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Strategies for Authentic, Student-Led, Text-Based Discussions in General Education High School English Class

Bethany Holt
Bethel University

STRATEGIES FOR AUTHENTIC, STUDENT-LED, TEXT-BASED DISCUSSIONS IN GENERAL EDUCATION HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASS

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Bethany Holt

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Thesis Advisor: Lisa Silmser, Ed.D.

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Abstract

Since the advent of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory on the importance of social interaction in learning, teachers have sought to include more collaborative opportunities for their students. One avenue for that in English classes is discussion on literature. The research question posed was, "What are effective ways to foster rich, authentic, text-based discussions among general education high school students in English class?" Unfortunately, the trend has been for those "discussions" to be lopsided in participation with teachers dominating the conversations. While whole-class discussions have their place, small group discussions allow students to co-construct meaning as they talk about a common text. To effectively implement those experiences, teachers should cultivate a positive social environment in class, give students a chance to see and reflect on a quality discussion, make sure students have a chance to adequately prepare by reading the common text, and explicitly teach effective discussion strategies to students. Lower-track students also benefit from discussions, though they may require more scaffolding and time for strong discussion skills to emerge, but because students generally appreciate engaging in discussions with their peers around literature, the effort is worth it.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

When I first started teaching, I would often have to "shush" students at the beginning of class so we could begin our work together; their peer conversations happened naturally. Now, in an often silent classroom, I tell students to put their phones away and look up before we start class. While I originally came into this program thinking I would investigate writing feedback, my ideas have shifted. I still think writing is critical, but an area I see lacking, especially in my general education high school students, is the ability to have rich, authentic, text-based conversations with their peers. My anecdotal observations make it easy to blame technology for a lack of natural face-to-face interaction and reading stamina. However, fostering more robust, thoughtful discussions goes far beyond just putting phones away and rests more with the decisions I make and practices I implement as the classroom teacher.

Historical and Theoretical Framework

Discussion has not always been a valued part of classroom instruction. Historically, the teacher was the knowledgeable authority whose job it was to share her knowledge with her class of passive learners. However, in the last several decades, a number of shifts in that thinking have taken place. Many sources point to Vygotsky's ideas around social constructivism, or learning through interaction with others, as foundational to the value of discussion (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Corden, 2001; Davies & Sinclair, 2014; Freedman, 2020; Jadallah et al., 2011; McMahon & Goatley, 1995; Murphy et al., 2017; Murphy et al., 2018; Pennell, 2018; Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993; Young

& Mohr, 2016). His sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of learning as a social process, so a teaching technique like discussion fits right into that framework. While Vygotsky originally published his work in the early 20th century, it was not translated into English until the 1960s, so it was during that and subsequent decades that his ideas permeated the western world (Cherry, 2019).

Bakhtin's concept of dialogic interaction is also frequently cited in the world of discussion (Applebee et al., 2003; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Freedman, 2020; McMahon & Goatley, 1995; Nystrand et al., 2001; Pennell, 2018; Sosa & Sullivan, 2013). While he did not apply the idea to education himself, his theory states that "language evolves dynamically and is affected by and affects the culture that produces and uses it" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). This intersection of language and culture has direct implications for conversation among teachers and students, which is likely why so many point to his theory as a rationale for including more discussion in the classroom.

Finally, Cazden's work on discourse used in the classroom for teaching and learning is also heavily referenced in the field (Alvermann et al., 1996; Applebee et al., 2003; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Davies & Sinclair, 2014; Freedman, 2020; Jadallah et al., 2011; Marshall, 1989; Marshall et al., 1990; McMahon & Goatley, 1995; Nystrand et al., 2001; Pennell, 2018; Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993). While Cazden's (2001) work covered many aspects of language and literacy in academic settings, she described how in "nontraditional classrooms" (i.e., those with more discussions), "each student becomes

a significant part of the official learning environment for all the others, and teachers depend on students' contributions to other students' learning" (p. 131). The interaction among students is critical to the learning happening in the classroom.

These three authors help lay the groundwork for the value of discussions taking place in classrooms. No longer is it just the teacher imparting wisdom to students. Students themselves can help each other learn, but the teacher must know how to best facilitate that process. That is the purpose of this literature review: to help determine the most effective strategies for cultivating authentic, text-based, small group discussions in general level high school English classes.

Research Question and Rationale

My research question was this: "What are effective ways to foster rich, authentic, text-based discussions among general education high school students in English class?" My honors classes have, for the most part, continued to rise to the occasion and still have fairly thoughtful discussions. It has been in my general education classes that the struggle seems most evident. If we are in the midst of a 10-minute small group discussion, inevitably, a few groups will be sitting quietly after maybe five minutes, and when I check in, they say something like, "We're done" or "We answered all the questions we had" when there is much more possibility for their conversation. Granted, each discussion goal and content may vary, but I want them to be able to ask follow-up questions or go into more depth - to sustain their discussion. I also realize that any discussion I assign to students will not be fully authentic, but I would like to

implement strategies that will engage all, but especially general education and lower-track, students in meaningful conversations around literature.

Myriad strategies and ideas already exist to help students engage in discussions. My goal was to sift through to find research-based evidence for what works best. While I do want students to come away having comprehended texts, my ultimate hope is that students will have read and thought critically, and that they will listen and speak effectively and respectfully. In the current draft of the new Minnesota English Language Arts standards, rather than titling the section "Speaking, Viewing, Listening, and Media Literacy" a comparable section is titled "Exchanging Ideas." That language seems to reflect a deeper sense of interactive and thoughtful dialogue that is necessary for student-citizens. I want to find ways to help my students engage in those critical conversations with their peers.

Key Terms

Before delving into the primary research articles on discussion, it will be helpful to understand the way a few key terms are used. One is the term "discussion" itself. As you will read, "discussion" is often used to describe any instance when more than one person talks in a class. The broader term for that is dialogic, versus monologic: not just one person talking, but something closer to a dialogue, in which more than one person participates. Nystrand et al. (2001) described a discussion more specifically as "the free (unprescribed) exchange of information among at least three students and the teacher that lasted at least a half minute during a classroom instructional episode" (p. 13).

Similar to that, but still distinct, is the term “episode,” which Brett (2016) defined as a “coherent sequence of discourse evidencing thematic unity” (p. 297). Within a discussion, a communication unit is “an identifiable remark or utterance on a single subject” (Marshall, 1989, p. 4); and a turn is “one or more communication units spoken by a single participant” (p. 4).

Other features of a discussion may include authentic questions, those to which there is not one prescribed answer, and uptake, referring to building off a previous comment with another question. “Stating a confusion” is verbalizing an uncertainty or “express[ing] a query in narrative form” (Berne & Clark, 2006, p. 678), and “co-constructing” is “collaboratively thinking through text ideas” (p. 675). Finally, the terms student-led and peer-led, which both showed up in various sources, will be used interchangeably: they refer to discussions in which the teacher is not facilitating nor leading. Rather, students are participating and leading their own discussions. They may be using a framework with particular roles, but the main point is that the teacher is not the leader. These key terms should help the reader more fully understand the language used in the current research on fostering more effective student-led, text-based discussions.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Procedures

To locate the literature for this thesis, searches of ERIC, Academic Search Premier, EBSCO MegaFILE, Scopus, CLICsearch, and ProQuest were conducted for publications from 1990-2020. This list was narrowed by only reviewing published empirical studies from peer-reviewed journals that focused on classroom discourse on texts found in journals that addressed the guiding questions. The key words that were used in these searches included “discussion (teaching technique),” “small group discussion,” “text-based discussion,” “student-led discussion,” and “literature discussion.” The structure of this chapter is to review the literature on discussion in six sections in this order: Classroom Discussions of Literature, Teacher Role in Cultivating Strong Discussions, Peer-Led Small Group Discussions, Text-Based Discussions, Struggling Students in Discussions, and Student Perceptions of Discussions.

Classroom Discussions of Literature

Before beginning a conversation about what discussion techniques are best, knowing the current climate for discussions in the classroom is necessary. Marshall (1989) investigated the “Patterns of Discourse in Classroom Discussions of Literature”: his goals were to discover what kinds of conversation happened during literature discussions and to determine what teachers and students perceived the purposes of those discussions to be. His study was comprised of six teachers and 67 students from four public schools and one private school, all in the Albany area. They came from a mix

of grades nine through 12, and all the classes were of high academic ability. Throughout the study, three to five class discussions were recorded for each teacher, and a total of 25 discussions were ultimately transcribed for analysis. Teachers and students were also interviewed.

Based on the interviews with both teachers and students, Marshall found similar themes in their perceptions of the purpose of discussion: both mentioned goals of getting to a "deeper and richer analysis of a text" (p. 10) through lively interaction among students, with both the text analysis and interaction being priorities. Both teachers and students also felt similarly about the teacher's role in those discussions: to facilitate the conversation - and keep students on track - to make sure they did not miss something important from the text.

However, in Marshall's analysis of the discussion transcripts, he found that, though interaction among students around a text was the perceived goal, teachers tended to dominate the discussion. Measured by communication units ("an identifiable remark or utterance on a single subject" p. 4) and turns ("one or more communication units spoken by a single participant" p. 4), Marshall found that the teachers had close to the same number of turns as their students, treated collectively. The length of their turns was often two to five times as long as the students' turns. Marshall also observed that "in most discussions the floor was returned to the teacher after each student contribution" (p. 17). He also categorized the types of communication units both students and teachers made. Still, the primary takeaway of his study seemed to be that,

as opposed to the goal of a “lively interaction among students” merely facilitated by the teacher, the class discussion was dominated by the teacher, both in the number of turns and the length of those turns. This study is over thirty years old now, so it is uncertain whether or not these trends have continued, especially with the advent of the Common Core discussion standards, but it still lays valuable groundwork for understanding why more authentic dialogic conversation is desirable.

Nystrand et al. (2001) also analyzed classroom discourse, but focused more on the provocation of dialogic conversation versus the amount: what happens in classroom discourse that prompts more authentic dialogue among students and teacher? They concentrated on three primary variables: teacher dialogic bids, student questions, and open discussion. To examine this, they used data from a total of 218 8th and 9th grade English and social studies classes from a mix of urban, suburban, and rural public and parochial schools in the Midwest. They observed the 8th grade classes in 1987-88 and the 9th grade classes in 1988-89, which comprised around 1500 students each year, and each class was observed four times a year for a total of 872 class observations. They recorded, transcribed, and coded the classroom dialogue, then analyzed it specifically for a number of variables: authenticity (open-ended), uptake (building off another’s response), level of evaluation (incorporating a response into discussion is high level), cognitive level (the sophistication of thinking), and source of the question (teacher or student) (p. 14). They used both an analysis of variance and event history analyses for the discourse.

Through their analysis, Nystrand and his colleagues affirmed Marshall's (1989) observations that "dialogic discourse is rare" (p. 34): less than seven percent of instructional episodes had even one dialogic spell, and in classes of low-track students, there was "a virtual absence of dialogic spells" (p. 35). Also, like Marshall (1989) found, Nystrand et al. (2001) noted that teachers might have lauded discussion, but most only engaged in recitation with students: asking a question with a straightforward answer.

One goal of this study was to find what provoked dialogic spells: they found that, while smaller classes, those of higher SES, and social studies classes were more likely to include dialogic spells, the content that seemed to be most strongly correlated with dialogic spells were authentic questions, uptake, and particularly student questions. In addition, it seemed to be "clusters" of student questions, especially, that made a difference, as opposed to student questions that are spread out among the dialogic spells. Since student questions made such a difference, Nystrand and his colleagues examined what, in turn, provoked those and found that "cumulative rates of authentic questions, uptake, and high-level evaluation are all powerfully associated with student questions" (p. 40). Similarly, discussions also occur more frequently when student questions, uptake, and questions with high cognitive demands precede them. Their findings suggest that teachers must pay attention to the flow and structure of whole-class discussion to make them beneficial and engaging for students.

Applebee et al. (2003) also undertook an expansive study to examine the relationship between discussion-based teaching approaches and the complex literacy

skills exhibited in writing. For their study, they sampled a total of 974 students from 64 English classes in 19 urban and suburban high schools and middle schools in California, Florida, New York, Texas, and Wisconsin. Middle school students were in either 7th or 8th grade, and high school students were in either 10th or 11th grade. Students represented a broad range of diversity in ability, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

To collect data, the researchers used teacher and student questionnaires, a program called CLASS 3.0 to measure observations of classroom discussions (two in the fall and two in the spring), and written tasks to assess student performance (one in the fall and two in the spring). In observations of classroom discussions, they were particularly watchful for evidence of dialogic instruction (open discussion, authentic teacher questions, and uptake), "envisionment building," ("a mixture of understandings, questions, hypotheses, and connections to previous knowledge and experiences" (p. 691)) and high academic demands (evidenced by an emphasis on revision, amount of English homework per week, and completion of assignments).

Through a rich analysis of their wealth of data – Applebee et al. (2003) used principal components analyses with Varimax rotations and controlled for various student and school factors - researchers found that "high academic demands and discussion-based approaches" were effective for all subsets of students, as measured by performance on spring assessments (p. 719). They noted that less time was spent on open discussion in low-track classes, and they observed that students in low-track

classes were less engaged. However, the authors did not venture to suggest that low engagement caused less open discussion, or vice versa, merely that a correlation existed there. While they examined a seemingly wide variety of classes, levels, and students, most of the classes observed still had a fairly traditional teacher-dominated approach. Thus, it was difficult to assess how much discussion was really enough. Also, the "discussion-based approaches" the researchers examined were not necessarily student-led discussions, but conversations in which the teacher may have played a role, too. In addition, the study used some of the same data as Nystrand et al.'s (2001), so not all of its data was fresh. Nonetheless, the practice of discussion as part of instruction proved to be valuable, and the expanse of the study makes this a weighty contribution to the field.

Teacher Role in Cultivating Strong Discussions

Since discussions have been established as a valuable practice in the classroom, teachers must consider how best to set them up. Sosa and Sullivan (2013), in addition to studying the nature of dialogic discussions, focused on the context for classroom discussions. One aspect they sought to discover was the best kind of social environment that would provoke dialogic discussion. To do so, they observed three lessons in the classroom of an engaging 8th grade language arts teacher whose strength was asking thought-provoking questions during the 2008-2009 school year. In each lesson, some kind of whole-class discussion took place, and the researchers used field notes and coding to track what the discussions included. They noted both teacher and student

behavior, literacy emphasis, and the context for instruction. Two of the lessons were discussions of literary texts: the short story “Harrison Bergeron” and the play *Romeo and Juliet*; and the third featured students reading original poems and commenting on each other’s writing. The researchers observed the dialogic nature of the whole-class conversations, noting especially the role of the teacher. The teacher welcomed student interpretations and often incorporated student questions and responses into the conversation, rather than just evaluating them and continuing with his pre-planned points.

The authors, seeking to understand how the nature of this classroom conversation evolved, discussed the concept of a “Third Space,” a theoretical space that allows for that interactive, co-constructed textual interpretation between teacher and students. To establish that kind of environment, one that is not teacher-dominated but encourages multiple perspectives and freedom in sharing, the authors emphasize the need for the teacher to intentionally set up that kind of social environment. Once a Third Space has been established, and students understand that their thoughts and ideas are valued within the academic conversation, the dialogic discussion can go that much deeper in the examination of a literary text.

This study, actually part of a larger, multi-year study covering many more teachers and classes, was quite limited in its scope: just one teacher and three lessons. The students in this class were also part of a gifted program, not pulled from a more diverse population of abilities. However, the general conclusions the authors posed

would logically apply to other populations, as well: for an academic conversation to become a dialogic discussion, a teacher must create a social environment in which students feel safe and able to contribute. The authors did not specify how to do that; they just emphasized that it was important.

Baker et al. (2017) also examined how teachers can best set up classroom discussions. Their study focused specifically on strategies teachers could use to increase student engagement in small-group, text-based collaborative conversations (they each used the Collaborative Reasoning framework). Six teachers and 120 fourth-grade students participated; they were from four elementary schools in central Illinois, two rural and two in small cities. Within each of the six classes, there were three smaller discussion groups, and those groups engaged in a total of ten discussions over five weeks. Teachers had been trained in Collaborative Reasoning prior to this study and used a variety of framing techniques as they set up the discussions. Researchers transcribed three discussions (the third, sixth, and ninth) from each of the 18 groups for coding, then analyzed the results.

Baker et al. coded for four different framing strategies that teachers might use to give structure and autonomy to student groups. They found that getting students involved in setting guidelines for the group discussions was positively related to student engagement, both in cognitive-behavioral and social-emotional engagement. It seems likely that encouraging student involvement in even the set-up of collaborative discussion sets the stage for more robust involvement and engagement in the

discussions themselves. By reflecting on previous discussions, students engage in metacognition, which may prime them for more thoughtful contributions in their groups and more autonomous collaboration (apart from the teacher). They also found that teachers adapting their framing strategies is more helpful than a "one-size-all" approach. Teachers who consider their particular group of students when deciding how to frame discussions will likely have more success in engaging students than those who use the same framing strategies every time.

Because this study drew from a fairly wide selection of classes, students, and discussions—and because of the complex coding and analysis the researchers applied to their findings—these results carry weight. The applications may be limited, though, because the study focused on fourth graders, who may need more explicit structure than secondary students. Also, the discussions in which they engaged were specifically Collaborative Reasoning discussions, which follow a more prescribed model than other discussions. Nonetheless, a teacher framing a class discussion by involving students in coming up with discussion guidelines and adapting their framing strategies to their particular class could still be valuable strategies.

Billings and Fitzgerald (2002) looked at a particular structure for setting up class discussions: the Paideia Seminar, sometimes also called the Socratic Seminar. Based on the work of Mortimer Adler, Paideia Seminars embody the ideals of text-based dialogic discussion: there is student-to-student dialogue in which all student voices are valued, and the teacher's role is merely to facilitate a conversation around the text rather than

leading the discussion. In their study, Billings and Fitzgerald observed and coded three Paideia Seminars in an 11th grade English honors class during the spring semester. Eighteen students and one teacher (who volunteered) participated in each discussion, which used "The Minister's Black Veil" by Hawthorne, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" by Martin Luther King, Jr., and a series of logic word problems, respectively. Several of the students had been in other classes together, too, so they were comfortable sharing together. Researchers derived data from transcriptions from observations and tapes, student questionnaires, teacher interviews, and student focus groups. They noted particularly who in the class talked, their roles, and the purposes, functions, and forms of talk that took place.

In their analysis of this application of the Paideia Seminar discussion framework, Billings and Fitzgerald found that, while using the framework did lead to some admirable discussion features, it did not follow all the prescriptions for a true Paideia Seminar. The teacher had attended multiple training sessions and was an enthusiastic proponent of the Seminar, and did follow through with several Seminar guidelines: she assigned a text for students to read before the discussion; students sat in a circle, as did the teacher, at eye-level with them; and the teacher posed open-ended questions within the discussion. She also emphasized the value of critical thinking. However, in practice, she deviated from Seminar guidelines in several ways, too. She talked much more frequently than students (nearly twice as much as the students, treated collectively), and she assumed the role of "Knowledgeable Coach." The teacher made nearly as many

statements as posed questions, and made her opinion seem like the standard to which students should come to understand, rather than allowing them to co-create meaning of the text themselves. For the most part, students followed her lead: most acceded to her role as the leader with the most knowledge, though a few spoke up in respectful dissent. In a follow-up interview, after which the teacher had listened to the recordings of the discussions, she seemed aware of some of the discrepancies between the Seminar expectations and her class discussion, but also defended some of what she had done.

While this study was certainly limited by its focus on only one teacher and her class, Billings and Fitzgerald cautiously concluded that, even with training and good intentions, it could be difficult to follow through thoroughly with a particular discussion framework, like this Paideia Seminar. Even though she had three years of experience, they considered this teacher in transition with regard to leading Seminars. They hypothesized that the teacher's emphasis on students' critical thinking actually led her to encourage them to come to her conclusions, rather than give them the freedom to come to their own. They also speculated that if teachers are not fully aware of the reasoning behind certain guidelines for the discussion framework, they may not take it to heart. They suggested, too, that, as opposed to preemptive training, a more personalized mentorship may be most valuable as teachers implement Seminars, so they can work to change in the areas most difficult to them, personally.

Davies and Sinclair (2014) also researched the Paideia Method but focused specifically on Socratic questioning within discussions. They wanted to see how effective Socratic questioning would be on the depth of student comments and if results would vary based on students' socioeconomic status. A total of six public schools in New Zealand took part, two from each socioeconomic level: low, middle, and high. Within each school, four general education 8th grade classes took part, for a total of 24 classes. Of those, 12 were experimental, and 12 were control (two of each at each of the six schools). The 12 teachers of the experimental classes received professional development around discussion and the Paideia Method, which also included direct instruction on Socratic questioning.

Throughout the twelve weeks of the study, students engaged in three discussions; within each school, both the experimental and control classes discussed the same topics. The experimental classes also participated in an online discussion before their face-to-face discussions on the same provocative prompt. Researchers analyzed the transcripts from all the discussions and coded the results based on the type and depth of comments participants made and the type of interactions that occurred (teacher to student, student to teacher, or student to student).

They found that, while students' baseline discussions included comparable levels of deep responses (5.5% and 7.5%), by the final discussions, those who had been part of the Paideia classes with Socratic questioning were offering deep responses more frequently than those in the traditional classes (17.5% versus 7.5%). They also found

that many of those deep responses occurred in interactions initiated by students, not the teacher. In addition, those in both the middle and high socioeconomic schools grew significantly in the deep responses they added; those in the low socioeconomic school still increased in the frequency of deep responses by their final discussion. While the previous study suggested that shifting from a traditional class discussion to a Socratic seminar can be challenging, this study suggests that it is both possible and beneficial to students, especially as it relates to encouraging depth of thought and peer-to-peer co-created meaning and engagement.

While Davies and Sinclair did understand that the students from the lower socioeconomic schools may have been disadvantaged because of less computer access and knowledge (and therefore less participatory in the online "pre-discussion"), the authors did not discuss how the very presence of that "pre-discussion" may have contributed to the depth of the in-person Paideia seminar. Based on their explanation of what made a Paideia seminar worthy of that title, the researchers did not address any preliminary online discussion, just the prerequisite of all the students reading the same text. Having more preliminary work to do could have made a difference to the depth the students were able to plumb in class.

To cultivate fruitful discussions, there are a number of practices a teacher can incorporate to set students up for success. In Freedman's (2020) study, he observed two 9th grade history classes taught by the same teacher over the course of seven class periods each. His purpose was to evaluate the class discussion for productive

disciplinary engagement (PDE) and to look at how specific PDE principles may have influenced the discussions. While PDE is a new term within this paper, it reflects the same idea of dialogic discussion that has already been established: namely, that students are authentically engaged in a collaborative text-based conversation together.

The classes Freedman observed had been studying postwar U.S. history and were shifting into a unit on the Vietnam War. A total of 46 students were in the classes: 20 in the first hour and 26 in the third hour. They attended a public high school in the rural Midwest, and while they were mostly racially homogenous, they were socioeconomically, ideologically, and academically diverse. One unique aspect of this study is that Freedman himself took part; he was not simply an outside observer but worked with the teacher on curriculum planning and also took part in the discussions on occasion (which may have unwittingly biased some of his conclusions, though they seem neutral). One can only wonder how the study may have been different had he only observed. Nonetheless, Freedman and the teacher designed the first four days of the mini-unit as primarily foundation-laying. The teacher lectured and provided information to the students that they read and discussed minimally in small groups. The class plans diverged in the last three days of the unit (the researcher and teacher had a prep period between the two classes and could adapt the third hour's plans based on how well the first hour went). During the class periods, Freedman observed the sessions, took field notes, recorded and transcribed the whole-class discussions on the last two days of the unit, then coded and analyzed the data.

Overall, the third period class engaged in more dialogic discussions than the first period class, and the author posits several reasons why. In the first period class, students had engaged with some of the documents that were fodder for the discussion, but not all. Also, the teacher and researcher intervened frequently (the adults in the room, including a student teacher, accounted for 76.4% of all talk time of the first hour conversations and 67.2% of third hour's). In addition, one of the interventions in the first hour, given by the researcher, posited a hypothesis that seemed to shut down student engagement rather than provoke it. In contrast, the third hour students had more time to engage with the documents - both to read them all and minimally discuss them in small groups - before the whole class discussion. The researcher also noted that, over the course of the two-day whole-class discussions, each class continued trends that had been established the first day: i.e., the first hour class, whose discussion continually "sputtered" the first day, continued in that vein; and the third hour class, whose discussion "took off" more that first day continued along that path the second day.

All of this suggests that a few strategies can more effectively set students up for PDE, or dialogic discussion. One significant factor is taking time to make sure students are prepared for a discussion, whether that be using class time to lecture on background information or giving time for students to read and engage with fodder texts. Even if authentic questions are posed, if students do not have the necessary knowledge to think through and reason in response to it, the discussion will likely sputter. Stints of non-

dialogic recitation *can* be used effectively to ensure students are equipped with the information needed for the discussion, but teachers should be careful about intervening in discussions because, as Freedman also observed, the trends established in a discussion are likely to continue: if a teacher "caves" too soon and steps in with ideas or responses, the student will likely come to expect that and disengage in future conversations. In contrast, in discussions where students have been amply prepared, the teacher should allow space for the students to engage, setting up the expectation for robust student dialogic conversation.

As mentioned earlier, the researcher's intimate involvement in this study may have unduly influenced some of his conclusions (though it did not appear to be significantly so). Another limitation was the small sample size—one teacher, two classes, two discussions—so what was true here may have been anomalous. The time of day may have mattered, too: students are usually more awake and engaged later in the day, as compared to their first class. Also, though the third period class did have more dialogic discussion than the first period, all told, it was only 4 minutes and 42 seconds, and only 14 of the 26 students took part. Therefore, there is still ample room for continued work in this area to see what can encourage more engaged participation in a text-based discussion. While this study focused on whole-class discussion, not small groups, the takeaways for teachers about preparation and intervention are still reasonably applicable.

In the study by Jadallah et al. (2011), researchers examined the effects of various teacher scaffolding strategies in fourth grade students' Collaborative Reasoning (CR) discussions. The study took place in a small city in east central Illinois and focused on 30 discussions in one classroom. The 23 students in the class were diverse in ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and academic ability. Before the discussions, the teacher was trained in CR facilitation and specific scaffolding techniques. As in any CR discussion, the teacher did not lead the discussion; rather, after the students read the text to discuss, the teacher introduced and framed the discussion, provided scaffolding remarks during it, and led a debriefing after the discussion was over. The teacher did not sit in the semicircle with the students, either, but sat off to the side to emphasize that she was not leading. The students, as dictated by CR protocol, were to talk freely (without raising hands), engage in critical thinking around the text, and to listen and share respectfully, with each student encouraged to participate. Only one discussion took place at a time, for 15 minutes or so; while one group (made up of seven to eight students and heterogeneous) discussed, the other students engaged in quiet desk work. Over five weeks, the students discussed two stories a week. The researchers recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the discussions using lag sequential analysis and bidirectional dependence analysis.

In analyzing the data, the researchers found, first, that, in contrast to previous whole-class discussion studies, the teacher spoke less than the average student in a group. Of the teacher's comments, all of which were scaffolding within the discussion,

they came from three primary categories: those dealing with evidence (both prompting for and praising the use of - 32% of her turns), those that ask for clarification (which included both clarifying pronouns of characters and prompting elaboration on a point - 21%), and challenging (posing an alternate view - 11%). The primary takeaway from each of these categories was that, as the teacher used - and ultimately modeled - these scaffolding techniques, the student to whom the teacher directed the prompt often responded in kind, but so did students who had not been prompted. In other words, if the teacher prompted for evidence, not only the student she spoke to, but subsequent speakers, too, would increase their use of evidence-citing. The scaffolding had a ripple effect among the students.

Another striking result of the study was that when the teacher used those scaffolding techniques, the students eventually adopted many of them in their own voices as the discussions went on. Through the course of the ten discussions, it took till around the seventh for the ownership of these moves to really transfer to the students, but at that point, the teacher rarely had to interject because the students had taken it upon themselves to ask for evidence and clarification from their peers. The only scaffolding that did not really transfer was the praising for evidence (which did happen a couple of times) and the suggestion of another viewpoint. The authors conjectured, though, that since the students themselves were offering various viewpoints, it may not have occurred to them to suggest the possibility of another.

The teacher in this study seemed to appropriately use the CR scaffolding techniques, in contrast to the Billings and Fitzgerald (2002) study, in which the teacher was trained in the Paideia seminar, which should have promoted more student participation, but still dominated the discussion. This may suggest that the CR setup is more realistically applied by teachers, but the sample size is too small to make that claim. The small sample size (one teacher and class) is a significant limitation. Another is that this study involved fourth graders, not high school students, so the scaffolding in discussion may have been necessary for the younger age of these students but would not be as effective with older students. However, even with just the one teacher and young class, the data is rich enough to conclude with some confidence that a teacher's scaffolding strategies in discussions can effectively train the students in effective discussion techniques and ultimately fade away in subsequent discussions as students adopt the moves as their own, allowing for a more authentic student-led discussion on a text.

Peer-Led Small Group Discussions

While Jadallah et al.'s (2011) study involved student-led discussions, the teacher still played a role in scaffolding during the discussion. What about truly student-led discussions? Are they as valuable as whole-class dialogic discussions? Applebee et al. (2003) established the value of dialogic discussion in classes but did not differentiate among teacher-led or student-led; are discussions without the teacher valuable? Before discussions themselves, is small group work around literature valuable?

Nystrand et al. (1993), in an oft-referenced article, studied small group work around literature in 8th and 9th grade classes. In the authors' previous study of 8th graders, they found that more time in small groups did not increase achievement; rather, it had a negative effect on achievement in literature. In this study, though, they sought to discover more about small group work around literature, to see if some types of small group work were more effective than others. To do so, they recorded four lessons each of 54 ninth grade English classes. Those classes were in nine different high schools in the Midwest: five urban, one suburban, and three small town or rural. The researchers recorded and analyzed the content of the classes, using regression analysis, to determine what they could about small group work in English classes.

First, they found that small group work was not frequently used; out of the 216 class recordings they had, only 29 included small-groups, and of those, the average time spent in small groups was around 15 minutes. However, as they looked more closely at what occurred in small groups, they did find profound differences in the kinds of small group work given. On the one end of the spectrum were very prescribed small group tasks, which really could have been done individually. The authors described it as collaborative seat work. On the other end were autonomous groups. The teacher still provided specific goals, even tasks, but did not prescribe exactly how the group should go about them. That freedom with parameters allowed students more ownership and seemed to provoke more authentic discussion and interactive critical thinking. Within the already infrequent small group time, that type of autonomous group work was also

infrequent: just 11% of all the small group time observed. The other facet of small group time that was more effective was when students were required to produce knowledge. Rather than manipulating information the teacher had already provided them, students were to evaluate, or problem-solve, or analyze something; their task did not have an already-prescribed answer or solution (for example, deciding together how someone was characterized, or determining what a character's motive might have been). In those cases, discussion arose organically because it was a necessary mode of meeting the group goal, and it often involved them using evidence from their literary text to support their ideas.

The researchers did conclude that, similar to their previous work in this field, the amount of time alone spent in small groups does not determine success; rather, it is the type of small group work that matters most. Collaborative seatwork is ineffective and can even detract from achievement, but autonomous, knowledge-producing small group work can promote achievement. In fact, achievement was more likely the more autonomous the small group work was. If students are to benefit from small group time, they must have clear parameters and goals, but then the freedom to interact over a text and co-construct meaning among themselves. This study was limited by the dependence on observations without a control group to draw more substantive conclusions, yet their findings ring true.

While small-group work has been fairly regularly implemented in K-12 education (though with varying levels of effectiveness), it has not always been a common learning

strategy in higher education. In their article, Kremer and McGuinness (1998) described the results of their implementation of student-led discussions in their higher education undergraduate classes. Part of the inspiration for student-led discussions came from a shift in higher education philosophy: the teacher is not the sole authority figure simply dumping their knowledge into passive students. Rather, students can and should be active participants in their own learning, and discussions are one way to do that. Another part of the inspiration from this technique came from the desires of employers and what they were hoping to see from the college graduates they hired. Beyond job-specific technical skills, employers wanted their employees to possess strong interpersonal skills, including the ability to communicate effectively and work well in groups with others.

For their classes, both final-year optional modules at the school of Psychology at the Queen's University of Belfast, the authors led one 90-minute lecture, followed by a student-led discussion six days later. (A series of 10 topics followed this rhythm over the course of each module in a term.) During each lecture the professors covered an overview of the topic and major themes within it, but purposefully left some ideas more open-ended so groups could discuss them more fully. After the lecture, students were given a series of five readings; each student was assigned a different selection to complete before the discussion, though more than one student would read each of those five selections. During the 90-minute discussion time, students were assigned small groups consisting of 12-14 students; they sat in a circle facing each other, and

after initially going around to share about what they read, they shifted into a broader discussion of the topic at hand. In the room where these discussions were taking place, a series of discussion points was projected as possibilities for conversation, but the group was not required to discuss each. After an hour, group members shifted to their second assigned group so they could be exposed to other perspectives within the class. To assess the groups, attendance was taken, and then each student evaluated their fellow group members - on preparation, sharing, support, facilitating, and membership. The overall discussion score did make up 15% of the final grade for these classes.

This article focused on one cohort of 67 students, though the classes could have up to 80. Over half the class had 100 percent attendance for the discussions (which was a typical trend), and over 80 percent of the class attended at least eight of the ten student-led discussion groups. There was not a strong correlation between the scores for discussion and the scores for the other class assessments (essay, exam, interview), but the authors suggest that reflects how this discussion assessment reflects a different skill set, one that may be more valuable for potential employers. There was still quite a spread in the overall grades for the seminar (from 0 to 90, with the highest concentration from 62-68), and the authors did note a significant difference between the contribution scores of the top quartile of students and the bottom. Though the results are not conclusive and this methodology more informal, they also noted subjective observations that students who participated in these discussions showed greater depth of understanding in their other assessments - and that in addition,

students evaluated these student-led group discussions very positively. So, while this study did not show conclusive evidence that student-led discussions are highly effective in higher education, it does reflect the trend of higher education shifting toward more active, engaging techniques that both encourage student ownership of learning and prepare graduates for future employment. Both provide the rationale for incorporating student-led discussions at the high school level.

In their study, Smagorinsky and Fly (1993) described what they found about why some small group discussions are more fruitful than others: ultimately, it boils down to the class culture the teacher has cultivated. In a relatively small sample, they analyzed three discussions each from four 10th grade English classes in Chicago. Three of the classes were general, and one was honors. In each class, the researchers recorded an initial whole-class, teacher-led discussion of a short story. The next day, students participated in peer-led small group discussions on a different short story. Researchers recorded all the small-group discussions and ultimately transcribed two, chosen randomly, from each class.

After analyzing the transcripts of the discussions according to Marshall's coding system, Smagorinsky and Fly concluded that what the students' small group discussions reflected was not the mechanical setup, but the pattern of discourse the teacher had set in the classroom overall. They noted that simply teacher modeling of a behavior was not enough. However, both "saturat[ing]" (p. 14) a class with fruitful discussion patterns and explicitly talking through the process of analysis proved to be effective. They contrasted

classes in which teachers provided long personal stories, or “broad interpretive context” as context for student responses, with classes in which teachers used questioning to prompt more student elaboration. It was that latter practice, especially, that transferred to the students’ small groups; students in classes where teachers used uptake to provoke more elaborate student responses used those same strategies in their own small groups. In the classes where teachers provided a lot of context and required only minimal student responses, it was the minimal student response pattern that transferred to the small group discussion.

So, while the mechanics of setting up discussions matter, that is likely downstream from the overall classroom culture and teacher habits in whole-class discussions that influence the effectiveness of student-led small group discussions. One potentially problematic area was the fact that the class with the most effective teacher and small groups was taught by the lead researcher. The authors did point out that data from that class was only used after another teacher backed out, and the data was initially collected before the study, as baseline information, so the teacher/researcher was not trying to make his class look better. As the researchers also acknowledged, even these four classes provided a small sample size, so their results are not necessarily conclusive. However, the trends make sense in the grand scheme of class culture. Rarely do small group discussions take place in isolation; they are always at least partially a product of the classroom culture out of which they come.

Setting up small groups in which students lead the discussions requires intentional instruction and preparation from the teacher. McMahon and Goatley (1995) conducted a study in which they observed a series of three student-led discussions that took place early in the school year in one fifth grade class. While all students in the class participated in these discussions on the book *Tuck Everlasting*, McMahon and Goatley focused on just one of the small groups, which consisted of five students. They observed a discussion early in the unit, one in the middle, and one at the end; all were in September of 1991. The teacher used a framework called "Book Club" for these discussions. Some of the students in her class were already familiar with Book Club because they had used it the year before. Other students, though, were new to it. The teacher provided ample instruction, modeling, and guidance along the way, but the discussions themselves were all student-led. The teacher grouped students so that a mix were in each group: some who knew the Book Club framework, and others who were brand new to it. Over the course of the study, the researchers both audio and video recorded the discussions, transcribed and analyzed them, took field notes, and interviewed the involved students.

In the first discussion, one student who had previously participated in Book Club discussions took a leadership role, but interestingly, adopted more of a traditional IRE rhythm in how she interacted with her group members. Others participated, but with frequent pauses and apparent reluctance and uncertainty about what should be happening; it did not meet the goal of authentic, free-flowing conversation that Book

Club seeks. By the second discussion, after more teacher modeling and mini-lessons, that same, more experienced student still maintained a leadership role, but other students participated a little more, and another student started sharing the leadership role. In the third discussion, those same trends continued: there was still some traditional IRE conversation, but students were starting to converse more naturally, and more shared leadership emerged among the group members.

Though admittedly a limited study, both in timeline and number of students observed, McMahon and Goatley still drew some tentative conclusions. One was that, even over a short time period like this, growth was possible in student-led discussions. At the same time, that growth required teacher instruction and intervention between discussions in addition to the leadership of their more knowledgeable, experienced peers; students did not get automatically better just because they participated. Instead, they learned more about the framework and guidelines around it, from both the teacher and fellow group members. While the primary focus of this study was discovering how students could “nurture productive discussions” (p. 24) among themselves, also noteworthy was the work the teacher did around those discussions. She provided ample instruction on discussion expectations - what to share and how to share it - and provided time for students to add thoughts to their reading logs so they would have fodder for their discussions. While this study focused on much younger students than my ideal demographic, high school students, these lessons can still be applied: the teacher must still prepare students for discussion, but within those

discussions, students with more experience can help their peers; and together, they can grow in their ability to have authentic discussions around literature.

Another approach that can help students engage in discussion with each other is the fishbowl. Akbar et al. (2018) sought to discover the effects using fishbowl discussions in 9th grade classes of Pakistan Studies in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa in Pakistan. They also wanted to see what kind of a difference it would make for both high- and low-achieving students. First, they administered a pre-test to the 68 students who participated. Then, they divided the students into control and experimental groups, each with a comparable average score on the pre-test. The control group was taught using traditional lecture instruction. The experimental group engaged in fishbowl discussions: a smaller group of students (often half the class) sits in a circle in the middle of class and takes part in a discussion while the rest of the class sits around them in a wider circle. While in the outer circle, students observe, take notes, and may pose questions or comments at the end. After the first round the teacher guides students in reflection and then has the students in the inner and outer circles change places. There are some variations in which the teacher leaves an empty chair in the inner circle so that an outer-circle student may step in if he or she wants to add to the discussion, and the teacher usually sits outside the discussion so he or she can allow students to engage - but can still step in to intervene if needed.

After the two different instructional methods, the researchers gave students a post-test, and then a retention test two and a half months later. On both the post-test

and the retention test, the students who had taken part in the fishbowl had significantly higher scores than those who had received their instruction via lecture. It did not matter if they had been high-achieving or low-achieving before; both subsets of students who had taken part in the fishbowl significantly improved on both tests.

Though this study was not specifically text-based, it could still be used for that kind of discussion, and it could be useful to scaffold for students: it could allow them to both take part in and reflect on a smaller group discussion with a teacher both intervening in a discussion if necessary and guiding the reflection before letting students go completely on their own in small groups.

One facet of small-group discussions that has not been addressed yet is the logistics of managing it in a classroom. While some models may have one small group meeting at a time so the teacher can listen and monitor, or the aforementioned fishbowl with half the group participating while the other half listens, many models involve multiple small group discussions occurring at the same time in a relatively small space. Dong et al. (2009) investigated that setup in a fifth-grade class in Hefei, the capital of the Anhui Province in China. Fifty-two students comprised the class, bigger than most American elementary classes, so even more students would be in the same room concurrently discussing. The researcher taught the class the Collaborative Reasoning framework for discussing literature in one 45-minute class period, and as part of that instruction, showed a video of other Chinese students engaged in productive CR discussions. Then, over the course of two weeks, the students engaged in four separate

discussions based on stories they had read. Seven small groups (five groups of eight students each and two groups of six students each) discussed in the same room at the same time, for about 20 minutes each time. The groups were heterogeneous: balanced based on talkativeness, academic ability, and gender. The researchers chose two of the seven groups to focus on and recorded, transcribed, and coded their discussions. The researchers gave them - and the control group, another fifth grade class that did not engage in small group discussions - an essay assignment at the end to evaluate their written arguments. They also had students and the teacher complete evaluations of the experience.

Overall, Dong et al. found that it is possible for students to engage in concurrent small group discussions, even with many students in a relatively small space. Students reported being able to hear and focus in their groups; distraction from other groups was minimal. In addition, those students who participated in the discussion class performed better on their argument essays than students in the same school who had not been in the discussion class. Finally, students reported liking these discussions with each other and thinking more critically about what they had read.

Given that these discussions did not have a designated leader, some of the groups' time was spent on "discussion management" - essentially figuring out who would talk when. However, as the discussions progressed, less and less time was spent on that, so the majority of the time (87% in Group 1 and 95% in Group 2, at their heights) was spent on "argument development," the hoped-for content of these

discussions. One fairly remarkable angle to this study is that, while CR protocol generally calls for the teacher listening in to scaffold discussions as needed, students in this study jumped right in with no teacher interaction. The teacher and researcher did walk around the room during the concurrent discussions to quiet groups down, as needed, but apart from that, the students' discussions were purely student-led. Leaders were not designated, and while a few students still adopted those roles informally to help discussions get going, in subsequent conversations, those roles were less needed because students acclimated to the concept of shared leadership and participated more. There were limited instances of participants seemingly offended by student leader correction, which seemed to dampen their participation for a short time, so that could be one area to more fully address. There was also some participant imbalance: some students tended to share much more than other students, but again, those issues could be addressed as they come up.

While this was just one study in one class in an upper elementary class in China, the feasibility of holding concurrent discussions in one class is logically transferable to high school discussions. If anything, it should be easier in American high school classes because those typically have fewer students in one space. Therefore, the fear that multiple concurrent discussions may be more distracting than helpful can be quelled. Since small group discussions allow more student voices to participate, they can be more effective in giving students a chance to engage in text-based conversation.

As teachers form groups for peer-led discussions, one consideration is the makeup of the group. Murphy et al. (2017) engaged in a yearlong study of the effects of heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings of students in discussions of literature. They worked with four teachers of 4th and 5th grade - two of each grade - in a small city in the Midwest. The teachers were all trained in the Quality Talk framework, designed to foster authentic questioning and critical reasoning around a text, while making personal connections and referencing the text. Once trained, the teachers implemented Quality Talk lessons and discussions into their yearlong curriculum; the researchers collected data on students' reading comprehension at the beginning of the year for a baseline, then at three other points: week 2, week 10, and week 19. At the start, the researchers used oral reading fluency checks to determine reading ability, and at other checkpoints, they used new readings with carefully designed multiple choice questions to determine basic reading comprehension and an open-ended written prompt to determine high-level comprehension.

Using the initial oral reading fluency results, they divided students into high, middle, and low categories. Sixty-two students participated (28 in fourth grade, 34 in fifth); half from each grade were grouped into homogeneous groups based on reading ability, and half were put into heterogeneous groups. Researchers also assured that in each group there was a mix of genders and those from each teacher. Ultimately, each fourth-grade group had 4-5 students, and each fifth-grade group had 5-6 students. Teachers facilitated the same three groups three to four times, then switched, so the

teacher was not a confounding variable. Teachers gave students mini lessons on Quality Talk components, like questioning strategies and co-creating meaning in the text. Students used literacy journals before and after discussions and also participated in pre- and post-discussions to prepare and reflect.

The researchers had a number of research questions going into this, but their most significant findings were around the effects of groupings on comprehension. They discovered that students in the homogeneous low-ability groups made the greatest gains in basic comprehension, but the heterogeneous groups made greater strides in high-level comprehension. While that conclusion was fairly straightforward, the authors also commented on the engagement of students in those groups. Though the heterogeneous groups may have led to better high-level comprehension, engagement was varied in those groups. The high-ability students seemed to feel comfortable and participate, no matter what group they were a part of. The low-ability students seemed to feel comfortable and participate in homogeneous groups but tended to be much quieter and hesitant in the heterogeneous group. Their interaction in homogenous groups did not usually get as deep into argumentation around the text; it stayed more surface-level. So, those lower-ability students may have been able to collaboratively establish better basic comprehension, but they were not able to collectively engage in the higher-level questioning, textual referencing, and argumentation necessary to support higher level comprehension. Therefore, the way teachers group students may depend on their goals for that time. If the objective is solely higher-level

comprehension, heterogeneous groupings seem to be the best way to go. If, however, engagement in discussion and more equal participation levels are the goals, homogeneous groups may be best. The authors did speculate on the long-term effects of heterogeneous groupings. If lower-ability students are continually placed in heterogeneous groups, what might the results be? Teachers would likely have to intervene to provide more scaffolding strategies, or students may withdraw.

Corden (2001) set out to understand how what students bring to a discussion influences their conversation. He accumulated data from eighth grade English classes in four high schools in England in a variety of settings, one teacher in each school, whose classes were mid-range, academically. He recorded 40 small-group discussions, ten from each school; discussions were each 15-20 minutes long. He transcribed discussions and interviewed participating students after having played the discussion recording for them. He also collected teachers' journals and interviewed them weekly.

Though he had acquired a wealth of data, in this particular study, he focused in on two discussions in an eighth grade class that were representative of trends he had observed; they highlighted an issue teachers had brought up - why some small group tasks set up seemingly identically yielded such different results. Some seemed to provoke rich collaborative work, and others simply sputtered, and students ended up working on their own. The four teachers in these classes all valued group discussions and tried to set up contexts in which students could engage in successful conversations: they considered discussions successful when students' language was more exploratory

and wondering, and if their contributions were based on text-based reasoning. As part of that preparation, teachers had students watch and evaluate recordings of their small group time, and from that set up guidelines for their time together. Students understood the value of their collaborative conversation in helping them learn more deeply.

What Corden found was that, though teachers may have considered tasks set up similarly, it was the students' perception of the purpose of each small group time that made the difference. In both discussions on which Corden focused, the teacher was having students discuss a portion of a text, but in the session that ended up being more successful, he explicitly gave instruction around the expectation that it would be a collaborative session. In the other, he assumed students understood that the task was to be a discussion among them, but they splintered off into more independent work. Using follow-up interviews, as well, the author discovered that the students considered independent work the baseline expectations, so unless a teacher explicitly told them otherwise, they defaulted to that method. However, when the students clearly understood the expectations for their small group collaboration time, they adhered to that and flourished in discussion. A clear takeaway is to make sure teachers give students explicit guidelines and that students understand and act on those expectations.

Another potential strategy is to coach students in the kinds of contributions that will allow for a more flourishing authentic discussion. Young and Mohr (2016) observed small group, peer-led discussions on literature to see what types of moves led to better

conversations. It was a limited study, taking place in just one fourth grade class, with seventeen students, yet the trends gave insight into potential areas of coaching for students in discussions.

Researchers recorded ten discussions of five groups; discussions ranged from just over five minutes long to nearly half an hour (students could determine the length based on when they felt done). The students had all read the same text and had prepared minimally, with questions, quotes, and unknown words, but the discussions themselves did not have prescribed roles or structure. The teacher did not take part nor intervene; the students facilitated conversations on their own. All the students who took part in this study had been part of literature circles like this in the grade before and had been doing them for seven months already in the current school year, so they were experienced in and comfortable with these kinds of discussions.

After recording, transcribing, and coding the data, the researchers ultimately identified five major categories of facilitating that helped discussions flourish: exploratory talk, elaborative feedback, topic management, confessional, and accountability. By far, the most frequent were exploratory talk and elaborative feedback: together, they accounted for three-quarters of the facilitative talk. Both reflected higher-level thinking, but exploratory talk included thought-provoking questioning and insightful statements, and exploratory feedback was responding to someone else with textual or reasoned support. Beyond those, the researchers noted "topic management," when students facilitated when and how to shift to a new topic of

conversation; confessionals, when students admitted not understanding something, which drew others into the conversation; and accountability, when students asked others to participate or asked peers for evidence.

While, again, this was quite limited in scope, and the participants were much younger than the targeted high school age, these trends ring true for what I have observed in my own class. The implications for this limited study are still worthwhile: these observed facilitative moves in high-functioning, peer-led literature discussions can be explicitly taught to students. Teachers can model and instruct their students in exploratory talk and elaborative feedback. In fact, the authors provided a list of sentence starters that students could use as they start making those practices a part of their own discussions. The angle of beginning with good discussions and identifying strengths within them made this valuable.

Davies and Meissel (2016) sought to apply the Quality Talk (QT) framework, primarily used in younger grades, to the secondary level to see how well it would work with older students. While not fully student-led, it is primarily led by students, and the teacher's role ideally minimizes as time goes on, both within each discussion and from one discussion to the next. As discussed earlier, the goal of QT is to promote higher-level thinking among students, often with the use of authentic questions and uptake (building off another's comments). This study also sought to measure the effects of these discussions on students' writing. To do so, they worked with eight teachers of English and geography in Auckland, New Zealand, at three different secondary schools

of varying socioeconomic levels. Seven of the teachers learned the Quality Talk framework to use in their classes, and one teacher served as the nonintervention teacher.

The researchers collected data from a baseline writing assignment, similar to the national exam students would take later in the year, and from initial class discussions. The seven intervention teachers were trained in QT techniques, then taught those guidelines to their students. As part of that teaching, students watched and reflected on a video of an example QT discussion. They also participated in a fishbowl-style practice QT discussion with half the class participating at a time while the other group listened and then offered feedback. After all that initial preparation, students took part in two subsequent Quality Talk discussions. Rather than written works, though, the texts they discussed in the English classes were films: *Juno*, *The Truman Show*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*. Social studies classes used prompts based on the subjects they were studying. Between the two discussions, students were shown their transcripts and asked to reflect on how well they had implemented Quality Talk strategies. The nonintervention students were asked to reflect on how thoughtful and complex their discussion had been and how to improve it for the next time. After their second discussion, the students completed questionnaires and then wrote a second essay, similar to the baseline, in which their critical thinking was assessed. The researchers recorded, transcribed, and coded discussions, and likewise coded both the essays and questionnaires from students.

In examining the results, all of the classes improved in higher level thinking and did better in the final writing samples, but those using Quality Talk did even better than the one nonintervention class (an honors class taught by an experienced teacher). While, again, Quality Talk discussions are not purely student-led, this may suggest that minimal teacher intervention to scaffold discussion skills can be helpful as students begin the process. It also suggests the value of discussions on writing. Another consideration is all the initial preparation the students had: direct instruction, watching an example discussion, and practicing in the first fishbowl discussion, plus their subsequent reflection. While this study was done primarily to see how effective Quality Talk was for secondary students, it seems as though many of the parts of this could be replicated. However, as the results of the study suggest, the Quality Talk strategies were more effective in producing higher-level thinking and writing, even over the non-intervention honors class. This was limited in the sense that the groups did not discuss traditional written texts, but English classes now consider a variety of text types, so ideas can still be applied. It was also limited in that there was just one non-intervention class to compare to, but the fact that it was an honors class taught by an experienced teacher lends weight to the authors' conclusions.

Text-Based Discussions

Inspired by the shift in teaching close reading strategies, provoked by the 2009 Common Core standards, Pennell (2018) engaged in a qualitative study of classroom conversation around close reading. The idea of close reading came to the forefront

through the Common Core, and teachers use a variety of techniques to help students meet the related standards, one of which is discussion. Her overarching question was around the "classroom discourse practices that shape the teaching and learning of close reading" (p. 307). Pennell's study was twofold: she looked at both whole-class teacher-led discussion and small-group student-led discussions around closely reading a text.

Pennell used a qualitative case study approach, in which four teachers and their classes took part. Her first case involved a sixth-grade teacher and her 22 students; the second case examined two seventh grade teachers and their 51 students; the third, an eighth-grade teacher and her 24 students. Each was in a different school district in the Midwest. Pennell used teacher interviews, field notes, and recordings of whole and small group discussions to analyze and draw conclusions: she interviewed the teacher(s) in each case twice, and she observed the classes in each case six times, for almost an hour each time.

In the two approaches Pennell observed of close reading instruction, one involved primarily teacher instruction and guidance with brief peer discussions before coming back to whole-class time. The other still began with teacher instruction, but then students had more time in their peer groups to discuss the text at hand. In both cases, students had time with the text before the discussions: either the teacher read it out loud, or the students had time to read it to themselves. Also, they all used typical close reading strategies of annotating, rereading, and questioning.

After analyzing the data she collected, Pennell drew two overall conclusions. One was that the teachers, who overwhelmingly "believed in" dialogic discussion, asked their students high-level questions in the whole class discussions, which provoked higher-level thinking. The second conclusion, however, was that the teachers did not take it much further than that and neglected to ask students about alternative points of view or challenge their thinking to consider other perspectives. That gist transferred into the students' small group peer discussions. In their peer discussions, students seemed comfortable discussing a text together, and used high level questioning, too, but just as the teacher's leadership seemed to reach a certain point and go no further, the same idea held true in student discussions. The students, in responding to each other, predominantly used "basic statements" (p. 320); they co-constructed knowledge together about the text, but it lacked deeper reference to the text or challenges that would have engaged multiple perspectives or alternate views.

This was limited in scope, so the results cannot necessarily be generalized, but it makes sense that the students' limitations in their own close reading discussions would follow the example set by the teachers' leadership in whole class discussion on close reading. While this study was specifically on teaching close reading through discussion, the takeaways seem applicable to any text-based discussion: since students often follow the models they have seen, teachers should be intentional in continuing to ask high level questions, but also prod students to consider other perspectives and use the text even more as they reason through questions and ideas together.

Walsh-Moorman (2016) sought to have her students engage more rigorously in text-based discussions and had used Socratic seminars to do so for a number of years. She typically facilitated whole-class seminars (discussions) in a specific text, in which she and students posed open-ended questions to which all students could respond. However, even though she explicitly required specific references to the foundational text, in both the preparation sheets and rubrics she used, it was still rare for students to refer to the text. Curious about how dynamics might shift in an online discussion, she studied her senior English class (AP Language and Composition), composed of 26 students, and compared two of their Socratic seminar discussions: one in person and one online. The in-person seminar took place over one class period on an excerpt from one longer text, and the online seminar took place over four days on three shorter texts. Walsh-Moorman recorded and transcribed the in-person discussion and archived the online discussion threads. She also interviewed four students about their impressions of both the discussions.

In examining the interactions and text-based responses provoked by both discussions, she noted that each had their strengths and weaknesses. She, as the teacher, took a more significant role in the in-person discussion, steering the conversation and times and challenging students to think more deeply about certain aspects of the text. In the online discussion, her only role was setting up the seminar, and the rest was made up of student participation, so their voices (metaphorically) and thoughts came through much more clearly. Participation among students online was

also more distinctly text-based and democratic - each student had an equal chance, rather than being “drowned out” by more dominant voices in person, and they were able to take their time in responding since their responses didn’t have to be added verbally in the moment. However, the author did note that it seemed less “discussion-like” being online, and student opinions were split. Some appreciated the written aspect of the online seminar - not having to try to butt into a conversation to get their required sharing in and having more time to think and go back to the text. Others reported that it lacked the back-and-forth nature of an in-person discussion and lacked the physical vibrance otherwise present in people’s personalities. They also admitted to only reading some of the online discussion threads and ignoring others, so their experience was selectively limited. Walsh-Moorman concluded that, depending on the discussion’s goals, a mix of both in-person and online Socratic seminars could be valuable for students.

While this study was certainly limited by just examining the researcher’s honors-level class and only four interviews, it seems to capture general impressions of discussions and possibilities. I am curious what student impressions would have been had they been comparing small group Socratic seminars, rather than a teacher-led, whole class discussion, because that may have allowed more people to share and go more deeply into the text. However, the idea that online discussions offer the chance for more reflection and the ability to go back to the text makes sense. Unless one has a

text practically memorized, it may seem that there is not enough time to go back to find a reference in a fast-paced, in-person discussion.

Often, when engaging students in text-based discussion, the goal is to help them understand the text better. Murphy et al. (2018) studied the aforementioned strategy called Quality Talk to see how well that type of discussion would foster students' comprehension of texts. Their subjects were 54 fourth grade students from two classes in a small Midwestern city. The researchers first gathered baseline data based on both students' basic and high-level comprehension and recorded a typical text-based discussion. Then, teachers engaged in professional development on Quality Talk, which trained them in both facilitating student discussions on texts and delivering mini lessons to their classes on skills of questioning and argumentation, which emphasizes using reasoning and evidence in their conversations.

Teachers facilitated weekly small group discussions with their students throughout the school year, and students mostly remained in the same group throughout the year. While teachers were working with each discussion group, the other students were engaged in quiet independent work. Apart from the conversations themselves, teachers taught those mini lessons on discussion skills early in the year. Four mini lessons addressed authentic questioning (as opposed to "test questions" with closed, right or wrong answers): uptake questions, high-level thinking questions, affective questions, and inter-textual questions. Two mini lessons dealt with argumentation: supporting a claim with reasoning and evidence and incorporating

counterarguments and rebuttals. Students also kept literacy journals throughout the year that they could reference in their discussions; in them, students had pre- and post-discussion activities centered around the focus text.

The researchers recorded, transcribed, and analyzed 15 small group discussions - about two a month. After each of those discussions, students were assessed on basic and high-level comprehension of the focus text. Texts were taken from the ELA textbook assigned to their grade, and they were a variety of genres and increased in difficulty throughout the year.

Over the course of the year, the frequency of teacher input generally decreased, as is the goal of this framework. One uptick was likely due to a new skill having just been taught and the teachers feeling the need to guide students in that new skill. Student input in discussion also changed: over the year, students increased in authentic questions (as opposed to test questions) and then decreased in question frequency as they increased in elaborated explanations. They also increased in exploratory talk; in other words, as the year went on, students discussed fewer questions, but went into greater depth on those questions. In addition, students who engaged in these discussions increased in both basic and high-level comprehension and in argumentation writing. The increase in comprehension was much higher than average growth in fourth grade.

This study was limited by its small sample size: two classes and fifty-four students. It also lacked a true control group to compare; simply comparing to average

fourth grade growth is much too broad to account for multiple variables in potential for growth. Also, given that these students are in fourth grade, and the target for this literature review is high schoolers, such prescribed structure may be too prescriptive for older students. At the same time, the explicit lessons and practice could be replicated for older students, since they still have texts with which to interact, and those texts continue to be more complex. When engaging with a text, it may be wise to directly instruct on discussion skills like authentic questioning and using evidence in argumentation to enable students to more deeply comprehend the texts they read.

Berne and Clark (2005) conducted a study focusing on making meaning within small-group, text-based discussions. They worked with one teacher and the 29 students in her ninth grade English class in a small city in the Midwest. Before getting to the small-group conversations, the students had engaged in whole-class discussions based on a literary text, and they had engaged in small-group work with each other. Also, specific to preparing for this discussion, the two researchers and the classroom teacher modeled a peer-led, small-group discussion on a short story to the class, and invited the students to evaluate it, noting both strengths and weaknesses. Then, students prepared to engage in their own small group discussions on a short story. Students had a class period to read “The Lottery,” a short story by Shirley Jackson, on their own; the next day, they engaged in 20-minute conversations in six small groups of four or five students, designed by the teacher to be heterogeneous in gender and academic ability. The researchers observed, took field notes, and audio recorded the discussions. Then,

they transcribed and coded the discussions, looking particularly for comprehension strategies.

The teacher of the class in the study, who was comfortable with whole-class discussions, was concerned about how students would understand the assigned story if she were not a part of their discussion. Ultimately, Berne and Clark found that students did make meaning in their small groups: their attempts to do so followed "statements of confusion" (p. 32), which could be either actual statements about an aspect of the text a student was puzzled by, or explicit questions about the text. In either case, what followed generally went one of two directions: students co-constructed meaning or engaged in didactic sharing (directly stating an answer or response to the confusion). If co-construction occurred, it generally included tentative language, an opportunity to refer back to the text ("cognitive re-entry" (p. 33)), and sharing opinions. While co-construction was implied to be superior because of the way it allows students to engage in the process of meaning-making, the authors emphasized that didactic sharing, though often seen as negative, also has its place in rich conversations around a text. In fact, co-construction and didactic sharing often overlap in discussion, so both can be productive in helping students make meaning of a text in their small group discussions.

This study was limited by sample size (one class of students, albeit in six small groups), but the observations about making meaning can still hold true in other groups. Another interesting note, though the authors did not emphasize it, is that observing and evaluating a model of the kind of discussion students may have been a key part of the

value of the students' conversations. Having students observe and evaluate a model discussion could be a strategy to prepare students for peer-led, text-based discussions, though testing it with control and variable groups would be ideal. Also, like Freedman (2020) pointed out in his study, since the students were given time to read the story on their own, they had the fodder they needed to valuably participate in the discussions.

In another article, using the same study, participants, and methods, Berne and Clark (2006) also used the observations of those peer-led, small-group discussions to investigate if and how students used comprehension strategies in their conversations. After analyzing their data, Berne and Clark found that students did employ specific comprehension strategies in their discussions of "The Lottery." The researchers noted previously-identified strategies like comparing/contrasting, contextualizing, questioning, searching for meaning, interpreting, engaging in retrospection, and summarizing. They also observed a few more that they dubbed "stating a confusion," "noting author's craft," and "inserting oneself in the text." Ultimately, most of the conversation that took place in the small groups was related to comprehension in some way (72-94%, depending on the group). The primary strategies students used were "interpreting," "text-based questioning," or, parallel to that, "stating a confusion."

In the midst of all this strategy use, though, Berne and Clark noticed a few issues. Though the students were employing comprehension strategies, they appeared to be quite unintentional in their use. Another problem was that not all students participated equally; in each group, while three or four students substantially engaged, there was

one participant in each group who rarely spoke. Finally, the students did not allow their conversation to go too deep; rather, they skipped around from topic to topic without delving into a more detailed exploration of the ideas.

Again, this is a fairly small sample size, which may limit the transferability of the authors' findings. However, it may not necessarily be so negative that students were not using comprehension strategies. The flow of their conversations, at least in the published excerpts, seemed to be authentic and organic. Had students been trying to purposefully employ comprehension strategies, the discussion may have been more stilted and not as genuine.

Brett (2016) followed in the footsteps of Berne and Clark (2006) by also examining what happens in small group discussions of literature, but he was looking for very specific content: a balance between conversation around the technical aspects of a literary text and empathy with the content of that text. To describe what he was looking for, he coined the term "authorial empathy" (p. 295). He analyzed pre-existing data: transcripts from small group conversations in a 9th grade honors English class. Within the class period, students were first read a poem out loud, then had ten minutes to respond in writing to what they had heard and read, and finally engaged in 20-minute discussions about the poem. Of the two groups Brett transcribed, analyzed, and coded, one had four members and the other had three. He scored each episode of the discussion on a continuum for authorial empathy, with only technical observations on one end and only narrative connections on the other. He sought episodes that were

balanced in nature, those where students were able to discuss both the techniques of the author and have empathy for the content of the text.

Similar to Young and Mohr's (2016) strategy of starting with an ideal discussion and then figuring out what made it that way, Brett noted those balanced episodes of discussion, then looked for features of those episodes from which he could pull strategies to use for instruction for other students. He observed that in one of the most balanced discussions of the text, students engaged primarily in three strategies described by Berne and Clark (2006): stating a confusion, searching for meaning, and noticing the author's craft. While those strategies could take place in a less balanced conversation, here, they allowed students to both note the technique while empathizing with the person who was the subject of the text. Like Berne and Clarke, one of Brett's (2016) conclusions was that teaching those strategies, especially "stating a confusion," can be helpful for students. So often, students are under the impression that they must be assertive and correct in whatever they share, but Brett suggested that teaching students how it can lead to the goal of authorial empathy in discussion may show them the value of including it.

Brett also recommended "pairing" (p. 302): teaching both discussion strategies like these and the theory and purpose behind them. In this example, that would be both observations about an author's craft and making personal connections to the text. He noted, too, that the Common Core discussion expectations expect particular skills, but

that it is critical for teachers to not let discussions become so technical that they neglect the moral and ethical implications for students.

This was another study with a small sample size: one class, and only two groups within that class. Given the nature of this study, though, highlighting ideal discussion moments—those with balanced discussion comprised of both technique and empathetic observations—and then analyzing to see strategies students had used to get there seemed to make this more applicable. The fact that this was an honors class may have made a difference: it is hard to say if the same strategies would have been used in balanced discussion in a general or lower-track class. At the same time, even if there was less balanced discussion, some of the same techniques may still have been used.

Struggling Students in Discussions

Earlier, it was established that class discussions tend to be dominated by the teacher, despite a desire from teachers for discussion to be a chance for students to engage in interpretation and meaning making on their own (Marshall, 1989). Since that and many other studies typically center on honors or at least college-bound students, Marshall and two of his colleagues (1990) also studied what discussion looks like in lower-track classes. They observed five English teachers and their classes over the course of a unit (no more than five class days). The classes came from five different schools (three urban, one suburban, and one rural) and covered four different grades (one seventh grade, one eighth, two tenth grade, and one twelfth grade). Researchers recorded, transcribed and analyzed 16 whole-class discussions of literature and also

interviewed teachers and at least one student from each of the classes. As opposed to many other studies on discussion, though, the classes the researchers observed were all composed of average and below-average students. Marshall et al. sought to discover what discussions were like in English classes with this population and to see what teachers and students thought about the purpose of such discussions.

In interviews with the teachers, they collectively wanted their students to personally engage with the text, to actively participate in the discussions, and to be able to construct meaning students could apply to their own lives. Different from teachers of honors classes, the focus seemed to be less on the texts themselves, but on the students' connections to them and their ability to use them as reflective tools. However, the teachers also reported significant struggles with their student discussion. Because of the students' difficulties with reading and school overall, teachers were unsure what students actually understood from texts they had read. They felt a burden to use class time to make sure of students' basic comprehension of the texts, which left less time for discussion. They also noted students' difficulty with general school engagement because it often felt so disconnected from their personal lives. Students reported similar sentiments: that the goal of discussion is to engage in conversation that interprets and makes meaning of a text. Students also noted teachers playing a key role in discussions and often putting the text in their own words since it may be too difficult for students to comprehend. One compelling excerpt also showcased a student's disconnect from school expectations and his life outside of school. The student acknowledged teachers'

desires to “have kids go by the rules and play everything straight” but said in his own life he had learned that it was a “dog-eat-dog world” (p. 12). He struggled seeing relevance in class activities when “polo shirt[s], […] gold around your neck, [and] driving a BMW” determined whether you were viewed as one of “the scumbags [or] the higher people” (p. 12). Both teachers and students showed in their interviews the challenges of discussions about literature among non-college-bound students, especially when there were so many other things at play besides school in students’ lives.

After analyzing communication units, turns, and the categories of utterances from both students and teachers, the patterns that Marshall et al. found in these discussions of literature were similar to his previous study: “teachers dominated the discussions” (p. 37). They had nearly as many turns as students, collectively, and their turns were longer than students’. When teachers spoke, they informed, questioned, and responded, in that order; the majority of their turns were informing. When responding to students, they most often restated what students had shared, then used it as a springboard to more informing and another question. When students did talk, their comments were also informative and reflective of the questions their teachers posed.

The only significant differences between this study in lower-track classrooms and the other study on college-bound classes were that these teachers made more informative statements, and they were more apt to offer positive feedback to student contributions (perhaps in an attempt to affirm and encourage more participation). The authors suggested that the reason for the general discussion patterns was partially the

fact that these discussion patterns are hard to break: they are so ingrained in the way teachers conduct their classes. On the other hand, part of it is the challenge of teaching students who have been so alienated by school; teachers need to scaffold so much that it seems to leave little time for actually getting to student connections to the texts. While the authors could have offered specific strategies, they concluded by suggesting that the challenges in lower-track classes are more reflective of larger societal issues, so simple strategy shifts may not make as much of a difference as radically reimagining education for students who come from non-middle-class, non-college-bound families. However, this article was published thirty years ago now, so while it may still reflect trends in discussion and challenges among lower-track students, some things may have changed in the ensuing decades.

Despite the challenges of cultural circumstances, teachers can still attempt strategies to improve what they can for their students. In fact, Heron-Hruby et al. (2018) actually suggested the possibility of using small-group literature discussions to help struggling students. Their study took place in a rural high school in eastern Kentucky, in a tenth grade English class for students who had low scores on reading tests. In an effort to help those students on upcoming standardized tests, administrators assigned them to this class, which spanned two class periods: the first was “traditional” English class, on canon texts, grammar, and mostly direct instruction. During the second class period, students read self-selected books - primarily young adult literature - and engaged in a variety of projects and discussions on those books. The researchers observed over the

course of three months in the spring semester to record the small group discussions, which students engaged in once a week. There were 3-5 students in each group, and the groups changed at least twice over the months, as students finished books and shifted to other groups. There were often 3-4 groups going per week, and the researchers recorded a total of 19 discussions. Their purpose was to look for reasoned arguments and varied stances from the students as they took part in the small-group, peer-led discussions.

The teacher and researchers provided frameworks for discussions. The first two discussions were journal-based so students would have something prepared to discuss. The next two used discussion webs based around a central problem-based question on the text. Movie trailer storyboards, in which students had to collaborate on a tagline and support, were used for the next discussion. Two of the last discussions were literature circles, in which students had prescribed roles for the purpose of reading comprehension. For the final discussion, the students chose their own format from those four: two chose literature circles, and one chose the movie trailer storyboard.

In analyzing the transcripts from the recordings of the discussions, using qualitative theme analysis, the authors coded based on categories that already existed from previous research, but also created categories based on what emerged from the student discussions. Their findings covered both the concept of reasoned arguments and the stances that the students took toward their readings. In the latter category, they found that students acted as reading stewards, wordsmiths, and critics. As reading

stewards, students facilitated their understanding of the text and helped each other comprehend what had happened. The example they gave of this occurring was provoked by one student's statement of confusion, which aligns with Berne and Clark's (2005) study. Students also facilitate practical aspects of the discussion: when to move on, when to pause because some students had not read as far as others. As wordsmiths, students "negotiat[ed] word choice" (p. 389). Especially during the movie trailer work and one discussion web, students worked together on which words to use as they described their texts. Finally, students were critics, both in popular and academic ways. The researchers also observed chains of claims and evidence in all the discussions, while some (discussion web and movie trailer) also included counterclaims and rebuttals, though less frequently. Despite the use of reasoned argument in these discussions, the authors also noted that they could have used them more.

Based on their findings, Heron-Hruby et al. concluded that using small-group, text-based discussions for struggling readers can be effective. While not officially part of their study, they did note that, by the end of the second semester in this course, all but one of the students had exceeded the expected-growth score on the subsequent standardized test. Rather than engaging in "drill and kill" test preparation, discussion-based learning may be more effective in increasing student achievement.

This was certainly limited by the small sample size of one class with only twelve students participating. Also, while it seemed clear that engaging in small-group, text-based discussions was helpful for students' literacy skills, the researchers did not

emphasize what may have been key factors: the students had two full classes of English a day (one more traditional, the other more choice-driven), and the students were able to choose what they read for this. Their choices were more popular, young adult literature, and not necessarily academically rigorous texts. It is unclear how much of the success of this approach was due to the extra English time and the freedom students had in selecting appealing texts. Nevertheless, those could also be considerations in helping lower-track students succeed in reading and discussion.

Another tactic that may be valuable, especially for lower-track students, is discussing reading strategies within the small-group, text-based discussions. Hall (2012) studied middle school students' discussions in social studies classes, in which students were grouped with others who perceived themselves similarly as readers. She sought to find out how struggling readers participated in those groups, and what the struggling readers' experiences were, depending on their perceptions of themselves.

Hall conducted the study over twelve weeks, and at the start of that time, she assessed both students' actual reading ability and their perception of their reading ability (e.g., a student who was an average reader may consider himself above-average, and a student who was above average may consider himself below-average). Based on both those assessments, she and the teachers placed students in heterogeneous groups based on actual reading ability, but homogeneous with respect to perceived ability (but students were not told that explicitly). So, each group (four to five students each) was made up of students from each reading level. Interestingly, only about a third of

students correctly perceived their reading abilities; the rest were a mix of over- or under-estimating their ability. Three teachers at two schools in the rural south participated, each with one of their classes that they thought needed the most help in reading. In total, 52 students participated.

The routine the classes followed for this was multi-step: first, they were given instruction on a specific reading comprehension strategy. Then, they read a text and tracked their strategy use; next, they discussed with their small group both the text itself and their strategy use. After that, students read another text, again tracked their strategy use, and again took part in a small group discussion on the text and their strategy use. They then reflected on their learning - on both the text and the strategy use - and finally met with their group one more time to discuss their reflections. This whole routine happened four times in the twelve weeks; each round took about two weeks. The reading strategies they were taught were on metacognition, predictions, prior knowledge, and questioning. Since each round included three discussions, each about 15 minutes, a total of 144 discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Hall also interviewed a sampling of readers to gauge their perceptions.

At the beginning of the study, within the first six discussions or so, the struggling readers, no matter which group they were in, spoke less than their peers. Those who were average readers spoke more, and above average readers spoke the most, regardless of their self-perceptions. However, as time went on, those who were below-grade-level readers spoke up more and even took on leadership roles in the groups. Hall

noted that the shift in sharing time occurred about halfway through, and the leadership shift two to four discussions later, so that by the end of the study, ten of the twelve discussion groups were being led by struggling readers. She also noted that when lower-track students led, they were more apt to prompt their peers to share more reasoning and explanation for their contributions. In interviews, students shared that, though they may not have been as actively participating early on, they were still listening and learning, and Hall suggested that time was likely valuable for building a comfortable environment for sharing, and for the lower-level readers to get a sense of how stronger readers used particular strategies.

Though this study took place among younger students (sixth grade) and in social studies, the results suggest that it takes time for students to feel comfortable and capable sharing, but that it is possible. A key part of this study is that students did not just discuss texts themselves, but also the reading strategies they used. It seems likely that sharing those may have demystified the reading process for below-average readers and perhaps helped the group share more vulnerably, since strategies are often used to alleviate confusion. This aligns with previous studies that laud the value of stating confusion in text-based discussions for provoking deeper, more effective understanding. Hall, in fact, recommended framing classroom discussions of a text around the process of struggling and how to work through it.

Student Perceptions of Discussions

Thus far, with the exception of some student interviews and surveys, these studies have been primarily teacher-focused: about what teachers could do, how to scaffold, and how to foster rich discussions. With a similar goal, Alvermann et al. (1996) pivoted to examining text-based discussions from students' perspectives. They conducted a multicase study that spanned five teachers, grade levels, and geographic areas, with the goal of discovering and synthesizing what students thought of discussions in their classes. While the researchers recorded and transcribed the class discussions (both whole-class and peer-led, small-group, depending on the class and teacher), the bulk of their findings were derived from focal groups at each site, in which students watched tapes of discussion, then vocally responded to questions about their discussions and others they watched. The five classes used for this study were all humanities, but varied in age, diversity, and subject. One was a 12th grade AP English class in Phoenix; one was an 8th grade language arts class in Atlanta; one was a middle school language arts class at a school for gifted students in a southern university town; one was an 11th grade history class in Buffalo, New York, at a school with mostly English language learner immigrants; and one was a 10th grade global studies class at a large suburban high school in the northeast. Two of the classes were small enough that all students participated as the focal students for follow-up interviews (12th grade English had 13 students; middle school language arts for gifted had 14 students). The other classes each had four to six students who provided follow-up reflections. Over the

course of the school year, researchers recorded and transcribed three class discussions - one each at the beginning of the year, in the middle, and toward the end - and conducted focal group sessions after each. While many were peer-led, small group discussions, a few were whole-class.

The researchers synthesized the data from students and recognized three general assertions about student perceptions. First, “students are aware of the conditions they believe to be conducive to discussion” (p. 253). They thought that small groups were preferable to whole-class discussions, that it was important to feel comfortable with group members, that they all shared responsibility for the outcome of discussion, and that it was good to maintain focus on the discussion topic. Second, “the tasks teachers present and the topics or subject matter they assign for reading influence participation in discussion” (p. 257). What teachers choose as discussion topics and how the discussions are framed matters. Students appreciated discussion topics that were interesting or likable - or they wanted teachers to make them think it was interesting; they also generally liked discussing literary texts as opposed to social studies texts. Finally, “students see discussion as helpful in understanding what they read” (p. 260). They valued listening to each other to learn more about the discussion topic, getting a chance to verbalize their thoughts and potentially persuade group members, and figuring out vocabulary from the texts together.

Certainly, a limitation to this study is that a relatively small number of students participated in the focal groups, yet the conclusions the researchers drew were trends

that cut across the silos of the five different sites. They acknowledged the influence that their presence and the study itself (the chance to watch and reflect on discussions) may have had on student participation and reflections. They also acknowledged the limitation of reporting individual perceptions as the topic of a study. Nevertheless, they recommended a number of teacher practices: cultivating a classroom community where students know each other well and feel comfortable sharing; giving students ample opportunities to discuss their readings, selecting engaging topics, and fostering student leadership within discussions - setting expectations and parameters, but then giving students the freedom to go from there.

Flynn's (2009) study also set out to discover the student experience in peer-led discussions, and how she could use that to make subsequent discussions better. She taught 9th grade, and over the course of a school year, used her three sections of Honors World Studies classes to collect information on the student experience in discussions to scaffold their experiences. The high school where she taught in Chicago had selective enrollment, and it was an honors class, so the students were already generally eager learners and participants. It was also a diverse population - a little less than a third, each Black, white, Hispanic, and around ten percent Asian. While she was not certain how much of an effect each of those factors had on student perceptions of discussion, the patterns in student feedback seem applicable to other classes.

Over the course of the school year, her students participated in a number of discussions of several different styles. They began with a role play, in which students

took part in four rounds of conversation with a guiding question; each student was assigned a particular role and had to use appropriate language and technique: one was the first to respond to a question, another offered support, another questioned and played devil's advocate, and a fourth summarized and synthesized. This allowed students to see specific parts in discussion and intentionally practice the language and role. After that, they took part in a salon, in which they each adopted a character, learned about him or her, and interacted as though they were that person, with one student playing the role of moderator, to make sure all took part appropriately. Next was a fishbowl, and then an online forum, both of which depended on primary sources in their conversation, and finally was a simulation, in which students took on countries and argued, Model UN style, for resolution in various realms.

After tracking discussions with sociograms, charts, and notes, collecting student reflections, adding her own teacher reflections, and interviewing students, Flynn came away with five main points around student perceptions of discussions. First, students are very aware of group dynamics and concerned with peer perception; they can struggle with how to time their input - when is a good or appropriate time to say something, and how? They also did not appreciate roles that took students out of discussion - both leadership roles and roles like scribe or recorder. Rather, they sought discussions in which each group member could be an equal participant. She also noted how critical the common text was: when working with a source document, it was important for students to understand it well, so sometimes reading comprehension

would need to be addressed. Another critical piece was student voice: “students want[ed] to be heard” (p. 2046). If vocalizing was difficult, the online type of discussion offered another avenue to sharing thoughts and ideas. And finally, student interest mattered: if students thought the discussion was on something worthwhile and real, they were much more engaged and participatory.

Each of these observations lent itself to an application: to give students a chance to practice typical roles (not prescribed like “leader,” “recorder,” etc. - but initiator, summarizer, etc.); allow students to be equal participants; give ample time and support for sources; try various forums so all voices can be heard; and provide a way to do something real and tangible with what students discuss.

Now, these were in a social studies class, so especially the point about helping students understand a text before discussion may be debatable; an English class discussion’s goal may be to get at that understanding collectively. However, using these ideas to help students grow into flourishing discussions can still be applied in an English class. Democratic collaborative conversation is still a worthy goal in English.

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

In the world of class discussions, despite the goal of rich student interaction, teachers often dominate the conversation by sharing more frequently and for more time than all their students (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Freedman, 2020; Marshall, 1989; Marshall et al., 1990; Nystrand et al., 2001). However, discussion-based approaches are good for students' learning and achievement (Akbar et al., 2018; Alvermann et al., 1996; Applebee et al. 2003; Davies & Meissel, 2016; Davies & Sinclair, 2014; Kremer & McGuiness, 1998; Murphy et al., 2018). Rich discussions generally consist of authentic questioning and elaboration, or building off what someone else has said with more questioning or reasoned responses (Davies & Meissel, 2016; Davies & Sinclair, 2014; Murphy et al., 2018; Nystrand, 2001; Pennell, 2018; Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993; Young & Mohr, 2016). Another valuable tactic in provoking more interactive discussion is stating a confusion (Berne & Clarke, 2005; Berne & Clark, 2006; Brett, 2016; Hall, 2012; Heron-Hruby et al., 2018).

One important factor of a quality discussion is the class culture, or the social environment (Alvermann et al., 1996; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Flynn, 2009; Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993; Sosa & Sullivan, 2013; Young & Mohr, 2016). If students are involved in setting guidelines for their discussions, they will be more engaged (Baker et al., 2017; Corden, 2001). It is also important to consider your particular students as you frame a discussion (Baker et al., 2017; Hall, 2012; Nystrand et al., 1993). The goal or task

of a small group discussion also matters to its fruitfulness (Alvermann et al., 1996; Flynn, 2009): both the way that it is set up (Nystrand et al., 1993) and that it is clear to students (Corden, 2001).

Multiple frameworks that attempt to provoke rich discussion may be helpful. Socratic seminars, using a Paideia approach, emphasize authentic questioning for deeper understanding in secondary classes (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Davies & Sinclair, 2014; Walsh-Moorman, 2016). Collaborative Reasoning is effective in small group, text-based discussions but has only been studied in upper elementary grades (Baker et al., 2017; Dong et al., 2009; Jadallah et al., 2011). Fishbowl discussions are effective for retention and reflection (Akbar et al., 2018; Davies & Meissel, 2016; Flynn, 2009). Quality Talk is a small-group, text-based framework in which direct instruction on strategies is effective for discussion skills and comprehension (Davies & Meissel, 2016; Murphy et al., 2017; Murphy et al., 2018).

Before the discussion itself takes place, the preparation in which students engage matters (Heron & Hruby et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2018). If students will be discussing a text, they need time to read the text before the discussion (Berne & Clark, 2005; Berne & Clark, 2006; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Flynn, 2009; Freedman, 2020; Kremer & McGuiness, 1998; Pennell, 2018). It may even help to have an online discussion before an in-person discussion (Davies & Sinclair, 2014). Watching a model discussion among other people is effective, whether in-person or on video (Berne & Clark, 2005; Berne & Clark, 2006; Corden, 2001; Davies & Meissel, 2016; Dong et al.,

2009; McMahon & Goatley, 1995; Pennell, 2018). Direct instruction from the teacher on particular strategies is impactful (Brett, 2016; Davies & Meissel, 2016; Murphy et al., 2017; Young & Mohr, 2016).

A few final thoughts also emerged from the literature. Within a discussion itself, the way that a teacher scaffolds or intervenes can guide students to richer conversation (Jadallah et al., 2011; Pennell, 2018; Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993). Students generally like small group discussions on literature (Alvermann et al., 1996; Dong et al., 2009). Finally, it can take time and multiple rounds of practice to build to richer discussions (Hall, 2012; Heron-Hruby et al., 2018; Jadallah et al., 2011; McMahon & Goatley, 1995; Murphy et al., 2018).

Limitations of the Research

My goal was to find strategies for small group, text-based discussions in general-level English classes. I looked at frameworks like Collaborative Reasoning and Quality Talk, even though they had been primarily used for upper elementary students, because the setup and roles did not seem too prescriptive like others (literature circles), and because angles of them could feasibly be replicated for older students. I investigated some whole-group discussion strategies because it became clear that teacher modeling and scaffolding within the large group made a difference in how small group discussion played out; however, I did not investigate ways for teachers to make whole-group class discussion better by itself. I stayed as closely as I could to text-based discussions, and not just those on topics or opinions. I did not venture into general group work or

collaborative learning. I only discussed grouping strategies as they applied to comprehension of a text. I stuck to literature as much as possible and only delved into social studies when, again, it was clearly text-based, and the takeaways could apply to literature. As I investigated struggling students, I concentrated on the intersection of struggling students and literary discussions, and not just how to help students engage or speak up more in class, or how to help them improve in English class. Also, I stuck primarily to in-person discussions. There is a growing body of literature on online or virtual discussions, and while little bits of that showed up here, my focus was on face-to-face discussions.

The research itself was limited in a number of ways. First, many of the most comprehensive studies seem to have used data from the late 1980s or early 1990s, nearly thirty years ago now. It is difficult to know how relevant some of those trends still are, especially since the 2009 Common Core standards were introduced that explicitly require a variety of discussions in English language arts. Because of those standards, teachers may be including more text-based discussions, but it is difficult to know. Another area lacking in the current research was assessment: how might grading affect discussion? If discussion is in the standards, it must be assessed - what might the measurable factors be?

Also, while I did find several studies on secondary students, a majority of studies on text-based discussion frameworks featured upper elementary students - many fourth and fifth grade. Though the discussion techniques could be transferable, there are many

developmental differences between elementary and high school students, and it is hard to tell what difference that might make. Also, most recent studies were very limited in scope, covering just a few classes, or even one. Many were also honors-level classes, so it was hard to tell what might apply well to general level or lower-track students.

Implications for Future Research

As implied above, even more comprehensive studies on general education or lower-track students in discussion would be helpful. Studies isolating various strategies would be helpful to determine what is really most effective, as opposed to attempting to identify trends in successful discussions. In addition, within the realm of text-based discussions, investigating different kinds of texts as fodder for discussion could be interesting. How might strategies vary for discussions of a novel, poem, short story, or informational text?

It would also be valuable to study the effect of the Common Core discussion standards on discussions. Are more frequent, authentic discussions happening in English classes because of those expectations, or are the trends that Marshall (1989), Marshall et al. (1990), and Nystrand et al. (2001) observed about teacher dominance in discussions still occurring? How are current discussions being assessed? How do different types of assessment affect the discussions (a group grade versus individual grades, for instance)? Does assessment itself affect the content and structure of a discussion?

While there is ample research on frameworks in younger grades, another potential area for future research would be testing the various frameworks in high school students: the effect of Collaborative Reasoning and Quality Talk among general populations should be measured more comprehensively. Also, while the content of discussions was a focus for so many discussions, it would also be valuable to study ways to encourage more democratic participation among all group members so that all student voices can be heard.

Finally, part of the impetus for my research on this topic was the proliferation of students quietly absorbed in their phones or other devices and not even engaging in regular conversation with each other. It makes me wonder what effect those devices have had on both interpersonal discussion skills and thoughtful reading comprehension. Has the ability to have online discussions aided in thoughtful exchanges of ideas, or has the instinct to bury one's face in their device hampered conversational abilities and the ability to sustain attention to a difficult text? Both? Further research should be done on the impact of technology on text-based discussions.

Implications for Professional Application

Based on the information-gathering I have done here, there are many ways I want to apply what I have learned. First is the idea that, because discussion is so powerful, I want to include more of it in my classroom. I have become more aware that times in my class that I call "discussion" really do not deserve to be called by that name because I am talking much more than my students. Rather than just shifting to small

groups, though, I want to intentionally model the kinds of dialogic discussion I hope my students emulate within their small groups. Posing authentic questions, encouraging elaboration, and using uptake are all techniques I want to incorporate. At the same time, even in whole class conversation, I want to speak less and encourage more student voices.

I also want to be intentional about the preparation we do for small group discussions. It seems critical that students have read the text for the discussion or their participation will be hampered. As one author recommended, there is not just a "one-size-fits-all" framework for discussions, so, while some of my classes would be able to complete a reading assignment for homework to be ready for an upcoming discussion, other classes likely would not. Knowing that, I may need to give them more class time to read or read aloud to them so I know they have all at least been exposed to the text, and then they can, in their groups, wrestle with and co-construct meaning. Thinking of discussion skills themselves, I noticed that many studies included some kind of model discussion, either in-person or on video, and a chance for students to evaluate or reflect on it. That could also be something to incorporate: even if I did not have a model discussion, we could still have a practice discussion and spend time before and after reflecting on it.

An especially powerful trend I noticed was that building up to authentic, student-led discussions takes time. Especially in my general level classes, it can be easy to try small-group discussions a few times, become discouraged by the lack of participation or

seeming ineffectiveness, and revert back to more direct instruction. After completing this literature review, I want to continue to incorporate small group discussions. I also want to be much more intentional with teaching specific strategies, like some of those used in the Collaborative Reasoning and Quality Talk frameworks. The most intriguing technique, but the one that made the most sense upon reflection, was the idea of "stating a confusion." Coaching students specifically in the value of and freedom to admit what they do not understand would, I hope, especially help those students who struggle more.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, I want to cultivate a strong classroom community where students feel comfortable sharing. As the research showed, discussions are not just isolated events, but products of multiple factors. Students must feel a sense of belonging and connection to engage in authentic dialogic discussion with each other, on a text or otherwise, and it is my responsibility to create that kind of environment.

In the broader world of education, it is critical that students learn how to interact with each other in healthy, respectful ways. Rather than just spouting opinions, students need to be able to read carefully and thoughtfully engage in equitable, collaborative conversations in which they genuinely listen to each other, prod each other for solid evidence and reasoning, and together have a goal to reach that they can accomplish collectively. Educators must purposefully model and foster these skills to ultimately cultivate wise, empathetic communicators.

Conclusion

Discussion-based strategies are effective for students and increase their comprehension and achievement. Teachers can set students up for success in discussion by modeling dialogic discussion and explicitly teaching effective discussion strategies like elaboration and stating confusions. Multiple frameworks exist that could be helpful for fostering text-based discussions. Though it takes time for all students to feel comfortable participating, teachers can create a positive social environment, and also ensure that students have adequate preparation before engaging in small group, peer-led discussions. Limitations do exist in the current body of research, particularly around the effect of the Common Core discussion standards, the role of assessment in discussion, and the effectiveness of particular discussion techniques among struggling readers. Many studies were also quite limited in scope. Future research should study the latter areas and be done on a broader scale with more students of various ability levels. I plan to apply much of this in my own classroom, cultivating a supportive environment for students, incorporating more discussions on texts, and persisting to make sure students have opportunity to grow in this area, and my hope is that other teachers do, as well.

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