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Discussion to promote inference making

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Discussion to promote inference making

Abstract

Using discussion as an integral part of the reading program is a natural outgrowth of real literature in the classroom. Children need opportunities to engage in conversations about their literature experiences in order to enrich and refine their understanding of them. Teachers can facilitate discussions that promote in-depth understandings of reading experiences by providing children with opportunities to make inferences. As a result, children become accustomed to bringing their prior knowledge to reading experiences to discover inferred meanings, thus extending their thinking-language abilities.

Discussion to Promote Inference Making

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Abstract

Using discussion as an integral part of the reading program is a natural outgrowth of real literature in the classroom. Children need opportunities to engage in conversations about their literature experiences in order to enrich and refine their understanding of them. Teachers can facilitate discussions that promote in-depth understandings of reading experiences by providing children with opportunities to make inferences. As a result, children become accustomed to bringing their prior knowledge to reading experiences to discover inferred meanings, thus extending their thinking-language abilities.

An interest in classroom discussion has emerged as evidenced in professional literature. The traditional notion of discussion, called recitation, encouraged little student participation. The teacher controlled the interaction by determining the questions and the correctness of the responses. The teacher's questioning determined much of the meaning developed by the students. In contrast, Almasi (1996) defines discussion as a "forum for collaboratively constructing meaning and for sharing responses" (p. 2). This recent approach to discussion allows students to interact using natural conversations and meaningful dialogue to gain new insights (Wells, 1995).

Using discussion in literature study is basic and sensible. The teacher's modeling of responses and questions can set the stage for valuable discussions. The teacher can talk with children about a book they have read, listening carefully to the students' responses and exploring with them the meanings they have gained from the reading experience. The teacher, according to Wells (1995), can offer three kinds of comments to nurture children's discussions: comments of encouragement to keep the conversation going, comments of syntheses to maintain the conversation and give confidence in using language to explore ideas, and comments of inquiry to allow the teacher to model thought processes and share ideas. All the while, the teacher demonstrates a personal search for meaning

through sharing what the book meant as a fellow reader (Eeds & Peterson, 1997).

Gambrell (1996) observes that the resurgence of interest in discussion has surfaced for several reasons: The emphasis on the meaningful integration of listening, speaking, and reading tasks as a means of advancing thinking abilities is reflected in the increasing interest in discussion. Reading programs are using more literature as their foundation with related student-centered activities that include responses in light of their background of experiences and interpretation of what an author has written. Such experiences encourage children to construct knowledge and to create personal meanings. Thus, discussion takes on a more important role as students participate in literature circles, book clubs, and reader-response groups.

By exchanging reactions to literature and strategies for handling the text, students extend their own learning strategies. Therefore, through discussion, children have opportunities for cognitive and social-emotional growth. From a cognitive standpoint, students can learn from one another through their interactions by verbalizing their own understandings, opinions, and uncertainties about text. From a social-emotional perspective, students involved in discussions by the peers and the teacher can enhance a child's pleasure and increase motivation to read. As a

result of discussion experiences, children make discoveries about themselves as individuals and learn to take responsibility for their own learning (Almasi, 1996).

Studies by Horowitz and Freeman (1995) suggest these conclusions about discussion: Discussions have the potential for increasing children's curiosity, broadening their interest, and restructuring their preferences for text. Discussions are affected by group size. A small discussion group, five or six students, provides individual students with more opportunities to speak and interact. Discussions are extended by effective leadership, whether teacher-led, student-led, or shared leadership. Students profit from independence to explore on their own during discussions, yet they also benefit from teacher guidance. Discussions are also affected by the cultural background of the participants. Delpit (1990) also recognizes the difficulty of dealing with diversity in discussion, whether social, racial or cultural.

The teacher assumes many roles in the discussion process. Foremost, the teacher needs to provide a safe, predictable environment in which children can explore ideas and issues. Another teacher responsibility is to create a nurturing community of learners. The members of such a community can find meaningful ways to use language to learn about themselves, others, and the world of literature (Wells, 1995;

Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). Through discussion, the teacher can also support the development of more high-level thinking-language abilities (Gambrell, 1996).

Rationale for Discussion Groups in Title I Reading

Many students placed in Title I reading programs have difficulty comprehending written text. Discussion groups can assist these students in grasping the main ideas and expanding and clarifying meanings. Through discussion, the students can help each other make connections with the text and promote greater pleasure in reading literature.

Literature discussion groups can result in increased participation that can lead to improved self-esteem among low-ability learners. These students, just as any other students, can respond to text with demonstration and practice. As long as the participants can back up their opinions with evidence, they are viewed as being correct and successful. With their increased confidence comes a higher responsibility toward learning (Routman, 1991; Kamber, 1995).

Using Discussion Groups Among Title I Students to Promote Inference-making

Inference has been defined as meaning derived from evidence (Johnson & Johnson, 1988). In reading, making an inference is using the text and the illustrations in combination with the readers' prior knowledge

and experience to understand what the author meant when he/she wrote the passage. While engaged in the reading process, readers must pay attention to the clues in the text and illustrations and integrate them with what they already know (Johnson & Johnson, 1988).

Humans make many different types of inferences. In a recent study, Johnson, Johnson, Harms & Lettow (1997) categorized inferences made by readers in the following way:

1. Action: What is happening?
2. Location: Where something is happening?
3. Time: When something is happening?
4. Characterization: What the character is like?
5. Object: What is the object?
6. Category: What group something belongs to?
7. Cause and Effect: Why something happened or what will happen?
8. Problem/Solution: What is wrong or what will need to happen?
9. Feeling/Attitude: How a character feels?
10. Figurative Language: What association do these words have with the ultimate meaning?
11. Theme: What is the message of the text?

Since completing this study, these researchers have also suggested that readers may infer theme: the underlying meaning of the passage.

Students in Title I reading programs need encouragement to ascertain higher-level meanings in text. Teachers can guide students to relate their backgrounds of experiences to the clues in the text that reveal the author's intended meaning.

A four-step process for teaching inference making is presented by Johnson & Johnson (1988). They suggest that the teacher model inference making by presenting a short passage and then showing students how textual clues are used to make inferences. The second step involves students analyzing a passage for clues that aid inference making. Next, the students are asked to apply what they have practiced by making inferences when shown a passage one sentence at a time. Students have to confirm, reject, or modify their initial inference as more text is supplied. Lastly, students are asked to transfer the task of inference making as they engage in other reading experiences.

A Project: Using Discussion to Promote Inference Making

Based on a review of professional literature, a program for engaging readers in inference making should include many aspects. First, readers should be introduced to the concept of inference making and the

need for engaging in it. Teachers should model inference tasks and directly teach them to children through different literature experiences. Second, strategies that enable students to see how inferences are made should be introduced and practiced. Another strategy is noting clues found in the book (text and pictures), those found in one's head (knowledge and experience), and the inferences that result from these experiences (Johnson & Johnson, 1988).

Since inference-making is a continuous process and is required so frequently in quality picture books, students can be presented with inference-making opportunities almost every time they are read to or they read themselves (Johnson et al., 1997). Initially, these opportunities should be presented and guided by the teacher. The ultimate goal should be for students to engage in transferring what they have experienced to their own reading. Students need to be involved in discussions about literature that allow them to heighten their understanding of text.

Reading teachers can provide much practice and application of inference making. Such instructional practices presented on a regular basis should lead to proficient readers. Children need to learn to read in more ways than simply decoding and recalling facts. They need to experience literature by relating it to their personal experiences and then

by extending its meaning through discussions in supportive reading communities.

For third grade students in my Title I reading program, I have selected several themes across the curriculum that can be enhanced by presenting picture book experiences. These works contain opportunities for inference making. I have made note of key inferences a reader would need to make in order to derive the author's intended meaning from the text. The types of inference tasks were related to the particular strengths of the works. For each theme, one of the picture books was selected to develop into a teacher-directed lesson on inference making. The themes accompanied with the annotated lists of picture books and their inference-making potential, along with the teacher-directed lessons, are presented in the next pages. In selecting the literature works, the reference Picture Books to Enhance the Curriculum, developed by Harms & Lettow (1996), was used.

Themes, Related Picture Books, and

Inference-making Potential

Quilts

Flournoy, V. (1985). The Patchwork Quilt. J. Pickney, (Il.), New York: Dial. When Grandmother becomes ill, Tanya and her mother help

complete the quilt she has started. The quilt is made of fabric pieces representing family experiences from the past.

Key Inference Possibility: Cause and effect—Why did the second mother re-sew the quilt for her own daughter?

Mills, L. (1991). The Rag Coat. Boston: Little, Brown. Minna is deeply hurt when the other children at school make fun of her new patchwork coat. After she shares the children's stories associated with the patches, they also develop an appreciation for the special coat.

Key Inference Possibility: Feeling/Attitude—How is Minna feeling (at various points in the story)?

Grandparents

Bunting, E. (1989). The Wednesday Surprise. D. Carrick, (Il.), New York: Clarion. A girl and her grandmother work every Wednesday evening on a surprise for her father's birthday. The entire family is surprised at Dad's gift. The reader will be too.

Key Inference Possibility: Action—What are the young girl and her grandmother doing? This question would be asked during the first reading before the ending is read.

Ackerman, K. (1988). Song and Dance Man. S. Gammell, (Il.), New York: Knopf. A grandfather shares his memories with his grandchildren by performing his vaudeville act for them.

Key Inference Possibilities: Object—What is a vaudeville stage?

Feeling/Attitude—What is the

grandfather thinking about as he looks up the attic stairs at the end of the story?

Rylant, C. (1982). When I Was Young in the Mountains. D. Goode, (Il.), New York: Dutton. The pleasures of growing up in the mountains are described, including special memories of grandparents.

Key Inference Possibility: Time—When does this story take place?

De Paola, T. (1981). Now One Foot, Now the Other. New York: Putnam. A young boy and his grandfather are close friends. The grandfather plays with the child and helps him learn to walk. Later, the boy assists his grandfather in learning to walk after a stroke.

Key Inference Possibility: Cause and Effect—What effect does the grandfather's stroke have on his relationship with his grandson?

African-American Culture

Johnson, A. (1990). When I am Old With You. D. Doman, (Il.), New York: Orchard. A young child imagines the things that she can do with her grandfather when she is old.

Key Inference Possibility: Action—Are the actions in the story things that will occur when the child is old like her grandfather or are they things that she will do now as a child? Explain.

Hoffman, M. (1991). Amazing Grace. C. Binch, (Il.), New York: Dial.

A young black girl is told by her classmates that she cannot play the part she wants in the school play. What will Grace do?

Key Inference Possibility: Action—What will Grace do when she is faced with other people's viewpoints of her wishes? This question would be asked at the beginning of the story during the first reading.

Ringgold, F. (1993). Dinner at Aunt Connie's House. New York: Hyperion. Melody's summer visit with her family at Aunt Connie's house becomes very special when she becomes acquainted with an adopted cousin and they discover 12 talking portraits of famous African-American women in the attic.

Key Inference Possibility: Characterization—What similarities do you see among the 12 African-American women that Aunt Connie chose to paint?

Howard, E. H. (1991). Aunt Flossie's Hats (And Crab Cakes Later). J. Ransome, (Il.), New York: Clarion. Two young African-American girls look forward to their Sunday afternoon visits with Great-aunt Flossie, who shares with them her collection of hats and the experiences associated with them.

Key Inference Possibility: Feeling/Attitude—What feelings do Sarah and Susan have toward Aunt Flossie?

Friendship

Fox, M. (1985). Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge. J. Vivas, (Il.), New York: Kane/Miller. A young boy helps an elderly woman find her memory after first learning from others what a “memory” is.

Key Inference Possibility: Figurative Language—What do the words the people use to describe a memory really have to do with what a memory is? For example, they say a memory is “something warm, something from long ago, something that makes you cry, something that makes you laugh,” and “something as precious as gold.”

McDonald, M. (1992). The Great Pumpkin Switch. T. Lewin, (Il.), New York: Orchard. A grandfather tells his grandchildren about an accident that occurred when he was young. He smashed his sister’s pumpkin and replaced it with another one without her knowing.

Key Inference Possibility: Action—What did Mama really mean when she said, “Look at that. Would you look at that? Must have been all that rain. Right boys?”

Rylant, C. (1988). All I See. P. Catalanotto, (Il.), New York: Orchard. A boy paints with an artist and discovers that painting can involve expressing inner worlds as well as representing reality.

Key Inference Possibility: Characterization—What are some of the traits of Gregory and Charlie?

Hutchins, P. (1986). The Doorbell Rang. New York: Macmillan. As more and more children arrive, Victoria and Sam realize that they will get fewer and fewer of the cookies their mother has baked. Then, their grandmother arrives with a solution.

Key Inference Possibility: Cause and Effect—What caused the children to end up with only one cookie?

Winter

Yolen, J. (1987). Owl Moon. J. Schoenherr, (Il.), New York: Philomel. One winter night when the moon is full, a father takes his daughter into the woods to observe the Great Horned Owl.

Key Inference Possibility: Figurative Language—What is the intended meaning of, "The snow below it was whiter than the milk in a cereal bowl?"

Keats, E. J. (1962). The Snowy Day. New York: Viking. A young boy explores the pleasures of snow.

Key Inference Possibility: Action—What happened to the snowball in Peter's pocket?

Lionni, L. (1967). Frederick. New York: Pantheon. A family of mice prepares for winter, all except Frederick. He appears to do nothing but says he is gathering supplies. When the food runs out, his ideas rescue the family.

Key Inference Possibility: Action—What meanings do Frederick’s words have in the story? For example, “Now I send you the rays of the sun. Do you feel how their gold glows...”

Teacher-directed Lessons to Promote Inference Making

Most of the stories will be read aloud to the students first for enjoyment. The stories will be read aloud a second time, stopping within the text to ask questions referring to the inferential possibilities. Along with being asked to make inferences, students will also be asked to recognize the clues that led them to their responses.

Theme: Quilts

Flournoy, V. (1985). The Patchwork Quilt. J. Pinkney, (Il.), New York: Dial.

1. Page 6—What is Grandma’s attitude toward the scraps for the quilt? (Feeling/Attitude)
2. Page 6—What is meant when Grandma says, “But sometimes the old ways are forgotten?” (Time)
3. Page 8—How does Mama feel about Grandma making a quilt? (Feeling/Attitude)
4. Page 11—What is meant when Grandma says, “A quilt won’t forget. It can tell your life story?” (Figurative Language)

5. Page 14—Even though Mama thinks Grandma is lonely, why doesn't Tanya? (Cause and Effect)
6. Page 15—What do you think Grandma tells Mama about the quilt? (Action)
7. Page 17—How can you tell that Mama's attitude about the quilt has changed? (Action)
8. Page 22—Why does Grandma say the quilt is her masterpiece? (Figurative Language)
9. Page 23—What made Jim and Ted help Mama and Tanya work on the quilt? (Cause and Effect)
10. Page 26—Grandma says that the quilt is "Nothin' but a joy." What does she mean? (Figurative Language)
11. Page 30—What was Grandma's special touch? (Action)
12. End of the book—How does the family feel about each other? (Feeling/Attitude)

Theme: Grandparents

Bunting, E. (1989). The Wednesday Surprise. D. Carrick, (Il.), New York: Clarion.

1. Page 5—What surprise is being planned for Dad's birthday? (Action)
2. Page 6—Where does the family live? (Location)

3. Page 8—What is in Grandma's bag? (Object)
4. Page 11—Why is Grandma pretending she doesn't remember the father's birthday? (Cause and Effect)
5. Page 12—Why is the girl thinking about the surprise while she and Grandma are reading? (Cause and Effect)
6. Page 15—What does the girl mean when she says that Grandma is tricky? (Characterization)
7. Page 17—What might be making the bag so heavy? (Object)
8. Page 20—Why are the girl and her Grandma hiding the book bag behind the couch? (Cause and Effect)
9. Page 23—What do you think the surprise is? (Action)
10. Page 24—Why is everyone astonished when Grandma begins to read? (Cause and Effect)
11. Page 24—Why is Grandma beaming? (Cause and Effect)
12. End of book—How do you think the characters feel and why? (Feeling; Cause and Effect)

Theme: African-American Culture

Hoffman, M. (1991). Amazing Grace. C. Binch, (Il.), New York: Dial.

1. Page 2 (picture)—How does Grace feel about Nana's stories? (Feeling)

2. After Page 13—How would you describe Grace?
(Characterization)
3. Pages 14-15—Why do you suppose Grace kept her hand up even though Natalie and Raj told her she couldn't be Peter Pan? (Cause and Effect); What will Grace do when she is faced with other people's ideas about her wish? (Action)
4. After Page 20—How did Nana encourage Grace to try out for Peter Pan? (Problem/Solution) This question needs to be asked during the first reading.
5. Page 22—Why did the class choose Grace to play the role of Peter Pan? (Cause and Effect)
6. Page 25—Why do you think Grace is considered amazing?
(Cause and Effect)
7. End of book—What can you learn from Grace? (Theme)

Theme: Friendship

Fox, M. (1985). Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge. J. Vivas, (Il.),
New York: Kane/Miller.

1. Page 2—How does Wilfrid feel about the old people who live next door to him? (Feeling)

2. Page 7—Why are Wilfrid’s parents talking about Miss Nancy? (Characterization); Why is Miss Nancy a “poor old thing?” (Characterization)
3. Page 7—What is a memory? (Object)
4. Page 8, end of page—What do the words, “something warm,” have to do with the meaning of a memory? (Figurative Language)
5. Page 9-- What do the words, “something from long ago,” have to do with the meaning of a memory? (Figurative Language)
6. Page 12— What do the words, “something that makes you laugh,” have to do with the meaning of a memory? (Figurative Language)
7. Page 13-- What do the words, “as precious as gold,” have to do with the meaning of a memory? (Figurative Language)
8. Page 21—What kind of a person do you think Wilfrid is? (Characterization)

Theme: Winter

Yolen, J. (1987). Owl Moon. J. Schoenherr, (Il.), New York:

Philomel.

1. Page 5—What do you think owling is? (Action)

2. Page 9—Why would you have to be quiet to go owling?
(Cause and Effect)
3. Page 14—How could you make your own heat?
(Problem/Solution)
4. Page 16—What kinds of things would hide behind black trees in the middle of the night? (Object)
5. Page 18—What is the intended meaning of, “The snow below it was whiter than the milk in a cereal bowl?”
(Figurative Language)
6. Page 24—What is happening? (Action)
7. Page 32—Why do you need hope when you go owling?
(Cause and Effect)

Conclusion

Students of all ages and abilities can make inferences. Inference making allows a more in-depth interpretation of a reading passage.

Teachers need to provide instruction in inferring and then offer opportunities for students to make inferences as they read. Inference making can be furthered through literature discussions. This interaction can make an important contribution to helping children learn from text.

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