What Research Says: Conversation in the Middle School Classroom: Developing Reading, Writing, and Other Language Abilities
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Conversation in the Middle School Classroom: Developing Reading, Writing, and Other Language Abilities

Classrooms where discussion is used to develop understandings, where students ask substantive questions, and where students learn to challenge what they read as well as one another are also classrooms where students develop the knowledge and strategies to do well on challenging literacy tasks that they are asked to complete on their own.

—Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, in preparation

By Janet I. Angelis

Among the challenges faced by middle level educators is that of providing curriculum and instruction that engage young adolescents. In an earlier “What Research Says” column, Strauss and Irvin (2000) summarized research on the importance of providing interesting, accessible, and relevant literacy materials for young adolescents, particularly those who struggle to read. Other studies, many of which have been conducted by researchers at the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA), have examined the effect of classroom practices on student literacy achievement. These studies have investigated many different aspects of classroom instruction—for example, the nature of classroom discussion, the way literature is taught, how the curriculum is conceived and organized—and their effects on student achievement on various measures of literacy.

Overall, CELA researchers have found that when three key elements of conversation are present and academic demands are high for all students, they make achievement gains in literacy. These three elements are dialogic instruction orchestrated to support envisionment-building classrooms centered around substantive and sustained curricular conversations. In this article, I discuss each of these elements in turn, although in practice, they are closely interrelated. For a fuller description of any of the CELA studies, go to http://cela.albany.edu, where all research reports and related materials are available.

Dialogic Instruction

For many reasons, not the least of which is concern for classroom management (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001), the teacher is at the hub of most middle school classroom discussions (Nystrand, 1997; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2001), initiating questions and receiving most student responses. Only rarely is the whole classroom the center of a genuine, dialogic discussion, a real exchange of ideas between teacher and students or among students (Nystrand, et al., 2001). The initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) pattern (Mehan, 1979) persists in most classrooms today, even though dialogic
instruction has been shown to be more beneficial in improving student reading and writing development (Langer, 1997; Nystrand, 1997). For example, a 1998 study of the relation between classroom discussion and reading and writing achievement in 102 English and social studies classrooms in the Midwest found that dialogic discussion was very rare (less than a minute a day per class, on average), but when it did occur, it had a positive effect on student writing in both English and social studies classes (Nystrand, Gamoran, & Carbonaro, 1998).

To foster dialogic instruction, teachers can use a variety of techniques, including

- **Asking authentic questions**—questions that get at the implications and applications of issues and for which the teacher does not have a preconceived “right” answer: “Why do you think you got that result from your experiment?” “Can anyone describe another way to solve this problem?” “What are the advantages/disadvantages of each?” “Do you think purchasing Alaska was Seward’s folly? Why/why not?” “If you lived in Puerto Rico and were old enough to vote, would you vote for statehood? for independence? to keep the relationship with the US the same? Why?”

- **Using student comments** or questions to invite other students to contribute their ideas or to help students think more broadly or deeply. For example, begin a new unit by gathering and recording students’ questions. Redirect a question from a student (posed to the teacher) to the whole class: “Who would like to suggest an answer to ________’s question about why so many authors leave us hanging at the end of a story?” Follow up on a student comment by inviting other students to respond: “_______ just made an interesting point. Who can offer other evidence to support that point?” “Does anyone have a different interpretation/opinion and the evidence to support it?”

- **Assigning writing** to help students anticipate events, think through their emerging ideas, or reinforce discussion, ask students to justify a mathematics solution in writing, then discuss their explanations, perhaps in small groups. “If Lewis and Clark were to invite you to join their expedition, what questions would you want/need to ask them before making your decision? Make a list of 6-10 questions.” “Now that you’re about half-way through the experiment, write a paragraph in which you predict what you expect the results will be.”

Perhaps most important, teachers demonstrate respect for what students say, often displaying their thoughts in some way (overhead projector, chalkboard, computer) for the class to refer to and talk about.

**Environment-Building Classrooms**

A mainstay of the middle school language arts curriculum is literature, and, indeed, research shows that having daily, thought-provoking experiences with literature helps children develop more varied and complex understandings of what they read. Since we read differently when we read for literary understanding versus when we read for information (Langer, 1995), readers use different strategies for the two kinds of reading. In both we build what Langer calls “envisionments,” which she has defined as “the wealth of information that people have in their minds at any point in time. Envisionments include related ideas and images, questions, hunches, anticipations, arguments, disagreements, and confusions that fill the mind during every reading, writing, speaking, or thinking experience” (Langer & Close, 2001, p. 6).

When readers read to gain information, they work to maintain a point of reference—to relate all that they read back to the topic about which they are seeking information. Most reading in school subjects other than language arts is primarily to gain information—for example, to learn about the process of photosynthesis or details about the Pilgrims’ journey to the New World. Yet even during such reading, readers are still building envisionment—of what is going on inside the plant, of what it might have been like to leave one’s country and travel for weeks by ship to a place unknown. Classrooms that are particularly effective in helping students build strong envisionments—with the resulting development of reading and writing skills—share some essential characteristics (Langer, 1998).

- They treat all students as capable of building envisionments and of contributing to the classroom discussion. In language arts classrooms, teachers and students form a community much like a book club in which each member has something
to contribute. Students are responsible for developing and refining their own envisionments, a process they will continue to undertake the rest of their lives (Langer & Close, 2001).

- They treat questions as a natural part of the learning experience rather than as a failure to learn. We all have questions as we seek to understand new material; these questions change as understanding deepens. Effective instruction starts with those questions. In science, for example, Wells argued that the force driving the curriculum should be “a pervasive spirit of inquiry”—and that force should come from students asking and seeking answers to their own questions (Wells, 2001).

- They use class time to help students develop their understandings rather than to test what students already know or to quiz them about someone else’s (the teacher’s, a literary critic’s) interpretation.

- They introduce many perspectives as a way to enrich interpretation, rather than seeking a consensus. In approaching a literary work or an historical account, each reader’s life experiences—including gender, socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, religion, culture—will affect how one interprets the text. Classrooms that provide a climate supportive of student formation and articulation of their unique perspectives can enrich all students’ envisionments and help them understand other people’s points of view.1 Teacher questions can foster this process, for example by asking, “How might an historian (or Native American or recent US immigrant) think about this?”

Some of the strategies that teachers employ to foster envisionment-building classrooms include

- Using small groups to have students work together to share their envisionments, with the assignment of bringing the group’s understanding to a whole class discussion, along with any questions or concerns they were unable to resolve.

- Starting whole class discussions with whatever questions students have from their reading and study to date.

- Assigning writing to focus questions and predictions before reading, to reflect on learning during a lesson or unit, and to pull ideas and thoughts together towards the completion of a unit (Langer & Close, 2001).

Since many less successful readers have difficulty building and maintaining envisionments (Langer, 2002), strategies like these help make reading more personally meaningful to them and are particularly beneficial (Langer, 1998). They also boost language acquisition for English language learners. For example, one CELA study (see Langer, 1997) engaged recent middle school immigrants from the Dominican Republic in drawing on their own culture, literature, and literacy to learn and write a story they had heard at home. Working together in small groups, with their teacher, and with a community representative, they wrote, edited, translated, and published in both Spanish and English a collection of Tales from Home (National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, 1994), gaining essential literacy abilities in the process.

Conversations about Challenging Subject Matter

Research suggests that the most effective curriculum is a well-conceived year-long (or longer) conversation into which teachers initiate students (Applebee, Burroughs, & Cruz, 2000, Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000). Such initiation involves teaching students the ways of doing the things the people in that discipline do—learning to use the vocabulary they use, the concepts they explore, the texts they read, the kinds of arguments they make, the evidence they will accept, and the rules and conventions they follow (Applebee, 1996). In science, for example, this means that students would learn to ask questions that lend themselves to scientific investigation, to conduct valid experiments, to record and present results with documentation and evidence that would be acceptable to the scientific community. A similar initiation would take place in history, mathematics, and the arts.

The same initiation would apply to language arts. However, perhaps more than any other middle school subject, language arts has tended to be a collection of activities—the place where the need for new skills like Internet searching or word processing get added to the curriculum—rather than a signifi-
cant, ongoing conversation across a semester, year, or years. To engage in a curricular conversation in language arts means taking part in the primary activities of studying language and literature—reading, writing, listening, and speaking about significant issues and ideas, texts, and topics (Applebee, 1996). It also means that teachers bring coherence to their instruction by organizing the curriculum around big ideas or themes. This might mean that instead of a chronological sweep of literature selections, the selections are chosen to focus on a consequential topic (e.g., culture and identity). For young adolescents, that topic should be important to their lives (Strauss & Irvin, 2000). Conversation used in this way means more than classroom discussion; it includes the reading and writing assignments of the year as well as the discourse about those assignments. In fact, the more reading, writing, and talking are interrelated, the better students get at doing all three (Nystrand, et al., 1998).

In all disciplines, it also matters what the conversation is about and how it is conducted. In effective classes, the conversations are about topics worthy of the discipline. In environmental studies, for example, conversations might revolve around conflicting concerns about land use (e.g., preservation of endangered species vs. economic development vs. recreation). In social studies, conversations revolve around sources of conflict within or between nations or groups. In mathematics, conversations might revolve around important concepts like ratio/proportion; the invention of fraction and decimal representation and what that allows us to do that would not be possible if we only had whole numbers; or recognizing and representing geometric and number patterns as a way of understanding the world around us. These conversations draw on and refer to materials that are the best choices for the purpose and topic in question, are up-to-date and well written, are rich enough to provoke real discussion about the topic, and offer differing perspectives, where appropriate. They help students relate what they are learning in one lesson or unit to what they have learned elsewhere—in a previous unit, a different text, a contemporary movie, a community or newsworthy event. When these conversations build on what students have learned before and lay the groundwork for future learning, students’ knowledge and learning accumulate throughout the year (Applebee, 2002). It is vital that teachers make those connections clear to their students and not just hope that they discover them for themselves. It is also essential that they teach students how to take part in the conversation (how to take a position; make and support an argument; gather, offer, and evaluate evidence), providing them with the knowledge, skills, and strategies necessary to participate on their own (Applebee, 2002).

Conclusion

Once middle grades teachers have students reading materials that engage their interest, they can keep them engaged through effective classroom practices. In particular, well-planned classroom discussions engage students’ interests and help them learn how to take part in a discussion as well as ways to think. In addition, such discussions have been shown to strengthen reading, writing, speaking, and thinking abilities that are so important for developing adolescents.

Note

1In a recent commentary in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Robert Sternberg calls teaching for such understanding an essential part of teaching for wisdom (Sternberg, 2002).

References


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