Literary Conversations *in the* Classroom

Deepening Understanding *of* Nonfiction *and* Narrative

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Foreword by Diane Lapp

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From Parallel Sharing to Sophisticated Literary Conversations

Sammy: I thought it was interesting to learn that the water is filling up a hole where the Cardiff statue was found. How will the people who have never seen the statue know that it is real?
Ethan: Do you think people would believe you about the statue if you couldn't see it because it is buried in water?
Joshua: I am not sure. What would you do to let people know it is real? Could you save it from being buried?

This conversation occurred as 5th-grade students read *The Giant and How He Humbugged America* (Murphy, 2012), which is about the discovery of a 10-foot-tall man and whether he was a hoax or real. This single snippet showcased the thinking and question-posing that centered on their reading about the Cardiff Giant that was discovered in Cardiff, New York, by Gideon Emmons. Students talked, reread the book, and continued their conversation about this supposed giant discovery. Interestingly, the questions students posed were most likely not the ones a teacher might create, where he or she already knows the answer (Beers & Probst, 2013). The questions these students offered had no clear answers and offered space for multiple perspectives.

Often when listening in on students' conversations or seeing their drawing and writing about reading, teachers are concerned because their students do not produce the same quality conversations and responses to their reading as documented in an article or book. For example, Sammy, Ethan, and Joshua shared sophisticated questioning about their reading, and clearly listened closely and added on to what others said in their group. However, early in the year, these students did not *begin* their literary conversations by offering information,

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pondering what they were reading, and carefully listening to others in their group and building from their colleagues' thoughts. At first they shared their own thoughts and then the next student shared, and so the process went until they declared they were done. Each student offered information and other students in the group performed as an audience where they listened, but they did not really engage in conversation. Sometimes they didn't even listen attentively, because they were more concerned that they were going to be the next to share. We compared it to parallel play, where students are physically near one another but are not collaboratively participating. Procedurally, they participated in the format of a conversation where each student took a turn, but there was limited, if any, discussion among students.

This book, *Literary Conversations in the Classroom*, showcases how teachers can support students as they move from parallel sharing to sophisticated conversations. "Literary conversations" are those where a heterogeneous group of students read and participate in sophisticated conversation centered on their reading. Each student within the group has a responsibility or role that serves as part of the foundation of the conversation. For instance, one student might share interesting vocabulary words, while another might focus on the setting and the emotions conveyed within it.

There have been other structures to support students in reading and conversations. For instance, book clubs (Raphael & McMahon, 1994) are constructed around small groups of students talking about their reading to support comprehension. Daniels (2002) has described literature circles where each student has a responsibility or role that enhances comprehension.

Literary conversations utilize what has been learned from these structures and build from this knowledge. For instance, literature circles and book clubs primarily rely on students reading narratives, while literary conversations support discussion of both narrative fiction and informational texts. Often book clubs and literature circles have students who are similar in reading ability or clustered together because they want to read the same book, while literary conversations include heterogeneous groups of students who vary in reading ability. Literature circles and book clubs also often let students select the book for the group. Literary conversations involve the teacher selecting the books for reading because the teacher wants students to investigate thematic concepts, a genre, or an author, and also wants to support academic standards expectations. Additionally, the teacher creates groupings of students so that they support one another, have

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representation at various reading levels, and can work together cohesively. Choice in reading happens for students during independent reading, rather than during this instructional practice.

Within this book are pragmatic discussions of how to model, mentor, and support students in moving to quality conversations grounded in their writing and drawing about their reading. We share vivid examples of students participating in literary conversations to make this instructional practice come to life. We show how writing and drawing serve as the foundation or the stimulus for students to participate in literary conversations. We share information about forming and managing groups, selecting fiction and nonfiction books, and explicitly teaching the ways to respond to text, and then provide examples of student writing and drawing about their reading that grounded the literary conversations. These descriptions and resources provide the necessary support for teachers to successfully engage their own students in literary conversations.

WHY LITERARY CONVERSATIONS ARE IMPORTANT

Unfortunately, student conversations are rare in classrooms (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). And yet, conversation is at the heart of creating meaning. For most students, their teachers do the majority of the talking while the students listen, and this situation is even more common for low-income students and students learning English as a new language (Weber et al., 2008). Wilhelm (2014) wrote, "American education is still dominated by information-transmission modes of teaching, and most classroom discussions are thinly veiled lectures" (p. 75). And even when students are asked to talk, they are rarely involved in lengthy conversations about topics over time. Typically, teachers encourage students to turn-and-talk or share/pair, but it is for a limited time and only about one topic; then the conversation is over and students never return to this thinking again.

Students need to try on their thinking with others and ponder what they are reading to develop understanding. In essence, they need to inquire, think, write, draw, and talk about important topics to make meaning. Keene (2008) observed that meaning is created through conversation where students talk, discover other interpretations, and then search for clarity surrounding meaning. Peterson and Eeds (2007) wrote, "Each reader interprets the text in the light of his or her lived or imaginary life, culture, background, hopes, fears, and,

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at times, guilt" (p. 13). So imagine small groups of students talking about their reading where each student shares unique understandings that are somewhat similar and/or different from the others in the group. Ponder how they talk, think, and reassess meaning as they listen to and learn from one another.

Zwiers and Crawford (2011) write, "Since the dawn of language, conversations have been powerful teachers. They engage, motivate, and challenge" (p. 1). Dialogue centered on reading allows for inquiry and co-construction of meaning (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). Keene (2008) suggests that students need time to ponder and reflect on their thinking. And only infrequently in classrooms do teachers allow time for reflection, as they are time-pressured to complete curriculum. To accomplish this reflection they need to think about their ideas, share them with others, and then finally revise their thinking or understanding based on this feedback. This vision of learning is quite different from the commonplace in schools, where the student is often the receiver of language, rather than the initiator. Because of curriculum demands, conversation is often lost when teachers feel that they have no time to allow students to talk. Classrooms run from one subject to the next to deliver standards, instead of incorporating the standards into authentic learning experiences where students are the leaders.

These literary conversations are not easy to develop with students, as they often initially respond with "I liked it" or "I didn't," with no supporting reasoning. Or they provide a reason that is not grounded in the text they just read. For example, many students make connections to the text, and conversation often turns to life events instead of being centered on the text. They haven't had practice with this type of thinking and sharing, and it shows in their initial attempts. Wilhelm (2014) and Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) suggest that to engage students with conversation, teachers must trust them and their capacity to make meaning. And this trust of students to make meaning is not prevalent in today's classrooms, so it takes time to develop. Students are more familiar with simple answers to relatively easy questions. They believe there is a simple right or wrong response. When teachers move away from this routine, students are often surprised and not fully prepared to work with ambiguity in meaning creation.

Within this book, we describe the important journey around how to move from simple, parallel conversations to those where students are eager to hear from their group members and are reluctant to leave their conversation when requested. We provide strategies that can support you when you are a bit frustrated with your students'

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entry-level conversations. We share many examples from Becky Barone's class to show how students engage in literary conversations. And best of all, you'll discover that these strategies have been used successfully with students in classrooms, students similar to the ones you teach.

CONSIDERING THE NAYSAYERS

Anyone who is a teacher or has worked with teachers knows that as soon as a teacher wants to try a new practice, other teachers might respond with, "We tried that before and it doesn't work." Or they might say, "It is too hard and students won't really talk about their book." Or they might suggest, "Students won't read the books, so why would you try to have them talk about books?" When these comments occur, it is probably best to just respond with "Thanks for your ideas" and then move on to try on literary conversations. Arguing why literary conversations are important for student learning and engagement probably won't change a teacher's beliefs. Because these conversations take time to develop and because teachers don't see change right away, they often quit. Seeing students participate in rich literary conversations might change the outcome, but these conversations take time and patience to develop. Once students in your class have reached a serious level of conversation, consider inviting a naysaying teacher to your class to just watch and enjoy how invested students have become in literary conversations.

Conversely, you may be worried about bringing in a new practice, as there is always some disequilibrium while the teacher and students become familiar with it. You may be worried about evaluation as you are attempting to develop the new practice. To counter this particular worry, it is important to share with the principal what the new practice is, why it is important, and what the development of the new practice might look like. Through this sharing, the principal can honor the work and support you through the sometimes frustrating initiation of a new practice.

To prepare for these potential criticisms, we offer reasons for why literary conversations are important to students. Get ready; there are many reasons for having students participate in literary conversations.

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- Literary conversations support students in developing face-to-face communication focused on creating meaning from reading (Putnam, 2000).
- Literary conversations allow students to consider multiple interpretations of a similar text (McCann, D'Angelo, Galas, & Greska, 2015).
- Through conversation, students develop the use of academic language and vocabulary (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2015).
- Literary conversations build background knowledge (Fisher & Frey, 2009).
- When listening to various interpretations of a text, students develop critical thinking (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).
- Literary conversations build community (Almasi et al., 2004).
- Literary conversations foster motivation to read and to participate in collaborative groupings (Guthrie, 2015).

This list focuses primarily on more general benefits from literary conversations. In Chapter 1, we share all the literacy strategies that are used by students as they engage in literary conversations. Through the use of these strategies, students gain in literacy knowledge and skill. As a teacher, you can refer to this list as a way to sustain your journey of bringing literary conversations to your classroom, especially on days when you are worried about your students' progress.

MEETING STANDARDS EXPECTATIONS

Teachers are expected to teach to standards, whether they be state standards, Common Core standards, or some other form. Although thinking about teaching with the standards in mind can be challenging, literary conversations around reading support many standards. And the best part is that multiple standards are met when students participate in literary conversations. Just consider the titles of the various Common Core English Language Arts standards. They include reading literature, reading informational text, reading foundational skills, writing, speaking and listening, and language. Clearly, literary conversations support each of these standards. For instance, when considering reading literature in grade 5, students are expected to:

1. Quote from a text when drawing inferences.

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2. Determine the theme of a story.
3. Compare and contrast characters.
4. Determine the meaning of words or phrases.
5. Explain how chapters or scenes contribute to the structure.
6. Determine point of view.
7. Analyze how visual elements contribute to meaning.
8. Compare stories within a genre.
9. Read and comprehend stories independently. (corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/5/)

Shifting from the Reading Literature standards to the Speaking and Listening Standards, it is even clearer how literary conversations support standards expectations. For example, in grade 5, students are expected to:

1. Come to a discussion having read and studied material. They are to use this preparation as a foundation for discussion.
2. Follow agreed-upon rules for discussion and carry out assigned roles.
3. Pose and respond to questions and elaborate on others' ideas.
4. Review key ideas and draw conclusions.
5. Summarize a text.
6. Summarize the points a speaker makes.
7. Report on a topic, present an opinion, and logically share facts and details from reading.
8. Include multimedia components in sharing ideas.
9. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts. (corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/5/)

A literary conversation supports each of these standards' expectations as students read, discuss, and write (or perhaps draw) responses. They examine characters, plot, and theme. What is more powerful, though, is that students examine a book collaboratively. They learn the standards, yes, and they also learn from one another as they come to understand others' perspectives about the reading selection. In addition to meeting the English Language Arts standards within their instruction, they do so in a social environment where they learn to communicate effectively. And as Beers and Probst (2013) note, reading is fundamentally a social act.

Standards are important to consider as you bring literary conversations to your classroom. You may also want to explore your state

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