

DOINGWHATWORKS



Presentation

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Talking About Text: Discussion-Based Approaches to Reading Instruction

May 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Engaging Text Discussion

Highlights

- Engaging adolescents in extended discussions about text can help cultivate important reading skills.
- There are several key aspects involved in selecting text for discussion, including level of difficulty, level of interest, and potential for multiple interpretations
- The teacher's role is critical in cultivating a classroom environment for extended discussion, asking follow up questions, and providing task structures for students to talk with one another about text.

Full Transcript

Slide 1: Welcome

Welcome to the overview on Talking About Text: Discussion-Based Approaches to Reading Instruction.

Slide 2: Ms. Trindle

Ms. Trindle really wants to engage her U.S. History students in thoughtful discussion around the reading she assigned for homework. She knows that she can count on two or three students to talk, but most students won't participate. Even when she poses what she thinks are intriguing questions, she can't seem to get answers that are more than a few words long. She really wants her students to get more involved with the text, but she's having trouble engaging them.

Slide 3: Goal

Giving students opportunities to dig deeper into texts through pair work, whole-class, or small-group discussions engages students more in the learning process and helps them make new connections with what they are reading. Talking about text is something all students can do.

Slide 4: Proficiency

Reading instruction with adolescents should provide them with strategies that will allow them to go beyond literal understandings and become proficient readers and thinkers. The National Assessment of Educational Progress defines eighth-grade reading proficiency as being able to "summarize major ideas, provide evidence in support of an argument, analyze and interpret implicit causal relations, analyze character motivation, make inferences, and identify similarities across texts." By engaging in regular, extended discussions about what they are reading, students are provided practice in all of these important skill areas.

In fact, studies show that classrooms that frequently incorporate extended discussions show greater literacy gains than classes that have little or no opportunity for discussion.

Slide 5: Extended class discussions

Text discussion in the classroom can range from partner work where students discuss a section of text to an extended whole-class discussion. Starting with pair work can give students valuable practice in talking about what they are reading. In extended class discussions, there should be sustained exchanges among students and with their teacher. Students should have the opportunity to: question and summarize what they've

read, reference relevant parts of the text, use background knowledge to make connections, and listen to the points of view of others participating in the discussion. Through discussion, students are exposed to the ways effective readers think about what they read, and they will begin to apply these strategies as they read independently.

Slide 6: Text selection

Well-selected texts are crucial to increasing student engagement. Choosing topics that students are interested in will increase their motivation to engage with the content. Students can even choose their own texts, such as in the context of a book club.

Texts should be open to multiple interpretations or may be supplemented by other materials that prompt reasoned arguments and debate.

Challenging texts and materials that contain ambiguity can be extremely useful for pushing student thinking and highlighting various viewpoints.

Slide 7: Using questions

However, not even the best-selected texts will ensure a useful discussion unless the instructor has prepared questions that encourage and facilitate conversation.

Effective questions don't generate quick and pat answers. Instead, they mirror the questions active readers are likely to ask themselves and lead students back to the text in order to defend their arguments and positions.

Another important aspect of the teacher's role, especially when engaging in whole-class discussions, is to ask follow-up questions to further the exchange. For example, a teacher might ask students to provide different interpretations, explain their reasoning, or look for evidence in the text.

Slide 8: Learning environment

Creating an encouraging and supportive environment is key to successfully involving students in text discussions. Teachers should be clear about expectations and guidelines for student behavior, such as accepting divergent viewpoints, avoiding negative comments, and active listening. They can set goals with students for improving discussions and give feedback on their progress as they practice.

Teachers should be careful to monitor their own behavior as well. When teachers limit themselves to actions like providing summaries, asking follow-up questions, and reminding students of agreed-upon norms, students are encouraged to carry the weight of the discussion rather than participating in a question-answer

session with the teacher.

Slide 9: Small groups

Breaking the class up into smaller discussion groups is another way to motivate students to engage in discussion. Shy students are more likely to contribute, and all students have a greater opportunity to actively delve into the text in small groups.

Assigning roles to students in groups can give them direction and focus. One student may lead the discussion, while another identifies confusing words and passages or generates summaries. These tasks can be regularly rotated, keeping students focused, motivated, and engaged.

Slide 10: Practice

Many teachers are not familiar with how to effectively direct extended discussions and would benefit from engaging in their own small-group discussions. Such experiences can help teachers understand and practice facilitation techniques.

Slide 11: Time constraints

Teachers may find it difficult to find the time for regular, extended classroom discussion. In such circumstances, teachers are encouraged to plan for discussions by identifying one or two key texts that are particularly challenging or central to the curriculum.

Slide 12: Ms. Trindles's new practice

Ms. Trindle practiced leading some discussions with her colleagues, concentrating on asking follow-up questions so that she didn't dominate the conversation. She began with partner work, pairing students for textbook discussion and giving them guiding questions. Later in the year she divided her class into groups of six, assigning roles to each student. Students who had barely talked at all during the semester were actively discussing the text with their groups, and the whole class was alive with the sound of discussion.

Slide 13: Learn more

To learn more about Discussion-Based Approaches to Reading Instruction, please explore the additional resources on the Doing What Works website.