

Under Discussion: Teaching Speaking and Listening

Reading Closely and Discussing Meaningfully

Lauren Zucker

Northern Highlands Regional
High School, Allendale,
New Jersey
Fordham University, New York,
New York
lzucker2@fordham.edu

I had dutifully completed the assigned reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for my first college English class. When Professor Otten opened the discussion, however, I was overwhelmed by the caliber of my classmates' ideas. I felt like they were discussing a different text altogether. While I'd fulfilled the requirements of high school English—reading the assigned chapters and paying attention (mostly to the teacher)—I'd never learned how to take good notes, listen to my classmates, or construct my own meaning.

Today, many of my high school students are reluctant to participate during whole-class discussions because they are intimidated or lack adequate preparation strategies. As a result, they are deprived of the experience of testing out ideas aloud or engaging in the kind of lively debate that can result when participants build off each other's ideas.

To boost their confidence, I provide explicit instruction on how to prepare for discussion and ample low-stakes opportunities in various groupings for students to practice talking about their reading. As Maxine Greene wrote in "Aesthetic Literacy in General Education," the "capacity to perceive, to attend, must be learned" (137). Borrowing from the ethos of the artist, textual annotation strategies can help students "attend" to a text. An actor preparing for a role marks up a script, rehearsing ideas on paper before trying them out for small, then large, audiences. Likewise, I teach my students how to annotate their texts and share ideas with small groups of peers so that they arrive to whole-class discussion feeling confident and prepared. What follows is a description of my efforts to help students experience the kind of rewarding, whole-class discussion that becomes possible as a result of attentive preparation.

Laying the Foundation for Close Reading

The motto for my tenth-grade American Literature course is "Read Small. Think Big," a slogan borrowed from my colleague, John Wodnick. I kick off the first

unit of the year, "Reading Closely and Discussing Meaningfully," with lessons using short stories to reintroduce close reading, annotation, and writing. I tell students that the secret to coming to a brilliant conclusion about literature is to "read small," paying attention to details, noticing and tracking patterns, and making connections, so that they can later "think big" about deeper meanings.

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I make comparisons between reading and other activities, such as movie-watching and mathematics. I tell them that literature is not like math, where many problems can be solved with formulas, and there are often right answers. The most provocative questions raised by literature spark a plurality of interpretations, and the paths to meaning are infinite. Even though my students are fascinated by ambiguous endings of films, they express frustration with ambiguity in literature. I want them to recognize that confusion is an important signal that they've encountered something worth thinking about. I ask them to be patient with the

text, writing down even their tentative thoughts. Conversations about the messiness of meaning-making give students permission to pay attention to their thoughts.

I emphasize that all of their ideas and questions are worth jotting down, and that their first read of a text (like the first time they watch a movie) is a unique experience that can never be replicated. I want them to feel less pressure to get it “right” and be in less of a hurry to reach the end. I remind them that the key to building these big ideas is to “read small,” honoring hunches and interests by recording them, attempting to answer one’s own questions in multiple ways, and, ultimately, sharing their ideas with others.

Teaching Annotation Strategies

With these norms in place, I teach annotation, which I define as taking notes *on* a text. I ask students what kinds of things they notice when they read a story, and we create an annotation guide they can refer to throughout the year. Students share several responses, such as character details, plot, symbolism, setting, etc. I use this conversation to review basic terms, knowing that I’ll introduce more complex ones (e.g., subtext, irony) in the coming weeks.

Once students have exhausted their suggestions, I share some of my note-taking techniques, which are bulleted below. I don’t mandate that they use my shorthand; rather, I offer options and let them decide which strategies work best.

- Use a squiggly underline to indicate there’s something

important going on, even if you’re not sure what it means.

- Box new characters’ names, because authors introduce characters with revealing details.
- Instead of underlining a long section of text, use a bracket next to that section and write your thoughts beside it.
- Circle unfamiliar words as a cue to look them up and jot down definitions.
- Record questions, and use a question mark to indicate an idea is tentative (or start the idea with “maybe”).
- Use punctuation marks such as asterisks and exclamation points to indicate important, surprising, or climactic moments.
- Draw small pictures (e.g., a heart, a gravestone) or write a concise summary to mark major plot events; use these later to quickly locate parts of the story.
- Vary writing tools to indicate different levels of reading (e.g., pencil for your first read, pen for more fully formed ideas, highlighter to indicate quotations worthy of additional examination).

Structuring Independent, Guided Practice

After our prereading conversations, I share Peter Cameron’s three-page short story, “Memorial Day,” about a teenage boy who stops talking to protest his parents’ divorce and the arrival of his mother’s new husband. This story works well for practicing annotation techniques because of its high-interest subject, length, and complexity—



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students are challenged but not entirely flummoxed. When we reach the ambiguous ending, students’ audible reactions provide a teachable moment. I can say, “See? The author wants us to reread and think carefully about the story to understand it more fully.”

This first reading experience is tightly controlled and teacher-led because I want my students to practice the attentiveness that close reading requires and to experience the back-and-forth rhythm of reading and annotating. Students have on their desks a photocopy of the short story and their annotation guides. I insist they use pencil for the first round of annotations, since the impermanence of pencil allows students to make predictions and ask authentic questions. I warn them that I’ll be reading the story aloud in short segments, that they cannot pick up their pencils to write until we’ve completed a segment, and that we will refrain from discussion until we’ve read the story in its entirety. I temporarily

impose these restrictions because I want them to become patient with the text, the act of reading, and their own partially formed thoughts before outsourcing their thinking to a classmate, teacher, or study guide.

I begin by reading only the title aloud, pausing for students to record their thoughts. I prompt them with questions about the title, asking them to consider the denotation and the connotation of the words. Next, I read the first sentence and stop, instructing students to pick up their pencils and darken the period at the end of the sentence, so they can see where we've divided the text. As they take notes, they refer to their annotation guides for reminders and then put their pencils down to indicate they're finished taking notes. We continue this process, breaking the text into longer chunks each time.

At a certain point in the story, a student inevitably blurts out a question or opinion, but I direct students to incorporate these thoughts into their annotations. Some students slyly reach for their pencils to take notes while I'm reading, but I insist they wait and listen to the sentence or paragraph in its entirety. A colleague of mine teaches this story differently, allowing students to talk with a partner at each stopping point; however, for this first experience, I want to provide them with the


kind of environment for independent thinking that many students do not experience when they read on their own, perhaps because they are not accustomed to paying attention to their own ideas as they read, or they've been skimming, multitasking, or consulting study guides simply to get it done.

Transitioning from Annotation to Discussion

When I finish reading the story, I ask students to record any lingering questions. There's a palpable release of tension in the room when I give students permission to chat about the text in pairs. Again, I offer suggestions: they might talk without relying on notes; they may begin with their questions, turning to the text to investigate; or they might move chronologically through the story.

During the first whole-class discussion, I ask students to arrange desks in a circle. I prompt them to support their opinions with evidence from the text and use their notes for guidance and to record new ideas. I remove myself as much as possible from the content of class discussions, resisting the urge to privilege my own interpretations of a text. Reminding students that I want discussions to feature their ideas and not mine, we experiment with various protocols: they test out raising hands and calling on each other or

attempt a more organic conversation without hand raising; I practice limiting my interruptions and growing patient with the occasional 30 seconds of silence, and I experiment with where I sit in the circle, sometimes removing myself entirely. I may interject to prompt a meta-discussion, asking them to critique the discussion and set goals for its continuation.

As we progress throughout the year, I lessen my imposed structure so that students can engage in discussions with minimal teacher guidance. I hope to demystify for students the skills that appear to come naturally to skilled readers and discussants—to share strategies I wish I had in Professor Otten's course—so that they feel confident “thinking big,” sharing their unique impressions of texts, building deeper understandings, and joining a community of readers to co-create meaning. 

Works Cited

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Lauren Zucker teaches high school English at Northern Highlands Regional High School in Allendale, New Jersey. She is a doctoral candidate studying contemporary literacies at Fordham University in New York, New York, and has been a member of NCTE since 2009.