Effective literature instruction develops thinking skills

Studies in English language arts education tell us that:

- when children have daily, thought-provoking experiences with all kinds of literature, their understanding becomes more varied and complex; and
- when those experiences include substantive discussions with others, students' learning is further enhanced.

But while evidence for the value of literary experience is substantial, strategies teachers can use to help students gain the needed reasoning abilities to do well are relatively scarce. Today practitioners and policy makers are finding such guidance in the work of Dr. Judith A. Langer and her research team at the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA). This brief highlights some of these research findings and their implications for classroom practice. It is intended for use by those responsible for supporting effective English and language arts instruction and has been adapted from the booklet *Improving Literary Understanding through Classroom Conversation* and related reports, articles and books.

How readers think about a literary text

The way we think about a text depends in large part upon our purposes and expectations for reading it. Whereas reading for information requires finding a sense of the topic early in the reading and then shaping our search for new information with reference to that topic, literary reading is in a constant state of flux. We explore deeper possibilities underlying the particular part we are reading, while also exploring the different ways each of these explorations might affect our interpretation of the entire work. Thus, as we read, we entertain various interpretations as the text progresses, while at the same time recognizing that a development in the work or interaction with other readers might change our thinking. Langer calls these unfolding and shifting understandings ***envisionments***. They are like the kinds of knowledge we call upon when making sense of any new experience. Because they illuminate important themes in the text and reveal areas of insight or confusion on the part of the reader, envisionments are at the core of what teachers and students should be attending to during literature instruction.

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Langer has identified four **stances** to describe the ways in which accomplished readers interact with a given text:

- We bring what we know from our reading and other experiences to our reading of the new text, seeking enough essential information to ***step in*** to the text and form initial interpretations and speculations. We rely on this search at the beginning of the reading and again whenever we "get lost" or encounter unexpected or confusing ideas.

- As we think, write about, or discuss a literary work, we ***move through*** the text, exploring possibilities and developing deeper understandings. We use our momentary understandings of words and structures, themes and characters, events and conflicts, together with prior experience with life and literature, to contribute to an evolving interpretation of the entire text.

- Often our emerging understandings prompt us to reflect on the world beyond the text. Sometimes, we ***step out and rethink***, using ideas we have gotten from the text to inform and question our interpretations of the world we know. We learn from the text.

- At other times we distance ourselves from the reading experience, the text itself, and the understandings we have developed. Here we ***step out and inspect*** the text for purposes of analysis, comparison, or other critical examination.

Why the stances are important

These findings suggest that students need support in developing and articulating rich and powerful envisionments if they are to form deep and defensible interpretations. Such support is strengthened when teachers do the following things (see page 4 for example):

- **Focus the discussion on students' ideas and questions,** first to capture the thoughts students come away with at the end of a reading, and later, as they further develop their understandings.
- Teach students to strengthen their reading abilities by showing them **ways to discuss and ways to think** about a work.
- Ask questions that **move students to different stances** in order to develop their understandings.
- **Foster student awareness and control of their envisionments** through oral and written activities that make students' thinking visible to themselves and others.

These kinds of supports have the advantage of requiring active mental engagement, raising reading behaviors to the conscious level for examination and reflection, and inviting participation by students of varying reading and ability levels. Described in greater detail in the booklet *Improving Literary Understanding through Classroom Conversation*, these strategies have been shown to aid students' comprehension.

While the nature of any literature discussion will be guided by both the text and the students' emerging understandings, the example on the back cover illustrates one sequence a teacher might use to assure that such discussion is productive.

THEORY IN ACTION

The findings and practices highlighted in this brief illustrate some of the features of "uncommonly successful schools" identified in other CELA research. That is, they encourage critical and creative thought, collaboration between and among students, connections between academic and non-academic experiences, and the development of strategies for learning and thinking. Examples of theory in action can help to inform the work of educators and others seeking to improve student performance in reading, writing, and thinking.

In January 2002, the Annenberg/CPB Channel unveils its series of professional development programs devoted to helping middle and high school teachers improve literature instruction. The *Envisioning* series, produced for Annenberg/CPB by Maryland Public Television, builds upon Langer's research into how people think when they read literature and how effective teachers use this knowledge to move their students toward deeper understanding.

A possible sequence for guiding literature discussions

Example

1) Invite students to read the text, responding in any way that helps them. (Teacher: Jot down your thoughts and questions, or use sticky notes to record anything that strikes you as interesting or puzzling.)

2) After all have finished reading, tap readers' first impressions. (Teacher: What does the piece mean to you? What questions were you left with?)

3) Continue to keep readers' ideas and questions at the center of the discussion, exploring possible interpretations and seeking deeper ones by encouraging students to respond to one another and build upon what others have said. (Teacher: Do you agree or disagree? Any other possibilities?) Where appropriate, orchestrate the discussion by:

- Building on initial impressions (Teacher: What do you think this story is about? Was there anything you didn't expect?)
- Using uptake, or picking up on what is said (Teacher: I hear so and so say. . .anybody disagree with that idea?)
- Asking for clarification (Teacher: Can you say more about that? Why do you think that happened?)
- Making connections (Teacher: Is there anything you've read that helps you understand why it happened this way?)
- Encouraging multiple perspectives (Teacher: If you were (a character in the story) how would you interpret…? What if the narrator were…instead of…?)
- Taking a critical stance (Teacher: Was there anything about the style, organization, or wording of the piece that made an impression on you? How? How might someone in another century react to this piece?)

4) End the discussion by taking stock of ideas. (Teacher: So far we have discussed the following threads or themes . . . .What else do we need to discuss?)

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