

DOINGWHATWORKS



Audio

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Building Academic Literacy Through Text Discussion

Burlingame High School, California • February 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Engaging Text Discussion

Highlights

- Teacher Jim Burke describes the importance of providing opportunities to discuss text.
- Burke uses note-taking organizers to help students prepare for text discussions; in this interview he describes a lesson and note-taking organizer designed to help students identify figurative language in speeches.

About the Site

Burlingame High School

Burlingame, CA

Demographics

63% White

15% Hispanic

14% Asian

6% Other

1% Black

1% Native American

5% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

7% English Language Learners

Burlingame High School provides reading and academic intervention support to ninth graders through an academic literacy class called ACCESS. Teachers Jim Burke and Morgan Hallabrin have developed a comprehensive curriculum to help students develop reading, vocabulary, academic literacy, and comprehension skills. Features of the high school reading program include:

- Districtwide testing of all eighth graders to identify struggling readers,
- Academic literacy course for identified struggling readers in ninth grade, and
- Use of note-taking organizers and templates designed by Jim Burke to promote meaningful discussion about text

Full Transcript

Sarah Feldman: Today we're talking with Jim Burke of Burlingame High School in Burlingame, California. Jim teaches College Prep Freshman English and AP Literature and Composition. We wanted to learn more about how he facilitates discussion about text in his high school English classes.

What opportunities do you create in your classroom for extended discussion about text?

Jim Burke: Discussion in the classroom is fundamental and, in fact, if I was going to look at all the different instructional techniques out there these days, I would say that discussion in the classroom is probably getting the greatest amount of attention in recent times because of some nice research, particularly in an article about Martin Nystrand. He found that the average English teacher in his study incorporated discussion into their English class one minute a day, and what was most telling about that was that even one minute had a measurable and appreciable difference in terms of comprehension and engagement. And what he found in this study was that effective classroom discussion—by which he means it has to be structured, people have to have roles, it's got to be focused, it's got to be intentional, people have to come out of it with a result to report out or whatever—was consistently the most effective in terms of engagement, comprehension, and retention. So, that's had a big influence on me as well as some others.

I try to incorporate reading, writing, and speaking as a set and note-taking as often as possible. So, the kids are pretty much talking every day for some portion of the period. You have to think about talk as serving different purposes. There's talking for comprehension, which might mean everybody read this passage or this poem or something like that and jot some thoughts down and then turn it to a neighbor, as we did the other day, and talk just about those parts that you don't understand. It's always got to be intentional. So last week, kids read text of Barack Obama's 2004 Democratic Convention speech, and they had to look for

examples of figurative speech in there because we were discussing that. I asked the kids to read that speech and to annotate it focusing on figure of language, but I was also using the speech as the basis for discussion. So, they were reading and then taking notes to prepare for discussion about a larger question. So, what I'll do is I'll give them, in this case, sort of a three column graphic organizer—actually, more of a structured note-taking sheet—that asks them to identify the example in one column of the instance of figurative speech, in the middle to explain what they think it means, and in the far right column why they think the person used that or what effect that has in the speech. So, I'm often trying to create something like that as the basis for a highly organized piece of academic writing.

Feldman: Would those notes also potentially be used to facilitate discussion?

Burke: Yeah, definitely. They'll come in the next day, and everything kind of rolls and feeds on the next thing. So, they come in the next day, for instance, and use that as the basis for discussion about the speech and about some of the ideas as they relate to the larger question of lessons learned from others' experiences. So, one of the other techniques that I do is to organize the class around larger ideas or questions. So, the big question that we've been reading to answer and to think about lately is: What are the lessons that we can learn from our own experiences and those of others?

Feldman: What are some of the things that you do to create a safe and supportive environment that is conducive to class discussion?

Burke: It's really important to create a safe environment in which to have these discussions, and in a class like this it's particularly important because out of 33 kids I have about nine kids who have IEPs [Individualized Education Plans] for a variety of speech and language processing disorders, so these are not things that are easy and come comfortably for kids. So one, I think you have to create the conditions of safety and comfort for that, and that has to be done early on by helping the kids get to know each other and kind of establishing that climate. Number two, I think sometimes we assume that kids know how to participate in academic discussion. I think we tend to assume that we can just sort of come in and say, "So, what were your thoughts about that text?" and they'll just jump in, when in fact, drawing from my own experience, my father dropped out of high school in the ninth grade. I come from a very non-academic background. And we don't realize sometimes, as we start to look at issues of academic literacy, how many skills are invisibly folded into the academic enterprise, the participating in academic discussion. What do you say? How do you say it? How do you respond to each other? So, sometimes what I have to do is start by asking the kids to generate the kinds of questions, and one of the things that I write on the board a lot is cues to ask. So, I might say, "What are the questions that we should ask when discussing this text?" and then use those questions to kind of anchor. And then others, we might not go back to all of them, but at least it kind of helps them to get prepared and kind of lay the foundation for the effective discussion.

I create a lot of these opportunities for the kids to discuss the texts for the purpose of increasing their engagement because learning is inherently social, and I also think that kids need to learn how to participate

in discussion. In the workplace, in their adult lives, they're always going to be asked to engage in discussion in a variety of types of ways, and they certainly need to be able to do that to succeed in the academic environment as well.