



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Text Discussion One Step at a Time

P. David Pearson, Ph.D. • November 2010

Topic: Improving K-3 Reading Comprehension
Practice: Engage Students With Text

Highlights

- Dr. P. David Pearson, panel member of the IES practice guide, discusses key aspects of the recommendation to engage students in discussions about text.
- Pearson describes several dimensions of effective text discussion, such as selecting worthwhile texts, planning discussion questions, and helping students lead their own discussions.

About the Interviewee

P. David Pearson serves as a faculty member in the Language, Literacy, and Culture program in the Graduate School of Education, where he also served as Dean from 2001-2009. His current research focuses on issues of reading instruction and reading assessment policies and practices. With degrees from UC Berkeley (BA in history) and Minnesota (Ph.D. in education), Pearson has served the reading and literacy education profession in a range of roles: as editor of *Reading Research Quarterly* and the *National Reading Conference Yearbook*, as president of NRC and member of the IRA board of directors, and

as the founding editor of the *Handbook of Reading Research*. He is currently on the Board of Directors for the National Writing Project and is a member of the National Academy of Education.

Those contributions have earned him several awards: IRA's William S. Gray Citation of Merit (1990) and Albert Harris Award (2005), NRC's Oscar Causey Award (1989), NCTE's Alan Purves Award (2003), the University of Minnesota's Outstanding Alumni Award, and AERA's Distinguished Contributions to Research in Education Award.

Before coming to UC Berkeley, Pearson served on the reading education faculties at Minnesota, Illinois, and Michigan State. He began his education career as a fifth grade teacher in Porterville, CA.

Full Transcript

My name is P. David Pearson, Graduate School of Education, University of California at Berkeley. I do research on policy and practice related to reading assessment and instruction.

There's really two reasons for engaging in discussion with kids around a text. The first is so they understand the text right in front of them better than they would otherwise. Discussions about text are really an invitation for students to sort of revise the models of meaning that they may have built when they read the text on their own. So when you come to a discussion, you can actually think about what other people thought about the text, and that might cause you to say, "Hey, I never thought of it that way before." So you gain new meaning from the text. The second reason for engaging kids in discussion is not so much to help them understand the text at hand better, but actually to help them, over time, develop a set of strategies that they can use on their own, to understand text when there's no one around to guide them in their sort of interrogation of the text.

A lot of people, when I show videos of classrooms in which you are seeing this kind of discussion, they say, "Well, that's all well and good, but my kids can never do this. They don't have the background knowledge. They don't have the experience," and the like. And that's probably true, and you have to remember that Rome wasn't built in a day. What you do is you start out, you work on one thing. Maybe you work on how to agree or disagree with what someone else just said, and that's all you work on for a few days. You get that under your belt, and then maybe you go on to how do you learn how to build on to a point that someone else has made, and how do you add to the ongoing conversation. And you just build it a step at a time. And you also make sure that, all the time, that kids are focusing on what's really important about those texts; that's the central focus of any good discussion: Why would you bother to talk about this thing in the first place?

So what makes for a good discussion in a classroom? What should teachers be trying to do if they want students to be really engaged in their conversations around the text? Well, first is to select text worth

discussing. You know, not all texts are created equal. Some of them lend themselves to much richer and deeper discussions than others. So make sure there's something in the text worth discussing.

The second is to plan your discussion well. It's always good to have a set of questions in hand. These questions represent the big ideas in the text that you want to see uncovered, that you want students to grapple with. Now, your plans may go awry, but it's always good to have that set of questions or that set of tasks in mind as you go into the discussion.

And the third thing, vis-a-vis discussions, is that lots of time when you ask a really tough question, one that gets to deeper thinking—or higher-order thinking, sometimes we call it—sometimes kids don't get it right away. But that's okay, you can ask the higher-order question, and then if you don't get much of response, you can back up and then scaffold the kids into that question by asking smaller questions. So for example, if you ask, "So what's the theme of the story?" and you don't get anything out of it, you could maybe turn it into a multiple-choice question: "Well is this story more about friendship, or is it more about problems we have dealing with the environment?" And make it a forced-choice question. Then when you get a response to that, then you can get the kids back on track to the higher-order question.

And the final thing is shoot for getting the kids to a greater stage of independence. The ideal is really if you have a classroom where you can take your class of 25 kids and break them off into five groups of five or something like that, and then have each of those groups discussing the story, you'll get a lot more action, a lot more time on task with kids grappling with the ideas and the story that you want them to deal with, because they have more opportunity to speak when they are one in five rather than one in 25.

One of the things that a lot of teachers do is they actually have this technique called *fishbowl*, where they'll take one group that's gotten pretty good at discussion, they'll put them in the middle, and everybody else sits on an outer circle and watches them and critiques their discussion. And through that process, kids develop, if you will, kind of an explicit knowledge about what makes for good discussion. And I have seen that done with fifth graders; I've seen it done with third graders; I've seen it done with first graders. And it really does pay enormous benefits over time.

The best source of research evidence for the impact of a discussion is a meta-analysis published in 2009 by Karen Murphy and her colleagues in *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, and it really suggests three big findings. Number one is that when you have discussions, the effects are much stronger for changing participation rates, getting kids to say more, than they are for their impact on comprehension; not so good on that score. The second big finding is that you sort of get what you pay for. If you focus on text-based information, kids will get better at that. If you focus on critique and evaluate, they'll get better at that, but maybe not so much on the text-based kind of thing. And the third and maybe the most important finding from that meta-analysis, is that the effects are much stronger for low achievers than they are for average or high achievers, suggesting that as a profession, we need to spend much more time with the students who struggle most to understand text.