Encouraging Whole-Class Literature Discussions with Respect and Rules

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One of my main goals as a high school English teacher is to create a respectful and enthusiastic classroom community where the students participate in in-depth discussions about literature. This kind of a classroom is important to create because according to Vygotsky’s theories, “language and social interaction directly contribute to the construction of knowledge . . . and put students in cognitively active role” (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010, p. 49). The more students participate in thoughtful group discussions about literature, the better their critical thinking skills about literature will be. The purpose of this research paper, therefore, is to determine how to keep students involved and engaged in classroom discussions about literature.

Many educators have researched this topic and published their findings in various journals. While the research methods varied and the classrooms studied differed in grade level, location and student populations, the articles revealed several teaching strategies and techniques in common that lead to increased student participation in discussions about literature. The articles stressed that teachers must be respectful of the students’ themselves and their ideas (Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008, p. 295-297, 304, 309-310), that there must be posted rules and guidelines for the discussions (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007, p. 25; Eddleston & Philippot, 2002, p. 57-59; Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008, p. 304-308), the teacher should use indeterminate language when talking about literature (Eddleston & Philippot, 2002, p. 50; Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 600-601), the teacher should allow time for students to think about the literature through journaling or smaller discussions before engaging in large group discussions (Eddleston & Philippot, 2002, p. 55-57; Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 604) and the teacher should choose engaging and intellectually stimulating literature (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007, p. 25-26; Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008, p. 299).

One of the most important aspects of classroom culture that a teacher must have in place in order to have productive classroom discussions about literature is respect; the teacher must respect the students as people and respect the students’ thoughts and ideas, and the teacher must foster respect among the students for one another (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008; Townsend & Pace, 2005). According to one article, there is a positive correlation between the respect the teacher shows the students and the amount of respect the students show one another (Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008). Matsumura, Slater and Crosson explained that, “Students imitate the discourse they here in classrooms, and teachers serve as exemplars of behavior. We found that more respectful behavior on the part of teachers was associated with more positive interactions among students, whereas disrespectful teacher behavior appeared to be instrumental in promoting student negativism” (Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008, p. 310). The respectful environment, in turn, “was associated . . . with the extent of support students gave for their contributions in class discussions” (Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008, p. 304).

Related to modeling respectful behavior for students, the articles suggested that teachers post specific rules and expectations for discussions. Matsumura, Slater and Crosson found that the rules a teacher posted herself were especially beneficial for classroom discussion. The rules were in the front of the classroom and they stated, “Everyone participates; makes connections to characters, other books, or self; cites text to back up statements; brings others in; stays on topic, validates contributions of others; analyzes what the author is doing; is respectful; asks questions, looks for clarification; takes turns; doesn’t yell; uses conversation starters; [there are] no right or wrong answers” (Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008, p. 307-308). The authors described these rules as “exemplary” because they focused on the content of the discussion and the way the students should behave, which “helped create a safe climate in which students could contribute” (Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008, p. 308). Townsend and Pace and Clarke and Holwadel offered a different method of creating discussion rules, writing that students could create their own discussion rules to follow during class discussions about literature (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007, p. 25; Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 603). Yet another method for establishing the guidelines for classroom discussion is for the teacher to give each student a “discussion rubric” so the student can gauge his or her performance in the class (Eddleston & Philippot, 2002, p. 58). For example, Eddleston and Philippot liked the discussion rubric that gave scores from five to one, with five being the best, that each student in an English course had. The description of level five read,

“This discussant accepts responsibility for making meaning out of literature. He/she consistently demonstrates a careful reading of the text and makes insightful comments that significantly contribute to our understanding of a reading. The discussant refers to specifics from the class text, compares and contrasts that text with related texts, and makes connections with personal experiences and social and cultural issues. A respectful listener who avoids monopolizing the conversation, he/she sometimes pulls together and reflects on ideas that have surfaced in the inquiry discussions and may also ask relevant follow-up questions, thereby pulling other students into the discussion” (Eddleston & Philippot, 2002, p. 58).

Much like the successful rules described by Matsumura, Slater and Crosson, this rubric addresses the ideal content of a student’s statements in class and his or her behavior toward classmates.

When initiating classroom discussions of literature, the authors of the articles stressed that the teacher should use “tentative” or indeterminate language (Eddleston & Philippot, 2002, p. 50; Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 600). The authors stated that when the teacher uses phrases such as “I think,” “I don’t know,” “I’m not sure,” and “maybe” that “express uncertainty” (Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 600), the teacher opens the door to critical literary discussions among students (Eddleston & Philippot, 2002, p. 50; Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 600). This is because students “begin to see that fiction can be approached from numerous angles” (Eddleston & Philippot, 2002, p. 50) and because the language “reveal[s] a stance among the members of [the] class that can signal an openness to multiple perspectives and possibilities” (Eddleston & Phillipot, 2002, p. 600).

Another teaching method that allows students to offer different opinions on literature and thus participate in classroom discussions about literature is to give them time to think about the literature. This can be accomplished by requiring the students to write about or think about the literature on their own or in small groups prior to large classroom discussions. The authors pointed to reading journals (Eddleston & Philippot, 2002, p. 56), dialogue journals (Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 604) and question generation about literature in groups (Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 604), among other things, as techniques that allow the students to think critically about the literature before they participate in classroom discussion. As pointed out by Eddleston and Philippot, with these activities, “teachers can help both extroverted and introverted students prepare to engage in more thoughtful, provocative literature discussions” (2002, p. 55). Finally, teachers must choose interesting and thought provoking literature to keep students interested in the books and interested in discussing the books in class (Clark & Holwadel, 2007, p. 25-26; Matsumura, Slater & Crosson, 2008, p. 299).

In my classroom observations, I have not seen the teachers employ many of these techniques. While they are both respectful of their students and model appropriate behavior for the students, they do not engage in all of the teaching techniques that encourage successful classroom discussions. Only the middle school teacher has rules posted in her classroom. The posting, however, is very small and in the corner of the classroom. I have never heard her point them out or seen the students reading over them. One of the teachers I observe teachers grades nine through twelve and the other teaches grades seven and eight. Interestingly, in both classrooms, the teachers routinely request that the students move their desks into a circle for class reading and discussion. Townsend and Pace pointed out that circles are a good arrangement for facilitating classroom discussions (2005, p. 603). Once in the circles, however, no actual discussions take place. Each teacher begins to read aloud from a book while the students follow along, and then the students take turn reading a page or two around the circle. Every few minutes, both teachers pause the students to ask them a question about the text. These questions are not designed to facilitate critical discussion about the literature, rather they are designed to elicit a specific answer from the student. Once the teacher guides the student to the correct answer, she resumes reading aloud. For example, as I have discussed previously, the high school teacher asked what an observation made by a character revealed about his personality. She asked a series of questions to get to the answer that the statement revealed that the character thought he was better than other people, but after the brief discussion, she returned to reading. This is a pattern I frequently observe in the high school classroom. The teacher does not ask questions that are designed to make the students think critically about literature or that are designed to get the students talking about how they interpret what is going on in the books they read. Even in the advanced literature class, the same thing occurs. Although the teacher asks more difficult questions about the text, they are designed to produce a specific answer, and the students do not offer any analysis that is different than that of the teacher. In this respect, the teacher keeps the students in the role of “‘received knowers’” rather than active participants in their education (Townsend & Pace, 2005, p. 599).

There are times when she could press for more discussion and different viewpoints from the students, but the opportunities pass without her doing so. I recently observed her give the ninth grade class a list of principle with space next to each where they could write examples from To Kill a Mockingbird where they have seen them in play or represented. There were four statements for the students to work with, one of which said, for example, “It is usually better to tell the truth.” The students were placed in small groups and each assigned one of the statements to write about with each other. As she walked around the groups, the teacher asked if they were finding examples of the principles in the book. Many times the students offered examples that they had found, and the teacher simply responded “No, that’s not what I’m thinking of” or “No.” Other times, she did praise students for discovering something she had not thought of, but it seems that she lost out on valuable analysis of the book with the students to whom she responded “No.” By pressing the students to tell her why they thought an example was applicable to a statement, she could have further encouraged their critical thinking skills. The exams the teacher gives the students require them to think critically about themes and characters, but she does not require them to do this during times when there could be group discussion.

The middle school teacher does approximately the same thing during the portions of the class devoted to the books they are reading. During the breaks in reading in her classroom, the teacher typically asks what a word means or what part of a book they are reading. She does often begin the class period with a journal entry about the book, but does not use what the students have written to engage them in discussion about the book. The students write about a specific prompt and then put the journals away to being reading aloud as a group.

The teacher has initiated book clubs within her classroom that might prove to be very successful in terms of facilitating student participation in-group discussions about the books. The teacher divided the classroom into four groups or four or five students each and assigned them a book, and not all of the groups have the same books. The students were told that there would be five discussion days between the day the books were assigned and the final exam about the books. The students decided how many pages to read before each discussion day and, at least in part, what they think is important to discuss. On the days that they do not have a group discussion, the students write in their reading journals about what they have read. They divide a page into quarters and devote each quarter to a separate task. They write an important quote, they draw an image, they ask a question and they describe a character in the quarters. This is a very effective way to help the students think about the literature so that they have good group discussions about it. I have not yet observed any of the discussion days for the book clubs, but I am very interested to see how much the students participate in the group discussion days. At this point, I need to spend more time observing the classrooms and talking to the teachers about their goals in their classrooms.

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