



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Engaging Adolescents in Discussions About Text

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Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Engaging Text Discussion

Highlights

- Providing opportunities for discussion about text is important for students to learn from text and to think critically and analytically about what they are reading.
- Asking questions in a discussion can lead to internalizing these questions in independent reading.
- Research shows that discussion-based classrooms improve reading comprehension.

About the Interviewee

Janice A. Dole (Ph. D., Education, University of Colorado) is Professor of Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Utah. Dr. Dole has taught school in the primary grades and at the middle school level. Dr. Dole's university experience includes positions held at the University of Denver, the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Michigan State University. She has published widely in the areas of comprehension and conceptual change learning and more recently

in professional development and school reform. Her publications include articles in journals such as *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Review of Educational Research*, *The Elementary School Journal*, and *Reading and Writing Quarterly*. She is also co-author of the book, *Adolescent Literacy: Research to Practice*. From 1992-2002, Dr. Dole served as a member of the reading development panel for the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). She also was a panel member of the RAND Reading Study Group on reading comprehension. In addition, Dr. Dole is currently a National Reading First consultant on comprehension instruction. She also has served on review panels for the Institute of Educational Services (IES) and the National Institute of Child and Human Development.

In 1996, Dr. Dole began a ten-year interest in school reform in reading and professional development in high-poverty schools. She co-authored Utah's Reading Excellence Act (REA) for the USOE and was project co-coordinator as well as state technical assistant for the grant from 1999-2001. Thereafter, along with two colleagues in special education at the University of Utah, Dr. Dole received the evaluation grant for Utah's Reading First. They are currently at the end of the second year of the five-year project. Additionally, Dr. Dole is an investigator for Mathematica on a four-year IES national study of the effectiveness of comprehension interventions in high-poverty schools. Dr. Dole is also working with Utah State University on a grant to develop a teacher knowledge assessment of reading and writing curriculum, and with the Salt Lake City School District on a middle school reading reform project. Finally, Dr. Dole is a member of the Teacher Preparation Committee of the National Academy of Sciences. The final report of the Committee is due out next year.

Full Transcript

My name is Janice Dole. I'm Professor of Education at the University of Utah. Providing opportunities for middle and high school students to have extended discussions is really critically important for their growth and learning as readers. We want students to become critical thinkers as they read and analyze text. They need to interpret text. They need to make generalizations. They need to draw conclusions. They really need to be able to think critically and analytically about what they're reading.

A great mechanism for accomplishing this is through extended discussions. When students have opportunities to talk in extended discussions, they talk with their peers, they make arguments, they express their point of view, they critically analyze what they're reading, and in general they do all the kinds of things that we want them to do to become critical thinkers and readers.

If in a text discussion, for example, students ask a critical question such as, "Well, why do you think that?" Students then, when they go to read on their own, are going to ask themselves those same kinds of questions. "Why do you think that?" or, "Why does the author think that?" So, in this way, it's really important in terms of improving students' reading comprehension that they have opportunities to have

extended discussions. They internalize those questions, and that kind of thinking as they read then themselves.

When students engage in these kinds of extended discussions, they have lots of opportunities that other students don't have. Some of those include the opportunity to work with each other, not just the teacher, not just to answer their teacher's questions but to actually answer each other's questions. They would not normally have an opportunity to do that. It's important that the questions that are asked in an extended discussion are authentic questions, and what I mean by that is they're not questions that the teacher will ask where he or she already knows the answer, but they're questions that really arise out of the discussion. They're debatable questions, or they may present a point of view. Someone may present a counterpoint. They're questions that are real questions.

Some teachers might think, "Well, this is a great strategy to use in AP classes and advanced classes but not for my students. This wouldn't work for my students." Well, what we would argue very strongly is that these kinds of discussions work for all students. Some students may need a little more time to get used to an extended discussion, and they may need your help and your support in learning how to think critically and deeply about ideas. All students can do it. They do it all the time. It's just are they going to do it about the kinds of things that you are interested in and you want your students to learn.

The teacher plays a critical role in allowing extended discussions to take place and providing the kind of atmosphere in which these discussions can occur. From the very first day where the teacher begins an extended discussion, he or she can make or break the discussion. A teacher can make the discussion by responding positively and supportively to students' comments. A teacher can break a discussion very quickly by turning a student off, rejecting an idea or a thought that a student has. So, the teacher, first of all, needs to create a very supportive environment where it's okay to express ideas, where it's okay if you get something wrong, where it's okay to take risks. That kind of an environment is the kind of environment in which an extended discussion is going to thrive.

It's also important for teachers to create procedures and routines for students that provide them with an environment where they know what to do and how to have an extended discussion. Teachers may begin with cooperative learning groups, and they may assign students to particular roles in those cooperative learning groups. One student may be the leader, for example. One student may be the note-taker. Another student might be the manager, the task manager for the group. In this way, there is a structured environment for students to have the extended discussion, and this helps make the procedures a lot easier for students.

Schools can support teachers as they learn about extended discussions. I think the first thing that teachers have to experience is an extended discussion themselves. I think teachers need to spend some time talking about an issue, a problem, a topic, maybe a controversial one, in an extended discussion themselves. They need to experience what that feels like as a student. I think that's really one important way to help them to implement extended discussions in their classroom. The point is that teachers have the experience themselves, and it's then much easier for them to see what it looks like.

The other kind of support, I think, that's often very helpful is to have another teacher—for example, a peer or a coach—watch what a teacher does as she tries to present an extended discussion to students and then provide some feedback to that teacher. That level of support at the classroom level in teachers everyday at work experiences really seems to help them figure out how to do it on their own.