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CRITICAL THINKING:
INTEGRATION INTO THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LITERATURE CLASSROOM

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Reading/Language Arts

by
Julia Denise Mook

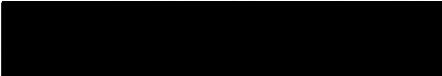
March 2000

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by
Julia Denise Mook
March 2000

Approved by:



Joseph W. Gray, First Reader

3/14/00
Date



Deborah A. Dolan, Second Reader

ABSTRACT

The pendulum of educators' interests often swings back and forth. In the current climate of high stakes assessment, there appears to be a greater emphasis placed on literal recall of information when reading. While in the short term, this may benefit score reports, there is a concern that higher order thinking skills, such as analysis, will fall by the wayside. In so doing, there may be long term effects on the citizenry of this country. A lack of shared experiences, paired with little or no opportunity to discuss and discern, could lead to an inability to participate in and manage a complex form of government, such as a democracy.

In today's middle school literature classrooms, however, there is room for all types of thinking: from the simple to the complex. Teachers who desire to create an atmosphere that values the application of a variety of thinking can make their classrooms into communities that offer students the opportunity to think in a myriad of ways. These opportunities may be explicitly modeled by the educator and take the form of whole and small group discussion, developing questioning skills and using journal writing as a tool to develop meta-cognition.

In addition to a review of literature on the subject of critical thinking skills, a handbook is presented for

teachers of all theoretical stances to put to use in their classrooms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Also, thank you to my parents for encouraging me to undertake this project and for loving our kids as much as we do.

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To Joseph, Kate, & John Thomas
I hope that you always have wise
teachers, counselors and mentors.

- Mom

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In today's literature classrooms, there is a movement away from higher order thinking skills such as evaluating, comparing, analyzing, reflecting and reasoning. This is, in part, due to the high stakes atmosphere standardized testing has created among teachers and students, alike. In an atmosphere where student promotion and teacher employment rest partly on standardized test scores, the desire "to teach to the test" becomes understandable (McGinn, 1999). Greater emphasis is placed on lower level comprehension skills, such as recall, which can lead to quantifiable data, the type that is required on standardized tests. While this is beneficial in the short term of score reports, it is harmful to the development of society. A recently issued report authored by the International Reading Association condemns high stakes testing as having a negative impact on students' higher order thinking skills due to the increased instruction time devoted to lower level thinking, that which is most commonly assessed on a standardized test (1999). In order to maintain our complex form of government, it is essential to help students develop higher order thinking skills. Approaching the literature curriculum with an emphasis on discussion, problem solving, reflection and

writing will promote higher order thinking skills in students, which are essential in developing a citizenry capable of maintaining a democracy (McNeil, 1990). In addition, students will have more in common with one another and come to know more about each other due to the shared experiences of working through similar tasks, solving problems and refining their thinking through discussion.

Much research in the area of critical thinking comes from those who advocate a constructivist approach to education (Miller, 1999). Teachers who allow for student voice, encourage the risk taking that is necessary for critical thinking to occur. In constructivist classrooms, the atmosphere is student centered and children are shown how to exist as a "community" of learners (Tunkle & Anderson, 1999). In this manner, students take ownership of their learning, more honestly communicate their opinions to one another and learn how to solve problems more effectively. All of this is done under the observant eye of the teacher who works to model explicitly all desired behaviors for the students (Dermody & Speaker, 1999).

Through the use of modeling, teachers are able to demonstrate thinking on a variety of levels. Teachers are also able to present to students a transactional viewpoint of literature. Weaver (1994) describes the transactional

model as teachers understanding that students possess a "rich prior knowledge and background, with ample experience...to construct their own knowledge (p.87)" about a text. A teacher who is able to value student voice, model desired thinking, and allow students to bring their experiences to the reading will produce students who are able to think on a variety of levels and communicate their thinking effectively.

Full integration of all types of thinking will allow complex thought to be always available to them; it is not a sub-skill to be applied when the teacher tells them. Further, critical thinking on a variety of themes is essential in creating a society that values a wide spectrum of people and ideas. Classrooms that serve as microcosms of society with good models and a safe atmosphere, will allow students practice as citizens of the world. This will lead to minimizing the sense of isolation many students experience, because students will begin to envision their place in the world, both in contemporary society and in the span of history. Students are spiritual beings capable of greatness and reasoning, and by focusing on lower level thinking skills, we deny our students the chance to develop fully.

Students' learning should center on the curriculum, and in order to fully maintain meaning, must not be fragmented into separate skills. Rather, teachers who use higher order thinking allow students to know literature, the world and themselves more fully. By approaching literacy learning with an emphasis on discussion, problem solving, reflection and writing, students are given the opportunity to regularly access critical thinking skills. Further, by working cooperatively on these tasks, students will have more in common, come to know more about one another through sharing the experience, and practice being a member of society in a safe, well-structured atmosphere.

In partnering higher order thinking skills with the social dimension of education, students would be allowed to recreate experiences, reflect on the process that led to the recreation and refine their thinking on the process. Students will realize that differing experiences lead to differing interpretations of a text. Teachers who model for students ways to think through interpretations, defend them logically and reconcile them with their experiences enable students to take a risk and interpret, defend and reconcile experiences in their own voice.

In looking at the manner in which literacy learning and teaching can be carried out in the middle school classroom,

it becomes clear that the teacher is in the unusual position of being the sole determiner of student opportunity for learning (Butler, 1966). It is the educator who has to make sure that all students are allowed access to the best society has to offer; therefore, all cultures are embraced as sources of excellent material. In choosing works from the culture in which students live, as well as that of their native countries, the curriculum becomes at once relevant and unifying. The educator, who provides experiences when the students do not have prior knowledge from which to draw, allows students to give voice to a variety of experiences, and opens new doors for those students. Then, students can be given the time to refine and simulate the experience with the teacher's support and mediation. Further, the experiences can also be reconnected to a diverse way of life that includes heritage (Skilbeck, 1970). Students who are allowed to think critically about issues and examine those issues through the tool of literature become fair-minded, self-confident and well informed (Facione, 1996).

Ultimately, approaching learning from a constructivist or transactional model helps students integrate complex thinking into literature. In other words, it is important to help students construct meaning from texts based on their experiences, or to transact with the text, also based on

previous experiences (Weaver, 1994). Further, this approach enables students to better understand the works of literature and helps them gain insight into their own significance in the world. Through modeling desired thinking behaviors and writing skills for students, better use of questioning techniques, using works of fiction and non-fiction, guiding the learner through meta-cognition, reflection and discussion, today's middle school literature classrooms can become sources of deep understanding, not just literal recall.

In order to help middle school literature teachers fully integrate critical thinking into the literature curriculum, they can be exposed to methods that accomplish that goal. A handbook that describes methods for integration will allow teachers of a variety of theoretical positions to help their students pursue critical thinking abilities. This handbook will focus on demonstrating the importance of modeling in community building, journal writing, and meta-cognition. Also, it will show the importance of asking a variety of questions in order to access a variety of thinking. Finally, the handbook will support teachers in their quest to lead students toward independence so that the teacher is an apostle of progress, maker of democracy and a study in self-elimination (Butler,

1966). It is hoped that the educator can serve students and watch them grow to self-sufficient thinkers and writers. As the students progress, the teacher is who links them to their starting point and then helps them move forward.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A review of the literature concerning critical thinking skills reveals a concern for the variety of topics that will be covered in the handbook. Of particular interest and importance are the concepts of the meaning of critical thinking and how it relates to comprehension, how experiences influence the ability to think critically and the development of citizenship through the cultivation of critical thinking abilities. Through the discussion of these topics, research will also be supplied that advocates techniques that support the development of critical thinking skills.

Critical Thinking Defined

In the early 1980's there developed a perception that critical thinking was not being taught. Because of this perception, real or imagined, interest in critical thinking has mushroomed (Taube, 1997). Many believe that increased exposure to critical thinking leads to skillful students who will achieve more, as well as develop a positive self-concept. Therefore, if critical thinking is vital to student success, what exactly is meant by the term "critical thinking skills"? Bloom and Guilford (Costa, 1985) have both done extensive study in the area of critical thinking and have classified that thinking into a variety of levels.

Both researchers have created a dimension to the thinking skills sequence. Within the sequence, tasks move from the simple to the complex. Critical thinking is the thinking that occurs as thought becomes more abstract and one begins to work more with unknown approaches or materials (Costa, 1985). In addition to complex thinking, critical thinking also calls to mind questions of social norms, values and purposes that guide human thought and action. Finally, critical thinking has its place in a variety of subject areas, including literature, "where norms that govern the composition and criticism of literary works may be in need of examination" (Hostettler, 1991, p.2).

Bloom's Taxonomy moves along a spectrum from literal recall, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and, finally, to evaluation. Bloom dedicates one level of his taxonomy to "comprehension", and that is the level most widely associated with literature. However, research indicates that to fully know the text and to become a proficient reader, one must move from the simple to the complex in one's thinking. Therefore, the literature supports integrating critical thinking with the instruction of literature (Costa, 1985). It is further stated that it is through the study of literature that students are given greater access to critical thinking skills. This is because

students approach literature differently than textbooks, with an open and interpretive stance where they employ their intuition (Langer, 1989). Throughout the literature it is further asserted that Bloom's Taxonomy can be used as a guide for instruction in literature, in addition to other techniques designed to elicit comprehension on a variety of levels (Mohr, 1988). In order to develop these thinking skills within a meaningful context, a great deal of the literature emphasizes the use of modeling. When a teacher models thinking, it becomes accessible to the student (Tassoni, 1998). Beyer (1998) calls this making the invisible part of thinking visible and explicit. He goes on to elaborate that modeling provides a "how to" for students. Students are told step by step how a skill is executed and why it matters (1998).

In addition to the use of modeling to help students learn and apply higher order thinking, the teacher is challenged to evaluate the role of questions in their classroom. Savage (1998) allows that higher level questions elicit higher level thinking and that a lack of opportunity to practice this thinking exists due to teachers not asking more complex questions. It is recommended that as teachers internalize critical thinking skills, they learn to model questioning behavior that touches on all levels of critical

thought. In this way, student thinking is less affiliated with wrong answers, an atmosphere that permits risk taking is promoted and sustained student thought will develop (Beyer, 1998). If the aim is to help students develop thinking skills applicable in a myriad of situations, then education must be focused on developing a "particular content as opposed to focusing merely on skills" (Hostettler, 1991, p. 10). Content areas, such as literature, are ripe for applying thinking and thinking serves to help our students understand the content (Beyer, 1998).

Importance of valuing student experience

In addition to putting the instruction of critical thinking skills into an integrated context with literature, research shows that the experiences students bring with them, as well as the experiences provided in the classroom, are also essential. In 1994, Weaver referred to the experiences students bring to the classroom and the text as "schemas". The schema theory refers to a unit of knowledge or experience that is generally accompanied by feelings. Schemas, according to Weaver, provide a framework for readers to make use of the text and comprehend the language. It is the schema that allows for meta-cognition and enables better reading comprehension. Judith Langer (1989)

discusses the essential role novels play in allowing students to share experiences through critical thinking. Novels are the instruments by which students can learn to analyze, compare and contrast, evaluate or apply knowledge to a situation or problem. In order to help students give voice to their experiences, it is also important to help students build community and share those experiences with others. Richard Beach (1998) advocates helping students construct connections between the world they live in and the worlds they encounter in literature. Through comparing the two "worlds" and sharing the experience, students may learn something new about themselves and the text. According to Knowles (1983), the emphasis should be on the manner in which children learn from the discussions and conversations that they have with others. Butler (1966) previously made this point with his view that education is necessary to make us fully human and must be conducted in a social situation. Beyond establishing connections to the text, the reader also develops the ability to become meta-cognitive, or, "think about thinking". Meta-cognition effects the capacity of the reader to self-monitor, self-assess and improve understanding (Underwood, 1997). Underwood further states that meta-cognition can be modeled by the teacher and practiced by the student. Within the classroom community, a

safe atmosphere should be created that allows for differing views (Hostettler, 1991). Apart from obtaining the skill of critical thinking, Hostettler asserts that teachers truly concerned with fully developing critical thinking abilities in one's students will work to establish communities "where people can engage in critical dialogue and work to hammer out understandings of social norms" (p.11).

The development of citizenship through critical thinking:

Perhaps the issue most widely dealt with when discussing critical thinking and its importance, is the influence critical thinking brings to bear on citizenship. Even the United States government concerns itself with this concept in Goals 2000: The Educate America Act(1994). In this act, Congress established critical thinking education as a national priority. President Bush and then Governor Bill Clinton, together with governors from other states, reached the conclusion that in order to compete in a global economy and to properly exercise the responsibilities of citizenship, it is imperative to have students who can think critically, effectively communicate and solve problems (Taube, 1997). A democratic classroom can be identified as a place where teachers and students work together to build a community in which all members are valued (Collier-Paul, 1998). The literature also confirms that the teacher plays

a vital role in establishing this democratic community. McNeil (1992) furthers this idea by emphasizing the need to approach the curriculum with an emphasis on discussion, problem solving, reflection and writing in order to promote higher order thinking skills, which are essential in developing a democracy. Classroom discussion should focus on truth, proof and exploration of a variety of topics (Beyer, 1998). Cooperative groups force students to think critically and come together in community. In order to work together, the students use analysis, synthesis and evaluation. They will make decisions and solve problem together (Spararpani, 1998). Hostettler (1991) weighs in with the notion that an essential part of initiation into critical thought is the development of a commitment to ethical values such as community, freedom, honesty, democracy and equality. He adds that this is of paramount importance for the full realization of the critical thought. Kaplan (1991), in reporting on the failure of the critical thinking movement, admits the importance of the movement's desire to prepare students "to exercise the most accessible political right guaranteed by the Constitution: the right to vote" (p. 363). Finally, Beyer (1988) sums up the essential aspect of students well versed in critical thinking when he acknowledges that skillful thinkers develop traits necessary

for effective membership in a complex world.

In closing, the literature reviewed for this topic supports the integration of critical thinking into the instruction in literature classrooms for all ages. Rather than isolate critical thinking into sub-skills, integration makes complex thinking applicable to variety of situations. Further, by sharing the experience and working through a variety of thought processes, the classroom becomes a community that values learning. Through community building and complex thinking, students become people capable of handling the leadership necessary in a complex form of government, such as democracy.

CHAPTER THREE GOALS OUTCOMES AND LIMITATIONS

I intend for my classroom to be a model of a civilized larger society, so that my students will leave with enough experience in sharing, discussing and thinking that they are able to handle the responsibility of being a citizen in a democracy. The benefits are two-fold, my students will be able to live better lives and our society will be able to maintain its current form of government. In using the handbook to guide my teaching, it is hoped that it will provide an avenue to keep my instruction student centered. In other words, it will serve as a reminder of the myriad of ways to help my students think critically about literature.

It is further hoped that the handbook will provide a guide and support for teachers who want their students to think about literature and life on many levels. To those teachers who are interested in more than having their students repeat literal information regarding a text, it is my hope that this handbook will help them allow students to find their voice.

The notion of constructing meaning with my students has allowed me to see the significance of allowing each child to use their experience as a resource for deriving meaning from literature and then articulating a response. Through

reflection, observation of student behavior and a periodic survey, I have witnessed a great deal of growth on the part of my students and myself. I am more appreciative of the stories my students have to tell and I enjoy watching them weave them into their literature groups, journal writing and class discussion. It has been a challenge for me to remember to model my thinking explicitly, instead of assuming the students understand that I would like more than just literal recall from them.

The students themselves have grown in their ability to infer, synthesize and analyze information. They are more willing to share their experiences, tie them to the literature they read and reconcile differences between the characters and themselves. My students come to class excited to talk to each other about what they have read, anxious to find new ways to express their interpretations and ready to share stories about themselves as well as listen to the stories of others.

Teachers who do not embrace the constructivist approach to education will still find value in the handbook. These teachers might appreciate the idea of monitoring the kinds of questions they ask their students, or, perhaps, they might want to allow students to discuss their readings in small groups. Many teachers may appreciate having the term

critical thinking defined. Too often, terms are used but not defined for all to understand.

This project does not deal with specifically with the learning disabled or English as a second language speaker. However, I believe that if a teacher allows those students to value their own experiences, talk about them in class and establish a relationship between those experiences and their readings, these students will be greatly helped. Critical thinking is an avenue that is available for all students, when the teacher acts as a scaffold, or support, and models the desired thinking.

In closing, in these times of high stakes testing, it is important to know that a variety of thinking on a variety of levels will improve comprehension scores and help create better prepared citizens. Although thinking skills such as analysis and evaluation are not easily quantified, they are important avenues for helping students grow into thoughtful and accomplished citizens of the world.

APPENDIX

Critical Thinking: Integration into the Middle School Literature Classroom

A Handbook for Teachers

Learning, Critical Thinking and Our Nation's Future:
The future now belongs to societies that organize themselves for learning... Nations that want high incomes and full employment must develop policies that emphasize the acquisition of knowledge and skills by everyone, not just a few (Marshall and Tucker, 1992).

Contents:

Critical Thinking Defined

Modeling Critical Thinking Behaviors

Questioning on a Variety of Levels

Journal Writing as a tool for reflection and meta-cognition

Whole Class and Small Group Discussion

In helping our students utilize a variety of thinking skills, we allow them to more fully develop their minds and to learn to be independent and well reasoned thinkers. For the middle school student, using the avenue of literature is the perfect opportunity to scaffold the learner and provide a safe atmosphere for taking risks. In scaffolding, we follow the ideas of Vygotsky. Vygotsky advocates that we teachers structure a learning task and provide directives and cues using dialogue to guide our learners' participation in the task (Dixon-Krauss, 1996). According to research, middle school students allow their self-perceptions as readers to influence their level of engagement with a text (Henk & Melnick, 1998). Therefore, when we motivate student interest and engagement, we are able to change students' perceptions about themselves as readers. In addition to allowing the middle school learner to safely branch out and try new ways of constructing meaning, you are able to create an environment that values the variety of experiences the students bring to the classroom. Also, the teacher can model ways for the students to put those experiences into context. Further, in sharing the experiences with others in the classroom, reflecting on literature and moving through a variety of levels of thinking, a community of learners can

be created and celebrated, thereby giving our middle school students the tools they need to navigate our complex society.

The following "handbook" of critical thinking skills and methods, outlines ways for us to monitor whether or not we attend to thinking beyond the literal level. It is important for us, as educators, to monitor the frequency and type of questions we are asking our students, to model our own thinking for these students, to very precisely deal with the topic of journal responses and to allow for social interaction among the learners.

Critical Thinking Defined

Critical thinking is an essential tool for inquiring into a variety of problems and experiences. There are certain cognitive skills that are incorporated into critical thinking that provide for thought deeper than literal recall. At the core of critical thinking are the abilities to interpret, analyze, evaluate, infer, explain and self-regulate (Facione, 1996). Also, critical thinking is the what occurs as thought becomes more abstract and one begins to work more with unknown approaches or materials (Costa, 1985). There is a significant correlation between critical thinking and improved reading comprehension, and both can be taught in an integrated manner so that students will be able

to apply a wide range of thinking skills to a variety of situations.

Modeling Critical Thinking Behaviors

In middle school classrooms, it is necessary to create an atmosphere that allows for risk taking. Therefore, we should model respect for all learners so that the students follow the example. When teachers serve as a model we improve the learners' ability to communicate about text. Students find they can participate more effectively when they have witnessed a model. This helps students gain facility in prediction, question generating, clarification and summarization. Students are then able to apply these behaviors in a variety of ways in order to communicate their thoughts about texts (Dermody & Speaker, 1999). In order to help foster such an atmosphere, we should "rely on four key elements: time, ownership, response and community (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997)." In so doing, one adds to the creation of creative learning environments.

In their book, Mosaic of Thought (1997), Keene and Zimmerman share the importance of having the teacher think aloud to explicitly demonstrate the thinking process for one's students. In allowing students a window into what is happening as our thinking unfolds we provide for them a fine example of the process of thinking in complex and creative

ways about the experiences we have and the literature we read. Finally, we allow our students to see that there is a fundamental connection between our experiences and how we react to what we read. In so doing, our students are invited into the community of learners, because they begin to see the value of the experiences they bring into our classrooms.

Questioning On a Variety of Levels

When we ask our students questions, we tend to dominate the discussion with close-ended, literal recall questions, for which we know the "correct answer". In order to develop true critical thinkers, the students can be trusted to think for themselves and be given a variety of problems to work through. As teachers, in shared control, we let go some of our power in order to empower our students.

There is a great deal that can be done to change the kind of questioning that occurs in your classrooms and to raise the level of student thinking, as well as the degree of student engagement. Berry and Glenn (1990) suggest six steps to better questioning.

1. Become familiar with the hierarchy of critical thinking and ask questions from a variety of levels.

As an example, here are some questions that could be used with any literature. However, the goal is not to pepper the kids with questions, but to monitor what kind of thinking your questions allows students to do.

Knowledge:

State six facts from the story.

How does the story end?

Comprehension:

Think of the main event in the story. Why did it happen?

How did the main character feel at the beginning and at the end of the story?

Application:

Give some examples of people who have had the same problems or have done similar things to those in the story.

What would the main character do if he/she came to your house?

Analysis:

Describe which things happened in the story that could not have happened in real life.

Organize the story into parts and think of a good title for each.

Synthesis:

Create an ending to the story that is different from the one the author chose.

Pretend you are the main character in the story and create a diary entry for yourself.

Evaluation:

Which of the characters in the story would you like to take to dinner? Why?

Compare two characters in the story.

2. Use Longer "Wait-Time".

Give your students a chance to really think about the question. This should be taught to the students, because they are used to rapid-fire question and answer.

3. Balance group and individual instruction.

It is not always appropriate to use whole group instruction. This allows for disengagement among students. It is important to engage in small groups and individual meetings with students, in order to more fully understand the individual student.

4. Use follow-up questions.

By leading the student toward refining their thinking, you help the student learn to think in a critical manner, independently. It is appropriate to ask a student to

clarify what they mean or to back up their thought with evidence from the text.

5. Overcome text weakness.

Use the text as a basis and move ahead from there. Too often, the text demands only lower level thinking. Model for the students, ways to mine the text for deeper understanding by providing information from other sources and valuing students' experiences.

6. Ensure that tests evaluate more than memory.

When writing tests or evaluating prepared tests, make sure the questions it asks students come from a variety of levels, not simply literal recall.

In addition to the previous suggestions, it is also of great importance to model for your students how the questions were created and to allow students to create their own questions for use in class. In this powerful way, student ideas are given voice. Further, the students embrace the relevance of the activities, and enhance the community of learning because of that investment.

Journal Writing as a Tool for Reflection and Meta-cognition:

The skill of meta-cognition is the most remarkable of all, because it allows good critical thinkers to improve

their own thinking (Facione, 1996). This reflection allows the reader to examine their thinking about themselves and permits examination of a "horizon of possible meanings" (Miller, 1999) found in the literature they are reading. Using the journal as an arena for meta-cognition turns what many take as a daily busy work into a powerful tool for improving student thinking. Students should not just be turned loose to write in their journals, as if they know what they are expected to do. When this occurs, real reflection and learning may be lost (McNeil, 1990). Again, the importance of modeling by the teacher is significant. After parameters are established, the students should be given time to talk with a partner about the topic and what they want to write. While the students write in their journals, the teacher should be modeling the appropriate behavior by writing as well. This demonstrates respect for the learner and the process of writing. When the time for writing ends, the educator models the thoughts that went into the entry, how it was expressed, and problems that were encountered. Then the students may share, if they desire. If students are able to see a role for their responses, they will begin to use their cognitive knowledge about life and apply it to literature (Miller, 1999). By using journals to help students navigate this process of meta-cognition, this

skill is more clearly demonstrated, integrated into everyday activity and ideas found in the literature can be worked through effectively.

Discussion: Whole and Small Group:

Once students have been able to see good questioning and meta-cognition modeled for them, they are ready to discuss literature and share experiences in whole and small group events. In all discussion, student voice can take the center stage. Too often, we as teachers give ourselves over to "experts". Unfortunately, we pass this along to our students when we act as possessors of all knowledge.

Discussions in which all students bear the responsibility to actively participate and engage in classroom life are discussions from which students will truly benefit. The kids are able to learn by doing when we offer them the role of facilitator. However, the teacher is always engaged in supporting students through observation, clarification and modeling.

In whole group discussions, teachers might want to have the students write in their journal or prepare some questions based on their own prior experiences that relate to the text. Then they will be able to talk about text, themes, symbols, language and meaning. In the end, it is

the teacher's role to mediate group discussions, rather than direct them (Miller, 1999).

Small group discussions can be conducted in a myriad of ways. Research indicates that they have come to be known by a variety of names such as, literature studies, book clubs, literature circles and book circles. No matter what it is called, it refers to readers interacting with the text and sharing the experience in a small group. Many researchers advocate small group discussions as an excellent means for developing literacy through social interaction (Tunkle, Anderson & Evans, 1999). In addition to the many names small group discussions can go by, they may be put together in a variety of ways and still be effective. Some general suggestions for conducting small group discussions are to group students in heterogeneous groups, allow room for student choice in reading selections, or specific readings and roles for the discussion may be assigned. What is important is the benefit to student learning. Students are more likely to assume ownership, communicate opinions more effectively, think deeply about their reading, synthesize important literary information and learn problem solving at the same time (Tunkle, Anderson & Evans, 1999).

It is my hope that this handbook enables you to help your students find their voice in the classroom. Guiding

students toward more complex thinking through questioning, journal writing, meta-cognition, and discussion will help shape the future of our democracy. The key to our students existing as citizens of the world is our ability to empower them now and give them practice in society from the safety of our classrooms.

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