

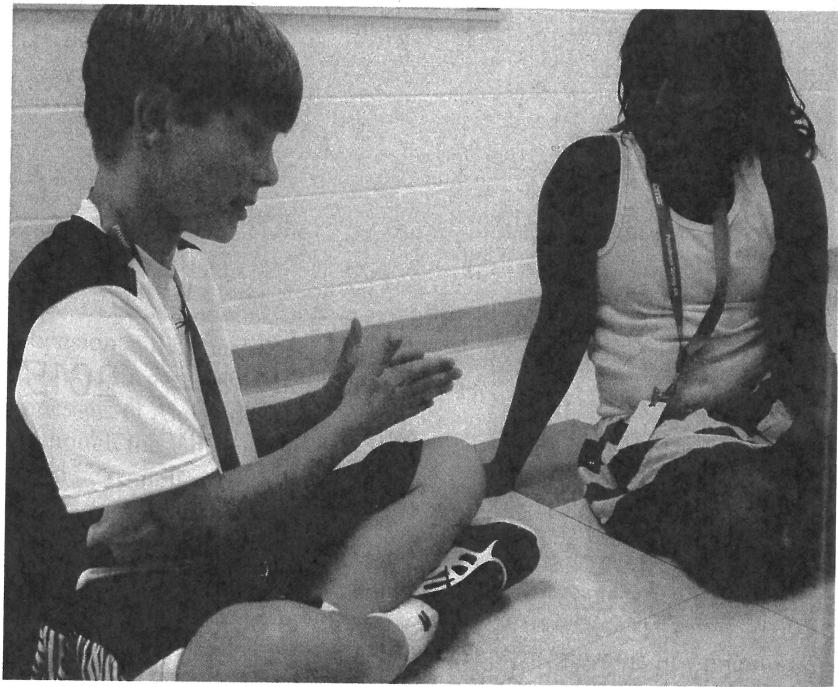
From Mindless to Meaningful

Whole-class discussions can be valuable rituals that students look forward to.

**Laura Billings
and Terry Roberts**

When teachers lead that ubiquitous classroom routine, the whole-class discussion, they do so with the best of intentions. They hope that discussions will engage students and provide useful information about students' learning. Unfortunately, traditional class discussions sometimes end up sounding like the monotonous drone of Charlie Brown's teacher.

How can we create powerful discussions that encourage meaningful student interactions and collaborative thinking? In Paideia schools, we've seen many teachers across grade levels build successful whole-class discussions by attending to three important



features: text selection, questioning strategies, and ongoing assessment of speaking and listening skills.

Choose a Strong Text

Teachers set the stage for an engaging, meaningful discussion when they select and use a tangible human artifact, or text, that represents key

values and ideas of the unit of study. This text—a speech, map, sculpture, poem, and so on—serves as the common reference point for the discussion. With such a reference point, students can practice citing evidence from a credible source.

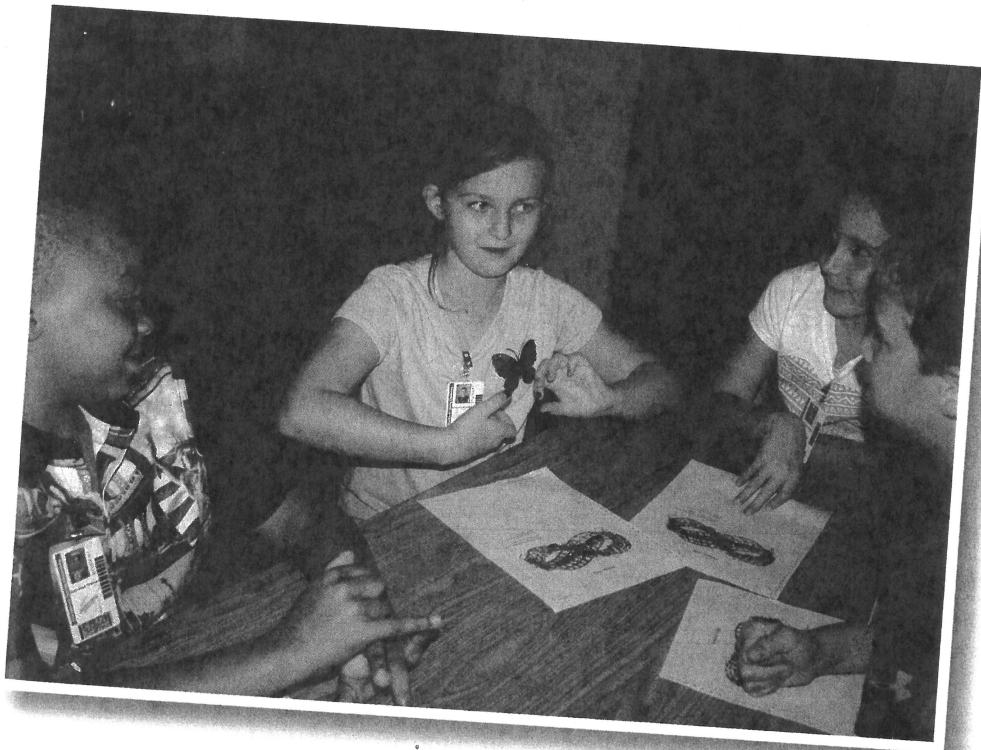
A successful text enables students to work on "academic skills and content

that are basic but also encompass big ideas in the disciplines" (Phillips & Wong, 2010, p. 38). These big ideas make the hard work of dialogue worthwhile for students.

For example, in a history course, students might use the Pledge of Allegiance to explore such concepts as *allegiance*, *citizenship*, *justice*, and *liberty*. In chemistry class, discussion of the periodic table of the elements might raise questions about *element*,

transformative process that James E. Zull (2002) describes as intellectual "control passing from others to ourselves" (p. 33). Discussion texts are more likely to have this kind of transformative effect if they are

- Rich in ideas and values.
- Complex and intellectually challenging.
- Relevant to the curriculum and to the participants.
- Essentially ambiguous.



Students in a Paideia elementary school discuss complex texts, including a Cherokee folktale (at left) and the Möbius strip (above).

nature, *science*, and *symbol*. And a mathematics class might use the blueprints for the Sistine Chapel as the centerpiece of a discussion about *infinity*, *quantity*, and *space*.

In authentic discussion, students experience the thrill of discovering and constructing meaning. They take ownership of knowledge in a

A single sentence from the Declaration of Independence demonstrates all four characteristics:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

In this one sentence, Thomas Jefferson introduces at least six great ideas: *truth*, *equality*, *God*, *life*, *liberty*, and *happiness*. Any one of these ideas is complex in isolation; taken together, they are supremely challenging. Further, they are as relevant today as they were more than 200 years ago when Jefferson captured them on paper. Finally, there is good reason to believe that Jefferson chose the term *happiness* precisely because it meant so many different things to so many different people—a form of deliberate, rhetorical ambiguity.

In authentic discussion, **students experience the thrill of discovering and constructing meaning.**

A strong text anchors the discussion while simultaneously making it more accessible. The facilitator can prevent students from drifting too far from the main focus of the dialogue by consistently referring them back to the text itself. And because all the students in the class have been led through multiple close readings of the text (regardless of their relative reading skills or experience outside the classroom), they should all have something important to say in response to it.

Craft Meaningful Questions

In authentic text-based discussions, teacher talk is limited to and carefully focused on asking thoughtful, open-ended questions that prompt students

to seek understanding, not arrive at a predetermined answer. These planned questions center around the ideas and values embedded in the text. They give shape (a beginning, a middle, and an end) to the discussion.

The *opening question* is designed to have students identify the key points of the text and to lure all participants into the discussion. This question often has two parts, which require two different types of response. All students are expected to share their concise responses to the first part of the question in a round-robin response. Then, individual students address the second part of the question spontaneously, creating a dialogue that weaves ideas together.

For example, a two-part opening question might be, *What is the most important phrase in the Declaration of Independence? And why?* If the text is the Cherokee folktale “How the Terapin Beat the Rabbit,” the opening question might be, *Which character could you defend? And why?* If the text is the periodic table of elements, an opening question might be, *Which element plays the most important role in nature? And why?* Notice that the first question is open-ended, with no right or wrong answer; it requires only a basic level of comprehension to reply, so all participants can feel safe taking this first step.

The middle section of the discussion is framed by *core questions* that require students to analyze the details of the text. The cognitive demand of these questions is typically much greater than that of the opening questions, forcing students to wrestle with the text’s language, structure, and intent. Because core questions require students to delve deeply into the text, the teacher may choose to pause the discussion to have students think silently and reread closely, do a short bit of

writing, or have a short paired discussion to give the students the time and space for deeper understanding.

A sample core question for the Declaration of Independence might be, *According to the text, what is the relationship between “certain unalienable Rights” and the “pursuit of Happiness”?* This question commonly prompts students to wrestle with ways a government supports or inhibits the individual. A student may note that Jefferson was borrowing from John Locke’s (1690/1980) ideas about the legitimate purpose of government as

responsibility of a scientist today?

The closing question is the time for personal opinion and reflection. Students often want to talk about personal reactions to the text early in the discussion. But a wise facilitator postpones the consideration of personal relevance until the end of the hard work of close reading is complete, so that students fully understand the text itself before speculating about relevance to their own experiences.

In *The Paideia Proposal*, Mortimer Adler (1982) notes additional characteristics of effective questions:

Teachers set the stage for a meaningful discussion when they select and use a tangible human artifact—or text—that represents key values and ideas.

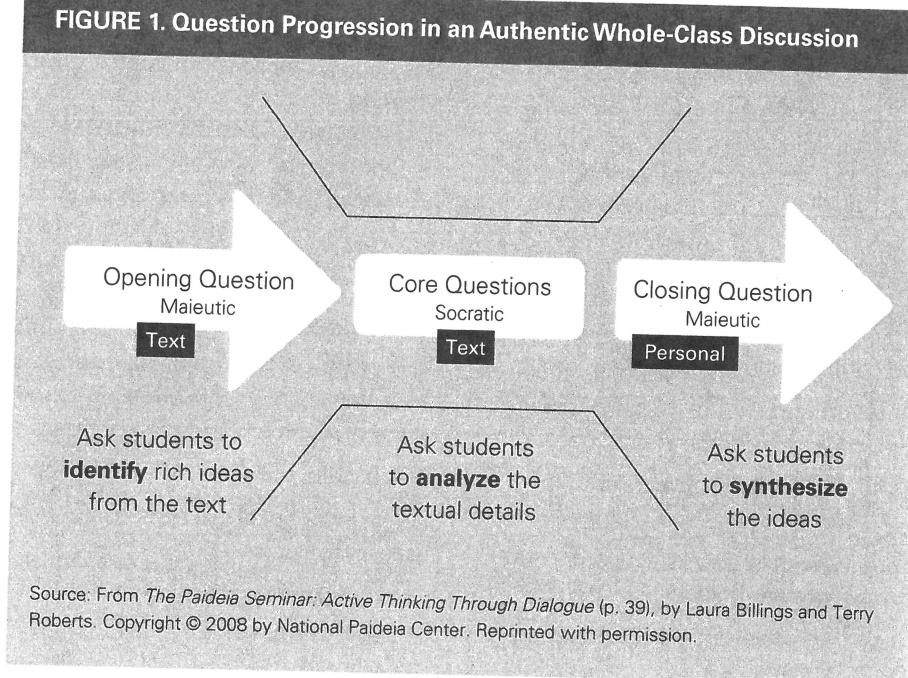
protecting life, liberty, and property, raising the issue of why Jefferson changed “property” to “pursuit of Happiness.” The discussion might then extend into an examination of happiness as a natural state, compared to happiness as property that is received, earned, or bought.

Toward the end of the discussion period, the facilitator poses a *closing question* that asks students to make personal meaning from the ideas in the text. For example, a final question on the Declaration of Independence might be, *What is important for us to remember about the Declaration of Independence?* If students discussed “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the closing question could be, *Why do we sing the Star-Spangled Banner at public events?* A closing question on a passage from Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* might be, *What does this story tell us about the*

for facilitating discussion. He advocates using both *Socratic* and *maieutic* questions to guide student participation. In general, Socratic teaching is a process for helping students examine contradictions in their thinking so they can more deeply understand universal truth. More specifically, *Socratic* questions demand deep analysis of the text and its concepts. In comparison, *maieutic* questions are those that help students recognize and articulate their own truth. *Maieutic* comes from the same root as *midwifery* and means to help another give birth—in this instance, to his or her ideas. In short, *Socratic* questions are focused on universal truth, and *maieutic* questions are about individual truths.

What is the most important phrase in the Declaration of Independence? is a *maieutic* question. The participant

FIGURE 1. Question Progression in an Authentic Whole-Class Discussion



may choose from among all the sentences in the document and provide his or her own rationale for the selection. In contrast, *What does Jefferson mean by “a long train of abuses and usurpations”?* is a more Socratic question. Jefferson deliberately selected these words to convey the values of the emerging nation. Socratic questions help students develop the standard readings of texts. Experienced facilitators combine Socratic and maieutic questions to honor both the individual students and the text.

When we overlay the distinction between maieutic and Socratic queries on the sequence of opening, core, and closing questions (see fig. 1), we find that asking a maieutic question to start, followed by several Socratic questions, works well to engage the students in an increasingly sophisticated discussion. After students engage in the deep textual analysis required by the Socratic core questions, the final stage of the dialogue should open up for personal application elicited

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by a maieutic closing question. This sequence of questions, repeated in discussion after discussion, creates a valuable classroom ritual that helps students think deeply and feel safe in sharing their thoughts.

Focus on Skills

Successful whole-class discussions demand assessment of speaking and listening skills before and after the formal, structured dialogue.

Beforehand, the teacher invites students to reflect on and assess their own personal speaking and listening habits and to identify a personal participation goal. The rubric in Figure 2 (p. 64), which is aligned with the Common Core State Standards, is a useful tool for this purpose. For example, a reticent student may select the personal articulation goal *speak voluntarily two times*. Similarly, a talkative student may decide to work on *refer to the text at least once*, an explanation goal.

In addition to encouraging individual participation goals, the teacher either assigns a group discussion goal or facilitates agreement on one. For example, with young students or groups just beginning the process, a group goal may be *look at the person speaking* (attention) or *give way if you start talking at the same time someone else does* (connection). Ideally, the teacher displays the group goal prominently so that everyone can refer to it throughout the discussion.

After the dialogue and before the end of the period, students reflect on their goals and their participation during this particular discussion. Students complete a short, written self-assessment, and then the teacher leads the group in a brief oral assessment of how well the group achieved its goal.

Assessment of speaking and listening skills may also take place during the discussion itself. For example, if there is too much talking and too little thinking, the teacher might call a time-out from the formal discussion and remind students of their goals for this specific discussion. Slowing down like this helps deepen students' self-awareness as they recall their personal goals. With younger students, the teacher may actively coach discrete speaking and listening behaviors—for example, by repeating a group communication goal (“Let’s

FIGURE 2. Paideia Seminar Speaking and Listening Rubric

Skills	Not Yet	Proficient	Advanced
Attention	Does not look at the person speaking. Occasionally turns and talks to person sitting nearby while another person is speaking.	Looks at the person speaking during most of the discussion. Rarely talks while another is speaking.	Looks at the person speaking during the discussion. Does not talk while another is speaking.
Engagement	Does not take notes related to the ideas being discussed.	Occasionally takes notes related to the ideas being discussed. Gives way to another as a way of sharing the talk time.	Consistently takes notes related to the ideas being discussed. Gives way to another as a way of sharing the talk time.
Articulation	Makes barely audible statements.	Makes clear and accurate statements. Generally speaks at appropriate pace and volume. Uses relevant vocabulary and grammar.	Makes clear and accurate statements. Consistently speaks at appropriate pace and volume. Uses relevant vocabulary and grammar.
Explanation (Justification)	Makes simple, somewhat unrelated or repetitive points/statement.	Provides points/statements about the discussion topic, noting details related to sequence, category, purpose, or point of view. Refers to the text or another relevant source.	Provides insight related to fallacies within the text. Tests assumptions and explores inferences. Refers to the text or another relevant source.
Expansion	Draws conclusions based on a single perspective.	Considers another point of view and states personal bias.	Illuminates relevance; notes positive and negative implications. Acknowledges difference in own perspectives—before and now. Adds to previous statement by offering a more global/holistic interpretation.
Connection	Does not ask questions. Does not refer to what else has been said.	Asks authentic questions. Paraphrases what else has been said.	Refers to another facet of an idea or another's comment. Considers multiple points of view while acknowledging personal bias. Asks authentic, thought-provoking, open-ended questions.

look at the person speaking" or "Remember to first say back what you heard someone else say").

A Natural Part of Classroom Life

Participating in structured, whole-class discussions may be one of the most meaningful learning experiences a student enjoys during the school day. Such discussions promote genuine, intellectual learning that not only builds important individual skills, but also can be a profoundly unifying experience, strengthening the sense of community within the classroom.

When we advocate making whole-class discussion an instructional ritual, we mean that teachers should use it consistently and often, incorporating discussion as a natural part of classroom life. If students participate

in the same type of formal dialogue several times a month, they learn to trust both the process and the teacher-facilitator. They also learn the habits of mind consistent with collaborative inquiry, which leads to genuine understanding.

As Mortimer Adler (1988) wrote, our ultimate goals are to help our students be citizens of the world, earn a decent living, and lead good lives. Collaborative thinking and effective communication are skills that not only help students learn in the classroom, but also resonate throughout life and in every area of human endeavor.**EL**

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