

Executive Summary: Negotiating Literature Discussions in Fifth Grade**Question**

What happens in my classroom when my fifth graders and I create the literature discussion guidelines together?

Rationale

Last year (2004 – 2005), I took a yearlong course offered by the Rochelle Lee Fund called Reading for Deeper Meaning (RDM) in which I learned how to facilitate literature discussions. This year I used some aspects of the RDM discussion model, and adapted other aspects to make the discussions more student-centered. Instead of telling the students my rules and expectations for discussions, I allowed for us to create the discussion guidelines together. This year I was able to step back and analyze the discussion process in a way I couldn't do during my first year teaching fifth grade. This project also gave my students many opportunities to grow as participants in discussions, an important skill for conversing about literature and other topics.

Data Collection Tools

- ***Discussion exit slips and video reflection sheets:*** One of the first things I had to do was to get the students thinking about different elements of a discussion. The exit slip and video reflection sheets had questions like “What did you notice”, “What was done well in the discussion?” and “What was not done well or could be improved?”
- ***Guideline checklist and rubrics based on guideline checklist results:*** After the students had had some experience noticing elements in a discussion we created a guideline checklist. The students and I ended up with 15 guidelines, We used the checklist after the next three literature discussions. Each person had to select two items that he/she thought went well and two items that could be better. I then used the guideline checklist results to create rubrics to assess our progress on the two most often selected items in each category.
- ***Videotape analysis:*** I reviewed the videotapes, paying attention to what went well, and what needed to be better. I also transcribed one of the videos to take a look at the participation levels and the types of support used by the students. For the last video I focused in and paid attention to 4 students' contributions to the discussions.
- ***Open-ended student reflections:*** In April I had students write open-ended reflections after a discussion. I wanted to see what they were thinking, and to have a more open-ended forum for them to tell me about what they felt was important.
- ***Self-assessment performance sheet:*** This time each student had to assess his/her own individual performance, instead of the class's. On the sheet I had them use the 1 to 4 scoring rubric to assess themselves on all the items on the class's guideline checklist.
- ***Teacher journal:*** In the journal I wrote down my questions, concerns, and comments about how the classroom discussions were proceeding. In the journal I also included in-class notes, including participation data that I took while discussions took place.

Findings**What should my role be in helping students create and carry out discussion guidelines?**

I found that one of my first responsibilities was to decide on some basic components of the discussions. I had to decide who could ask questions during a discussion and what kind of support was valid. Once the discussions started I had to focus my students' attention on various aspects of a discussion, like noting expectations for listeners and speakers, evaluating the class's performance, and noticing and improving one's own performance. I found that the level of direct instruction I provided was lower at the beginning of the project, then I realized I needed to be more explicit. As a class they were getting better at carrying on a discussion, but I felt not enough students were consistently improving. I responded by increasing the level of direct instruction by giving more direct feedback to the class, teaching additional minilessons on content-related guidelines, and at times interrupting discussions to encourage or discourage certain behaviors.

Which lessons do I need to teach in order for my students to engage in meaningful literature discussions?

I found that it was necessary to teach minilessons on both the “how” (interactional) and “what” (content-related) skills necessary to sustain a productive discussion. I found my students were capable of creating a list of guidelines without me telling them what my expectations were, but were inconsistent in holding themselves to following the guidelines. I found about one-third of my class had more ease with the content-related guidelines, and I needed to teach more of these skills in order for the other students to improve.

How does student reflection and evaluation affect the conversations?

As a result of students reflecting and evaluating themselves the class became partners in evaluation with me. I found them to be honest and cooperative, sometimes using “We” statements and pointing out inappropriate behaviors in each other. I was no longer the only one who cared what happened during our literature discussions.

Which strategies help reluctant or nonparticipatory students take part in the discussions?

In order to facilitate the participation of as many students as possible I used the following strategies: rating the book, having “Yes or no” sweeps around the room, generating questions and comments while reading a book, calling on certain students, and talking to students about their participation. Yet at the end of the project I found that I still had a substantial number of students, 9 out of 21, who rarely or never spoke up voluntarily during the discussions. I know that next year I have to work more closely with reluctant students to increase their participation.

What is the correlation in reading comprehension as observed in whole-class discussions and that measured by standardized tests?

I chose to study four of my students’ contributions to discussions and their scores on the reading comprehension standard of the Learning First Reading Assessment. For one of these students there was a positive correlation between the two, for another student there was a negative correlation between the two, and for two of the students there was no correlation between the two due to lack of contributions to the literature discussions. I found that instead of trying to determine a student’s reading comprehension ability with one type of activity or assessment, I have to use a variety of tools.

Limitations

One limitation of my study is the small sample size. I worked with one class of 21 fifth graders.

Policy Recommendations

- Teachers should have more opportunities to have professional development focused on facilitating literature discussions. Like with any other instructional model, teachers benefit from good professional development that is flexible and supportive. A teacher should be able to implement the techniques, then be able to adapt them to the needs of the children in front of her.
- Class size should be limited to 24 students. Smaller class size is essential in order for teachers to provide more individualized assessment and instruction in literature discussions.
- Students should have the opportunity to demonstrate reading comprehension in a variety of ways. Teachers and policy makers have to understand that teachers need to use a variety of assessments to determine what a student comprehends; no one tool such as standardized reading tests or literature discussion participation can give a complete picture of comprehension.
- Teachers should have access to video recording equipment. This tool has helped my students evaluate themselves and it’s helped me reflect upon and analyze my teaching practices.

Next Steps

Next year I plan on starting the discussions earlier in the year, and using this teaching technique more often with other subjects. I’m also going to use a variety of discussion sizes, such as half-class discussions and small group discussions, in order for students to have more independence and share contributions in a different setting. I will also start having individual discussion conferences.