher. Such a remark ensures that the point is sufficiently emphasized.
Accountable Talk

Accountable talk is an instructional approach designed to foster the meaningful conversation, respectful debate, and academic discourse needed to build the collective knowledge of its participants (Michaels et al., 2010). These discourse habits are built through teacher modeling and facilitation, with the intent of fostering application during peer-led academic discussion. One of the ways that we help students learn the language of accountable talk is through sentence frames. For example, the following frames were used to provide students with examples they could use when talking with their group members:

- I agree that ____, a point that needs emphasizing because so many people believe that ____.
- Though I concede that ____, I still insist that ____.
- While I don’t agree that _____, I do recognize ____.
- The evidence shows that ____.
- My own view, however, is that ____.

We teach routines such as this during the first month of school. For more information on establishing routines at the beginning the school year, see our E-ssentials article The First 20 Days: Establishing Productive Group Work in the Classroom.

Use Classroom Routines to Prepare Students for Discussions

Text-based discussions need to be a regular feature of every classroom. However, the quality of the discussion is dependent on the level of preparation students receive in advance of the conversation. It is easy enough to give them a piece of text, ask them to read it once to themselves, and then react to the content. But a true text-based discussion requires students to look closely at the text in order to explore its ideas and not simply to lean back...
on prior knowledge and experiences. Three instructional routines—annotation, text rendering, and Socratic seminar—assist students in thoughtful preparation.

Annotation

Annotation is the practice of making notes directly on a text in order to track one’s thinking processes. “Reading with a pencil” encourages students to interact more directly with the text and in turn with the content. We have written previously about annotation as a note-taking function (see E-ssentials article Note-Taking and Note-Making for Academic Success). However, annotation does double duty because it serves as a means for a reader to organize her thoughts in advance of a discussion about the reading.

Tenth-grade biology teacher Liz Herrera uses annotation regularly to support discussion. She reproduced the text from her students’ textbook so that they could write on the passage discussing transcription of DNA and RNA into the 64 amino acid codons formed through combinations of adenine, cytosine, guanine, and thymine, commonly referred to as A, C, G, and T. “This is a dense section of [the textbook],” she said, “and I really need to slow them down so we can unpack it. If they don’t understand the A-G, C-T rule, they’ll be completely lost when we start learning about nucleotides.”

Using an annotation protocol introduced during the first week of school, Ms. Herrera reminds students to circle unknown words and phrases, underline key sentences, and number steps in a process. As students read and annotate, Ms. Herrera circulates around the room with a copy of the passage on a clipboard. She observes the annotations students are making as they read and writes notes on her own copy. “I get a lot out of watching for the patterns of annotations I see,” she explained. “This is valuable information for me as we move into the discussion phase.”

The words and phrases students select guide her selection of text-based questions she has prepared, and their ability or difficulty with identifying key sentences tells her where she needs to steer the discussion. “It’s like I’m scouting out the territory so I can lead students to the destination,” Ms. Herrera said.

“While I can make some predictions about what they’ll have difficulty with, I have to say that every class is different. I can’t just observe in first period and then facilitate the same discussion in every class. Otherwise, I’m in danger of overlooking what they really need to gain from the text.”

Text-Rendering Experience

Eighth-grade social studies teacher Ray Wilkins uses a process called text-rendering experience (TRE) to locate the essence of a document (Baron, 2007). “I have them use TRE when the document is dense, but the reading is fairly short,” he said. Students read the document independently and then review it a second time to mark their most meaningful sentence, phrase, and word. “There’s no right answer,” Mr. Wilkins reminds them. “Go with your gut.” Students read the contents of the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution first to get a sense of the overall document, then a second time to note their three choices. In groups of five, the students worked through the three rounds of the protocol (see related sidebar for details). Lexus’s group identified the following phrases and words:

- Enjoy the right
- Right of the people
- Security of a free State
- Life or limb
- Freedom of speech
- Consent
- Peaceably
- Jeopardy
- Respecting
- Free

“The first thing I see is how much our list is about rights and freedoms,” she said. “I guess that makes sense, ‘cause it’s the Bill of Rights and..."
a question posed by the teacher. Such a question focuses on general understandings and key details, like asking students who have read the poem “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid what can be surmised about the mother and her daughter. Deeper understanding of the poem, especially as it relates to themes, motifs, and historical and cultural contexts, emerge during the seminar.

There are several features unique to Socratic seminar, although many of the questioning techniques discussed in the previous sections are held in common. One difference is the length, which usually requires an entire class period, and sometimes two periods. Another is in the physical arrangement. The room is set in a circle or square so that all the participants can see one another. Each member comes to the seminar having already read and analyzed the text, as the focus is on deconstructing and reconstructing to reveal deeper meaning. The norms for discussion that have been used each day are posted and reviewed.

Students who are new to Socratic seminar may need to be reminded that it is a conversation and, therefore, it is not necessary to raise one’s hand. Although this may appear to be a minor point, it is needed in order to discourage speaking directly to and through the teacher, rather than the group. To further reinforce this norm, the teacher takes a seat in the circle, rather than standing apart from it. Other norms regarding civil discourse are essential, such as listening as an ally. Remind students that this is not a debate, and that the purpose is not simply to locate an answer. Instead, Socratic seminar is a forum for deepening one’s understanding of the text and to entertain different interpretations. For this reason, texts that are somewhat ambiguous are excellent candidates for Socratic seminar.

Text-Rendering Experience Protocol

1. Students read the text all the way through, then a second time to select a powerful sentence, phrase, and word. Each should come from a different part of the document.
2. Students work in collaborative groups and select a facilitator and a scribe. The facilitator manages the process while the scribe records the phrases and words identified. (Sentences are not recorded.)
3. Round 1: Each member reads his or her selected sentence with no further commentary by the individual or the group.
4. Round 2: Each member reads his or her selected phrase with no further commentary by the individual or the group. The scribe lists the phrase so that the group can see it.
5. Round 3: Each member reads his or her selected word with no further commentary by the individual or the group. The scribe lists the word so that the group can see it.
6. The members of the group discuss their impressions of the document on the basis of the sentences, phrases, and words that were stated.
7. The members of the group discuss new understandings of the document that have emerged.

Socratic Seminar

As students become more comfortable with sustained discussion and analysis of texts, they are able to transition to Socratic seminar, defined as a “collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about the text” (Roberts & Billings, 2012, p. 22). Socratic seminar is one method for integrating speaking and listening, reading, and writing in a meaningful way. Students read and annotate the text in advance of the seminar in order to prepare for the discussion. This text preparation may occur within the classroom during lessons that lead up to the seminar or outside of the classroom as students become more adept at analytic reading. Whether in class or outside of class, students write a short, reflective piece in advance of the Socratic seminar, addressing all.” Oliver added, “But I think we also picked words that aren’t about people fighting, like peaceably and respecting.” For the next few minutes, the group discussed the intersection of rights and conflict, noting that “enjoying the right” was key. Mr. Wilkins then gathered all the groups together to continue the discussion. “You’ve had a chance to get some first impressions of the Bill of Rights,” he said. “Now let’s dive into them so we’ve got a better sense of what each means and what it means for society.”
The teacher’s role is somewhat different during Socratic seminar, as he or she becomes the facilitator, rather than more directly orchestrating the conversation. For that reason, the teacher reacts only as needed to student responses, instead offering further questions to engage other students (e.g., “How would you respond to that, Jose?”). However, questions, and the strategic reengagement with questions, frame the entire seminar. An initial key question can be posed to begin the seminar and might be posted so as it easily return to it. Key questions should be open ended in that they are not easily answered, and they should invite interpretation. Possible opening interpretive questions include the following:

- What is the author’s perspective, and how does this inform the message?
- Why is (word or phrase) pivotal to understanding this text?
- Is (concept) a good thing or a bad thing?

The opening question frames the rest of the seminar, which is furthered through the use of text-dependent questions that invite close examination of the text. The teacher continues to make publicly displayed notes for students in order to map the conversation and provide students with key points that can be used later in their analytic writing:

- What evidence in the text helps us understand whether the writer would agree or disagree with (concept)?
- What does (phrase or sentence) mean in the context of this reading?
- Where does the turning point in this piece occur, and why is it important?
- In what ways does our understanding of (character) depend on the (thoughts/actions/dialogue) of others?
- What is the theme of this text? What is your evidence?
- How does this text align or contrast with (previously read text)?

As the seminar comes to a close, the teacher/facilitator poses final questions that invite summary, synthesis, and evaluation. Examples of closing questions include the following:

- How does knowledge of this text inform our world today?
- Why has this text endured?
- What ideals or values are represented in this piece?

Reflection and writing continue after the seminar, as students reflect on their contributions to the discussion. In addition, the seminar sets the stage for more formal academic writing, as students now engage in literary critique and analysis. Having benefited from the input of peers, as well as witnessing how others have understood their ideas, students are better able to organize key ideas for use in their own writing.

Conclusion

Meaningful discussions are essential for deep understanding of complex texts and ideas, but creating a culture for doing so can be challenging with adolescents. Remember the classroom scenes in Dead Poets Society when students were practically falling over their desks because they were so eager to offer profound statements? We’ve never had that happen in our classrooms. Instead, it takes a lot of work to make discussion happen. It begins with initiating discussion by developing a trusting climate for sharing ideas and with teaching routines and procedure that scaffold student talk. It is maintained through the use of text-based questions that prompt students to return to the text. And, most important, the conversational moves of the teacher help us to refrain from telling them what to think and instead guiding them to co-constructed knowledge. Rather than initiate, respond, evaluate, let’s initiate, maintain, refrain. It is a truism in our profession: A good teacher tells you where to look, but not what to see.
Socratic seminars are named for their embodiment of Socrates's belief in the power of asking questions, prize inquiry over information, and discussion over debate. Socratic seminars acknowledge the highly social nature of learning and align with the work of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Paulo Freire. This strategy guide written by Scott Filkins explains Socratic seminars for use in grades 6–12 classrooms and offers practical methods for applying the approach in your classroom to help students investigate multiple perspectives in a text.

Researchers Linda Kucan and Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar have designed eight 2-hour professional development sessions for use by teacher-educators and staff developers on the topic of text-based discussions. This downloadable guide outlines a process for analyzing classroom discussions and plan lessons that emphasize comprehension and content learning. This guide can be used in conjunction with the IRA book of the same name.


Seventh-grade teacher Greg Lenihan describes how he used Franz Kafka's 87-word very short story "A Little Fable" as a close reading on the first day of school to promote discussion and writing.

REFERENCES


