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## Discourse in the Classroom

Amanda Johnson

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**NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY**

Discourse in the Classroom

**A Paper Submitted to the**

**University Honors Program**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the**

**Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree**

**With Upper Division Honors**

**Department of**

English

**By**

Amanda Johnson

**DeKalb, Illinois**

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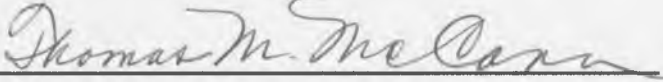
University Honors Program

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Applebee, Arthur N., et al. "Discussion-Based Approaches to Developing Understanding: Classroom Instruction and Student Performance in Middle and High School English." *American Educational Research Journal* 40.3. (2003): 685-730. Web. 15 Aug. 2013.

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

While experts (Nystrand, 1997; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran, 2003) have long encouraged authentic discussion as a means to promote literacy learning, teachers rarely engage students in this form of dialogic discourse and rely instead on recitations. The more monologic or presentational approaches to discussion seem to discourage students' active involvement and engagement, which is necessary for high achievement. If teachers avoid dialogue or do not know how to promote it, they may be missing an important opportunity to get students to engage actively in their own learning; therefore, they can achieve more.

The current research includes a literature review of research related to authentic discussion and literacy learning. Following an observation protocol developed by Hillocks (2009), the researcher analyzes sample high school English classes taught by one teacher to reveal discourse patterns and to conjecture about how the classroom discourse impacts students' development as readers and writers.

Amanda Johnson

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## Discourse in the Classroom

### **Problem**

Nystrand (1997) and Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, and Heintz (2013) report that the common method of classroom discussion found in schools is teacher-led question and answer. This method, however, robs students of opportunities to construct a deep understanding of the texts studied in the English classroom. It focuses on students' ability to correctly guess an answer that a teacher is looking for and ignores the higher level mental processes that occur when students read literature. Arthur Applebee supports this claim in "Discussion-Based Approaches to Developing Understanding: Classroom Instruction and Student Performance in Middle and High School English" when he states, "Viewed from a sociocognitive perspective, such instruction places a premium on transmission of information, providing very little room for the exploration of ideas, which is necessary for the development of deeper understanding" (691). In classrooms characterized by teacher-talk and recitation learning revolves around the teacher's ideas and largely ignores students' ideas, questions, and connections. Students are left memorizing answers so that discussion and later tests becomes recitation. For students to develop the deep understanding that schools are targeting, especially with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, they need to be able to explore their own ideas. They need the opportunity to talk through their own ideas with their colleagues and a way to solidify the learning taking place. They need to make their own sense of the

texts read in order for the knowledge to stay in their heads. To do this, discussion in the classrooms need to be student-led, authentic discussions.

The current study examines the practice of one English teacher in a suburban high school. This is an experienced teacher who serves as a mentor for a student teacher, and thus sets an example for appropriate classroom discourse. The teacher can be taken as representative of many experienced teachers, and his case can reveal if the dominant mode of discussion has changed since Nystrand's report in 1997.

## **Method**

I collected my data from observations of a veteran teacher and his classes at a Chicago suburban high school as an example of discourse in the English classroom. I visited the school nine times but was only able to collect data on three of those days. I collected all of my data within a week, the middle of October after expectations for classroom interactions had been set. I marked participation on the Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of that week. I sat in on all five classes, marking participation on three days.

The teacher has three classes of freshmen and two classes of seniors. First hour is a group of regular level freshmen who are usually still waking up and are very reluctant to talk at all. Second hour is a senior elective course. These students have no issues with answering the teacher's questions. A hand is raised fairly quickly after the question is posed. Fourth hour is Advanced Placement level seniors. They tend to take more time to answer questions because their answers are usually more complex in detail that takes longer to come up with. Fifth hour contains accelerated freshmen. These students are the storytellers. They have no problems responding to the teacher's questions. Hands are

raised almost immediately, but when they make a claim, a personal connection follows that is incredibly detailed and takes some time to express and relate back to the original question. Seventh hour is another group of accelerated freshmen. But these students have energy that overwhelms the teacher sometimes. He spends significantly more time with this class trying to refocus them back to the topic of discussion. When these students are on task, they can respond to the questions asked by the teacher. However, these students are less detailed in their answers compared to all of his other classes, so the teacher spends more time asking follow-up questions to make sure that the class is comprehending the material.

I collected the data by tallying student contributions in a notebook. I sat in the back of the classroom and out of the students' view. I made a tally in a box on a page that mimicked the layout of the classroom every time a student answered one of the teacher's questions. I also noted when a student asked a question. I drew an arrow between the desks when two students interacted with each other. The tallies revealed the amount of participation, while the arrows indicated the direction of the interaction: student to teacher, or student to student.

There are limitations to my research. First, I was only able to observe one teacher. The inferences I make about general trends are based in part on one teacher's practices. I do not have data from the beginning of the school year, and I will not be able to get data at the end of the school year; I am left with making observations about five classes from one given week. I cannot show or evaluate any long term progress. Lastly, on the Wednesday, the fourth hour seniors had to take a practice AP exam; so, they wrote independently the entire period. On the Friday, the first hour freshmen had an



independent writing day to work on their essays that were due the following Monday. In these instances, I lost data; there were no discussions to record.

### **Analysis of Data**

The data from the observations reveal a distinct pattern. First, a select group of students (spatially in the classroom) answer most often. Second, in some classes, relatively few students participate; a select few dominate the discussion. And third, students recite answers that the teacher is looking for.

The level of participation during a class depends on where students are sitting. Students who cannot hide from the teacher participate the most. The middle section has the most participation. They are directly in the eyesight of the teacher. His shoulders are squared right at this group of students for the majority of the lesson. In a way, he is talking directly to them and not the entire class. It appears that they feel obligated to answer his questions. Similarly, row one participates two to three times more than row two. The first row is closest in proximity to the teacher. The students in this row may feel the need to participate because they have no one to hide behind. They are exposed to the teacher. As he circles the room, he can read and check their answers more easily. As a result, he targets and calls on those certain students to answer his questions more frequently because he knows they have the ideas that he wants to discuss. Sometimes the teacher will glance at another student in the front row as a challenge to participate because that student has the correct response to the idea presented by the classmate because he reads student answers as he circulates among the first row. Still, the teacher summarizes the point and creates a question to be answered so that all contributions are

filtered through him. Because of this, there is little student to student interaction, only three instances.

Among all of the classes, there are a select few students who dominate the discussion. Some students are more vocal than others; this leaves room for some students to disappear in the classroom. Over the course of those three days, sixteen students never said a word during discussion, while other students spoke seven or eight times in a class period. Those sixteen students were not engaged in the conversation taking place; they were playing games on their Chrome books. They were missing key information that their classmates were offering. Because these students were checked out and others did not seem too keen on participating, the class discussion became mostly recitation and teacher analysis, with little interpretation from the students. Those few students who did participate had similar ideas regarding the text. As a result, these students did not have to defend their ideas at all; their interpretations were accepted as fact. Possibly, these responses were accepted as fact because these answers were the ones that the teacher was looking for.

Typically, students recite answers. All of the conversation goes through the teacher, so he has complete control over the statements made in the classroom. The room is even set up so that he is the center of attention. The students are in two rows that create a “U” shape. All information from anywhere in the room is directed at him, and he redirects, sometimes rephrases, to get the answer he wants out of the students. For example, the composite transcript below reveals a piece of conversation between the teacher and a single student. In this instance during a discussion of *King Lear*, the student was able to produce the right answer:

Teacher: “Why is Cordelia banned?”

Student: “She couldn’t say how much she loved Lear. There weren’t words for it.”

Teacher: “Tell me more.”

Student: “She didn’t follow his order, so she was banned and disinherited.”

Teacher: “Right!”

The student offers an accurate and reasonable response, but does not point to the elements in the text that allowed her to make her judgment. The response is closer to recitation than analysis. This example shows that the teacher was fishing for a specific answer from the student and made sure that the student provided it. He also controlled the conversation and kept it between the student and himself. Other students began to raise their hands to help out their classmate when they saw that this student was not giving a clear enough answer. Their hands went down after he demanded clarification from that one student. This teacher tends to demand concrete, fully detailed answers from his students. He stays focused on one student when he gets near an idea he wants to discuss. Here is another composite example from a different lesson where the student gets an answer wrong, so the teacher redirects the student so that the one student can provide the right answer:

Teacher: “Who can describe Faulkner’s writing style?”

Student: “It’s like a glacier. Seven-eighths of meaning is buried in the text.”

Teacher: “*Is* it like a glacier?”

Student: “Oh! No, it’s the stream of conscious—free-write without a filter.”

Teacher: “Yeah. Good.”

Again, other students wanted to participate to help out, but the teacher stayed focused on the one student. The students are not talking to each other. They are talking to the teacher. All they have to do is make claims, and the teacher tells them if they are right or wrong. There is a lack of student experiment and discovery. The teacher is doing all of the hard work for them. The students come up with a claim or hypothesis; the teacher has already done the experiment and arrived at the correct solution, so he gives them the answer. This reduces students' efforts in grappling with a text and with contending with competing interpretations. The discussion of literature turns away from being about a journey to discovery and towards more rote memorization of facts, which is not engaging. This is a possible explanation for why those sixteen students never spoke in the three days of observation.

### **Student Dominated Discussion**

In contrast to the pattern that is dominant like the classroom discussed above, a pattern of authentic discussion would be the opposite. The teacher would offer topics of discussion and then would let students discuss all of the possibilities; the discussion is teacher orchestrated, but almost completely student-led.

Students would talk to each other and not the teacher; the teacher would be a fly on the wall after introducing a topic, only interrupting if the conversation is completely off task. This way, the teacher is not doing the hard work for the students. The students would have to construct claims and hypotheses and then test them out on their own. They would use each other, and not the teacher, for support and to conference with as they try to find answers, not the teacher. The teacher is not there to say, "Right, that's

exactly what this part of the text means!” The students have to come to that conclusion on their own. In this method, students are more engaged in the material. They have to be in order to do the higher level thinking and testing that the teachers too often do for students. They journey to their own discoveries and do not necessarily take the path that the teacher has predetermined for them.

For example, if students were reading *Catcher in the Rye*, the teacher would offer a debatable topic and let the students talk on their own. The conversation on a given topic or question would last longer than the time it takes a student to give a response and the teacher to say, “Right!” Here is composite transcript of conversation from a group of students discussing a topic injected by a tutor:

Teacher: “Knowing what we do at the end of the book, is Holden recalling his experiences with identity formation, or is he expressing the product of his insanity?”

Student One: “He’s recalling his experiences with identity formation. He tested himself to find his limits in order to define himself.”

Student Two: “I disagree. This has to be expressing the product of his insanity. Everything he does is to the extreme. He didn’t test his boundaries; he overshot them.”

Student Three: “Yeah, you don’t pack up and wander around to find yourself as a young teen; you join clubs or sports at school or something. You change cliques in school, get new clothes.”

Student Four: “Maybe Holden is the type of kid who needs to do things to the extreme in order for them to make sense to him. Some people are like that.”

Student One: “Thank you. Building from that, what if he already tried those changes you’ve mentioned as a younger kid that we aren’t told about as readers, and it failed. So now he’s just up-ing the stakes.”

Here, the students are left to grapple with the material and come to their own conclusions. They have to engage and work with the material because the teacher is not interfering after every student remark. The conversation stays among the students after the initial topic proposal. They make the journey to their own discoveries. Because students focus on their own discoveries, the material and conversation is more meaningful and interesting to them. They discuss and make the connections that they want to, not what the teacher demands.

The seating arrangement in a classroom, along with its use, can also help facilitate discussion among the students. For authentic student discussions, the students can sit in a circle so that they can all see each other. This change in arrangement can make the discussion feel more like a conference among colleagues, unlike the classic rows that seem to trigger the “need to memorize facts” mindset. Depending on how the teacher uses the circle set up, it can either keep the discussion teacher-centered or can foster student-led discussions. For student-led discussions, the teacher should remove him or herself from the circle. The teacher is out of the spotlight and out of eyesight for most of the students, so the students are encouraged to talk to each other to figure out answers instead of relying on the teacher.

## **Implications for Practice**

The teacher observed is likely to be representative of common practices (Nystrand; 1997; Juzwik et al., 2013). An emphasis on recitation and a teacher's dominance of classroom discourse would be insignificant if the choices did not have a significant impact on student learning. "The purposeful interaction with other thinkers will support critical thinking" (McCann et al., 2006). But, too often teachers are the "other thinkers" and not the students. Students, not teachers, need to do the kind of analysis that is important for reading and writing, and most students are capable of analyzing texts.

Students are engaged with a text much more when they discuss it than when they memorize facts about it. Discussion-based activities can lead to higher achievement in reading and writing because students are more engaged with the material. Langer studied the correlation between effective discussion and reading and writing achievement. "She found that envisionment-building classrooms—those that provided activities particularly effective in the development of students' reading and writing skills—displayed a variety of discussion-based approaches to the development of understanding" (Applebee 691). Teachers need to create time for students to talk to each other. Not only does this discussion increase their social skills, but it increases their academic achievement. They can become better readers and writers by exploring multiple perspectives, drawn from other classmates. This discussion also increases their argumentative vocabulary and analytical thinking skills that help raise academic achievement. McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, and Flanagan, 2006, note a means for entering into dialogue with students:

By looking at a representative modern case, students form arguments to offer a rational basis for their own positions, and they are confronted with opposing views that they must account for in an attempt to resolve the dispute. The study of a particular case fosters the development of the specialized language of argument and equips students with analytical thinking strategies that they can subsequently apply to the reading of a related novel (pp. 151-152).

Students should enter discussion about issues or themes related to a text before the students have begun to read the text. Students can form their opinions about a given idea or theme and begin practicing defending their positions. Then as they read, students can analyze the text using their position as a means to make sense of the complex material. They may find that their initial position can hold up in all circumstances, or they may learn to alter their ideas in order to accommodate new material. The students made a claim by taking a position. They journeyed to their own meaningful discoveries by analyzing the text using their position, and they came to their own conclusions about the text by evaluating their initial position and their final position. They can self-evaluate their own ideas by defining and explaining why, or why not, their original position or claim changed by reading the text. The kids do the higher level thinking of analyzing, judging, evaluating, etc. Even though this is an ideal model that can raise achievement, many students and teachers resist this model.

Teacher-led discussion is still the norm in majority of classrooms, even though it is less effective and engaging. Teachers control the lessons and the ideas that are presented and discussed, and the students mainly take notes and make a remark every once in a while. Students rarely speak because they are not sure how to contribute to the



discussion: “While there is ample research on the importance of talk in the classroom, the reality is that students do not engage in academic conversations without guidance” (Fisher 15). If the discussion is teacher-led, then relatively few students have to participate. Others may, or may not, take notes. They run the risk of missing out on material if they do not contribute. They become, if they are taking notes, passive absorbers of information. They do not do the higher level thinking that those contributing to the discussion are doing. If the teacher is dominating the conversation, then that is taking time away from the students’ ability to speak. Many teachers dominate the conversation because they feel strongly that certain ideas have to be covered and are afraid to allow students to take control of their own learning. But teachers do not want to admit that students are the only ones who can make sense of a novel for themselves. The teacher directed questions ignore the multiple aspects a student encounters at any given moment of the text: “Students’ envisionment of a text at any time was a mixture of understandings, questions, hypotheses, and connections to previous knowledge and experiences” (Applebee 691). Any teacher, no matter how skilled, cannot account for this extreme individuality of interpretation of the text. When students have an impression that the teacher is the final arbiter of interpretation and judgment, they give up and ignore many aspects that can lead to understanding and academic achievement. They have to let go of their own questions and connections, which are beyond valuable, in order to accommodate the teacher’s direction and instruction. Because of this, students may still not gain as much as they are capable of gaining from the discussion of a text.

## **Suggestions for Increasing Student Involvement**

If teachers fully believe in their students' capabilities, then incorporating a student-centered dialogic classroom is fairly easy. There are a few minor changes that can be made, most of which teachers already practice on a minor scale. Teachers should create a positive and safe learning environment, teach students how to question, make more time for discussion, use more authentic questions, and practice more uptake.

At the beginning of the school year, teachers need to establish a safe environment where students feel comfortable talking. Many teachers already do this. They spend time letting the students get to know each other as well as the teacher. These ice breakers should not stop after students learn each others' names and a few facts about their classmates. Students should continue to have opportunities to get to really know each other throughout the school year; set aside time for them to talk about things that interest them; create a family, or at least a group of extremely close friends. If students are allowed to know each other and feel a bond, then discussions will feel safer for them. They will not fear the judgment of strangers. Their friends and family will be accepting of their ideas and opinions.

Teachers should spend time teaching students to question. Students should contribute to the inquiry of the material. Teachers have learned the material already and were able to ask their questions as they read; students should be given the same opportunity. If students are able to talk about the questions they have, they will be more willing to participate in discussions. As Tovani states in her book, *I Read It, But I Don't Get It*,

If teachers don't permit students to wonder, they restrict discovery. Forging paths of new thinking is discouraged when students aren't allowed to cultivate uncertainties. When readers are encouraged to ask questions, classrooms perk up and more than a handful of kids participate (81).

Students can and will pay attention to a book and participate in discussions if they have some control over the material. It is no fun for students to read a book because they are told to by the teacher and then discuss answers to questions that they probably do not care about. Instead, let them find their own discoveries.

Teachers need to incorporate dialogue in the classroom beyond a quick question and answer to test basic recall. These types of question and answer responses are not too useful when trying to encourage improvement in academic performance. According to Applebee the features that were most successful in improving performance were:

- More use of authentic questions, which were used to explore differing understandings rather than to “test” what students might already know;
- More time for open discussion: Whole-class discourse devoted to free exchange of ideas among students or between at least three participants; and
- More “uptake,” in which a teacher’s question “took up” and built on a student’s previous comment, creating continuity in the discourse (690)

Teachers need to create time for students to discuss. Students have a lot to sort through (i.e. ideas, questions, and connections) at any given time when analyzing a text. They are not experts yet, so they need a little time to work through these complex thoughts. The help of others can positively influence this process. The use of authentic questions can also help the process of analyzing their thoughts. Authentic questions give students a

framework in which to begin sorting through their thoughts for relevance. The teacher can inspire topics of importance, but students can put their own spin on them. They can take the discussion where they feel necessary and not fish for what the teacher is thinking. Finally, practicing uptake brings more students into the conversation and inspires self-efficacy. Students will begin to feel like the experts of a text when the teacher paraphrases them in a positive way. They will become confident in their abilities and will be more willing to participate in future discussions. Uptake also keeps the conversation student-centered, without the teacher imposing his or her own thoughts onto the students. Uptake allows the students to keep their own discoveries. The students will take a personal investment in the material and will be more likely to remember the material for the tests.

## **Summary**

The dominant method of discussion in schools is teacher-led and filtered question and answer. The teacher asks the questions, and students are left to fish for the answer that the teacher is looking for. Discussion becomes recitation. Recitation is nearly mindless, and students will not contain the information long enough to use it on a test or later in life. Authentic discussion encourages the high level thinking that is necessary for high achievement in reading and writing. In authentic discussion, students are in control. They have the opportunity to talk about ideas and concepts that matter to them. Because the ideas matter to the students, they retain this material. They can apply what they learn during discussion to the readings as an analysis tool, or they can use the discussion as a pre-writing activity to gather and organize ideas for a paper. If authentic discussion

encourages high level thinking that improves reading and writing achievement, then teachers should use authentic discussion. Teachers are in classrooms to help students achieve. Authentic discussion is a versatile tool that fosters achievement, so teachers need to make the shift from controlling the discussions to allowing students to take an active part in their learning. It is the students' turn to learn and make sense of the material.

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