

**HOW DID WE GET HERE:  
SEVENTH-GRADERS SHARING LITERATURE**

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ELIZABETH CLOSE

National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement  
University at Albany  
State University of New York  
1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, New York 12222

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**National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement**

University at Albany, School of Education, B-9

1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222

<http://cela.albany.edu/>

518-442-5026

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Farnsworth Middle School

- John: I think the author rushed the end of the story. He got tired of the story.
- Sue: Yeah, like he was building a mountain and he didn't put the top on.
- John: He left you hanging. I sometimes get that way when I write some of my stories and get tired of the stories. . . . He wasn't at the point of ending it so he just rushed through.
- Will: The author left you hanging for a little bit so you could let your mind wander. If you weren't that type of person, you could stop the story there. . . . I thought it [the ending] was happy when I just finished the book and didn't think anything about it. Then I started to think about it. I just thought – just like in a chess game – they took over one piece. They didn't win the game – they just won a little part of it.

As I participated in this discussion with my seventh-grade students, I knew they were engaged in an effort to understand their reading and to share their understandings with their classmates. The students involved were typical seventh-graders who were part of four heterogeneously-grouped classes that met daily throughout the year. The discussion took place in a forty-five minute class period and was the fourth, but not final, discussion of the novel, *The Girl Who Owned a City* by O.T. Nelson (1975). Students of varying reading abilities were eagerly sharing and reshaping their understanding of this piece. As each student spoke, listened, and rethought ideas, new envisionments (Langer, 1987) were being developed. Listening and responding to one another as thinkers and peers, the students were attempting to understand the novel for themselves with no need for one right answer or for an expert opinion.

How did we reach this point?

In the spring of 1988, Judith Langer from the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, located on the Albany campus of the State University of New York, came to the Guilderland Central Schools and asked for volunteers to work as teacher-researchers. The goal of the project was to determine how students learn and think about literature by studying actual 7<sup>th</sup>- and 11<sup>th</sup>-grade classes and learning from them. This was different from many research efforts

which start with a theory and test it in the classroom. In this project, the researchers would look at existing practices and try to form some general principles from the lessons that were successful at stimulating thinking and learning.

The teachers who volunteered for this project were expected to be active participants in the research. The research team was made up of four research assistants who were doctoral candidates (each an experienced English teacher), eight classroom teachers from two districts (city and suburban) and two grade levels (7 and 11), and the director of the project, Judith Langer. We met frequently in pairs and as a group to reflect on the ways in which students can come to think more richly about the literature they read in school. We discussed research findings, engaged in our own book discussion groups to experience ways in which we thought and interacted, and we discussed the activities we were trying in our classes.

The students also became partners in the research. They provided their views about which activities were thought-provoking and why. Participation in the project was a growth experience for all of us. I could see the students grow in confidence as they discussed opposing views, but I could also see myself growing as I learned to view my classroom from different perspectives.

## **Stances**

Two important concepts changed me. The first was the idea that developing an understanding or final envisionment of a piece of literature is not a sequential process, but rather, a recursive one. As readers work through to a final envisionment in an attempt to make meaning, four stances (Langer, 1989) might be employed. Readers move in and out of these stances as the envisionment develops.

- Stance 1: Being Out and Stepping Into an Envisionment – The reader, in an effort to understand and get into the piece, brings in prior knowledge and experience and uses surface features of the text to begin to make meaning.
- Stance 2: Being In and Moving Through an Envisionment – The reader becomes involved in the text and uses earlier envisionment, prior knowledge, and the piece itself to create meaning as the reader moves through the text.
- Stance 3: Stepping Back and Rethinking What One Knows – The reader steps back and uses the understanding of the piece of literature to rethink what is already known.
- Stance 4: Stepping Out and Objectifying the Experience – The reader is able to step back from the piece and consider and respond to the content, the text, or the reading experience.

My awareness of the four stances and their recursive nature had an impact on my teaching style. Although I had always encouraged class discussion and stressed the value of differing opinions, I had insisted that students focus only on the text for support of their assertions. I discouraged connections with their own experiences or with other works they had read outside of class. As I reflected, I could see that this approach interfered with the students' efforts to make meaning.

The notion of stances led me to believe that in class discussions the students had to control the movement. They were the ones who were working through the meaning-making process. It was their questions that would help them to reach a final envisionment, not mine.

Change never comes easily. I worried that students would miss important concepts if I permitted them to discuss their questions. It was during the discussion of *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969) that I learned the most important lesson of the year: listen to the students and trust them to have important things to say.

After completing the reading, but before our final class discussion, the class viewed a film version of the novel. Because the film skirts the issue of prejudice as well as the idea of independence, I felt a class discussion of the movie would not be valuable. I came to class prepared with several "important" questions. I put forth my first question and a few students gave tepid responses. At this point, Megan tried to start a discussion of the movie. Continuing to control the discussion, I tried unsuccessfully to focus the students on the text. Finally, Megan slammed her hand on the desk and said:

I really didn't like the movie because it changed what the story was about. The book was about Phillip's learning about prejudice and not to make up your mind about someone because he is black. The movie turned the story into an adventure of two people surviving on an island.

Megan knew what was important to the discussion. She knew what the class wanted and needed to talk about. At that point I began to listen to the students. Many had similar feelings about the movie and resented the change that had been made in the author's message. Some hadn't realized how a story could be changed when made into a movie. By trying to force my agenda on the students, I had almost lost the opportunity to discuss their feelings about the book and how it related to their lives. After the discussion, when I had time to reflect on that class, I realized that I was going to have to trust these students more and give them the opportunity to have ownership of our discussions.

Listening to the students and their thoughts about a piece of literature helped me rethink my envisionments. As the year progressed, I often found that the students had found new ways of thinking about a piece that I had never considered possible for seventh-graders. During a discussion of “Charles” by Shirley Jackson (1975), the discussion took a turn I never expected. It began with a question about why Laurie would lie. John wondered if the lying was Laurie’s effort to control the family and if Laurie’s stories about Charles were giving him power. Suddenly the whole class was launched into a discussion of power and what made people powerful. Related to that was a discussion of whether a five-year-old is capable of understanding a lie or plotting to gain attention. Ideas came from all directions and the discussion reached levels I never dreamed seventh-graders could achieve.

## **Scaffolding**

A second important understanding for me was that of instructional scaffolding (Applebee & Langer, 1983). I recognized the need for supporting students, but the idea of building a scaffold helped me look at this support differently. It isn’t enough to support students; that support must be carefully structured, and gradually removed as the students begin to internalize the structure. Building scaffolding for my classes meant I needed to think about problems the students might have in developing their envisionments; to develop strategies that would help them overcome these difficulties; and to design activities that would make these strategies clear as the year unfolded.

One way I provided scaffolding was in the form of questions. If students were going to learn to take control of the discussion, they first had to become aware of the issues they wanted to discuss. I began by having the students record questions as they occurred to them during their reading. Initially I asked them to write the questions in their journals (composition notebooks). At the beginning of class I would list their questions on the board, and we would select a question to use as the starting point of our discussion. As I grew more confident and the students became skilled in asking questions. I simply asked at the beginning of class, “Does anyone have any questions?” Although I still came to class with my questions, I never had a class where someone didn’t have a question or statement that raised an important issue for discussion. The discussion cited that the beginning of this article began when Barbara opened the class with the

statement: “I didn’t like the end of this novel. It was too perfect.” Although this wasn’t a question, it was a genuine expression of an issue that was bothering many of the students. The students were discussing something important to them, and in the course of the discussion, they reshaped their and my envisionments.

Writing assignments offered another way to provide scaffolding. The class used journals to record questions, to make predictions, to record character changes, and to react to discussion at the end of class.

New learning also took place as the students and I experimented with other writing activities. Student responses were more enthusiastic when they cared about the topic, and Written Conversation (Harste, Short & Burke, 1988, p. 375-9) allowed them control of the topic. Students worked in pairs, and each pair had one sheet of paper and two pencils. The instructions were simple: one person is to start the conversation with a question or a statement that will get the other person thinking. When the first person is finished, pass the paper to your partner who will respond in writing. There will be no talking.

To get the students started the first time, I assigned the person who would start the conversation in each pair. Students needed about five minutes to become fully engaged in their conversations, and the activity required most of a class period. I experimented with several variations of this activity, but none worked as well as the simple pairing which allowed the students to become completely engaged in one conversation.

Brenda and Maggie, discussing *Forever Island* by Patrick D. Smith:

Brenda: Why is Timmy in the story? How old is he? Why does it take so long for the story to get going? It takes a while for it to get going, but it’s interesting. It’s boring at first, but I like it.

Maggie: I think it goes too slow. It takes two pages for just one person to say something. The author makes the characters as robots. You don’t get any feeling while you’re reading. I like stories that make you feel as if you were with the characters.

Brenda: I never read any other P.D. Smith books. I think the reading goes faster after awhile, but not that much faster. I just had a thought. Maybe the author is not showing feelings because the Indian culture is like that. Maybe they are just the type of people who keep to themselves. Maybe another reason is that they don’t want you to know that much. What do you think?

Maggie: I never really thought of that. From what I have learned, some Indians seem to hide their feelings. On the cover Charlie Jumper even seems to have a dry personality. In one way they do describe the characters but he doesn’t describe them with adjectives. He describes them when they talk.

As students puzzled over one another's questions, they made amazing insights into their reading. Written conversation is a nonthreatening assignment; students aren't worried about what the teacher wants so they focus on making meaning from the text. The discussion is limited by their needs, and they remain in control. In addition, students are stretching their thinking and developing a clearer understanding on the novel by simply "listening" to each other. As I read the conversations after class, I could see exactly where the students were in the reading and what things seemed to be giving them difficulty. This gave me material for discussion when I visited various learning groups in later classes. Written Conversation also proved to be a supportive activity for many of the students:

Connie and Will, discussing *The Girl Who Owned a City*:

- Will: Hi. I have one question. What kind of government should they make? I have read to page 127. I think that is good.
- Connie: That is good! I don't know about the government. See when Lisa moved to the school, she said anybody could leave if they didn't like it, but if they stayed they'd have to follow her rules. Does that answer your question? If not let me know.

Another successful writing experience involved letter writing. I wanted the students to know that their thoughts and feelings about our work were important, so I often asked them to evaluate an activity. Throughout the year the students would write long letters expressing their feelings about our literature classes. By the end of the year, the letters were arriving on my desk without my asking for them.

- Sally: I think if we had tried to focus on one topic it would have been really, really hard. When someone says something on one topic, it always leads to something else, and I think it is good to jump around. . . . When someone says something, sometimes it gives me an idea of something, and I want to say it even if it really doesn't have anything to do [with the discussion].
- Barbara: I'm glad we had the discussions in class because this helped me to understand the book and make me think about things that if I read this book on my own I wouldn't have thought of. The journal writing also helped by letting me get as much as I could about the characters from the book as well as my own thoughts and ideas.

## **Trust**

Early in the year the class discussions were very restrained. Some of this was because students were developing trust in me, their classmates, the researcher, and in themselves. They

had to know that they could disagree and not feel they would appear foolish. We had to build on the concept that there was no one right answer. As students began to see that their opinions and experiences were valued in the discussion, and that other students would listen and respond to their thoughts, they became more involved.

Lynne: In class we learned to be comfortable in group situations by developing trust in our peers throughout the year. This trust made it easier for our class to be open with each other and not be afraid to voice our opinions in class discussions.

Allowing the students an opportunity to rehearse their understandings of literature in small groups provided the needed scaffolding. As the students began their work with our first novel, *The Cay*, I assigned them to literature groups, and I also gave each group and student very specific tasks and reading assignments. This slowly allowed students more control so that by the end of the year, the students were forming their own learning groups, making their own reading calendars, and using their questions to determine group direction.

Trust also grew in our full class discussions. Here I realized that even something as simple as furniture arrangement could make a difference in the way students related to one another. Instead of desks, I have eight tables in my classroom that seat a total of 32. Initially, I had the students sit on the outside of the tables for discussions, and I stayed on my feet in the front of the room. As the year progressed, I realized that the tables were functioning as a barrier – a way for the students and me to remain at a distance from the discussion. I had the students move their chairs to the inside of the circle, and I moved a chair into the circle for me. The discussions became livelier, more intense, more student-centered. The circle seemed to build trust because everyone was equally exposed and at risk.

Barbara: When we were in a circle and looking at each other, it was kind of hard to start. You could see all these people looking straight at you and you would get scared because you are always thinking “what if they laugh?” or “what if they think [this] is stupid?” But once you get started, it becomes easy. One topic leads to another, and you never have enough time to say what you want before class is over.

Mary: One thing that helped was the way we sat. We sat in a circle, not like a normal class does. Sitting in a circle helped me feel closer to the other kids in the class, and it helped me talk and share my feelings better.

## Where Are We?

As I look back on this exciting and learning-packed year, I see permanent change in myself and my students. The notions of both stances and scaffolding have forever changed the way I plan my teaching units. Watching and listening to my students have changed the way I lead a discussion. The students learned to ask questions that are important for developing their envisionments of a piece of writing, and I believe they learned to use the techniques we applied in discussions as a way of approaching other issues in their lives. The literature studies provided them with an appreciation of how thinking, discussing, and reshaping ideas gave them a better understanding of, and put them in control of, their thoughts.

Mary: Through defending my ideas I was able to learn more about the novel. I was forced to consider the different possibilities and I had to think about why things happened. I often changed my ideas on a subject after listening to other people's viewpoints.

Jen: I think the best thing I liked in your language arts class was the group discussions. It really helped me to figure out things not only in school but out of school too. If I can't figure out why somebody did what they did, I will just talk about it in my head.

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