

Dr. Frank Serafini
Associate Professor – Literacy Education & Children’s Literature
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interactive Discussions: Changing Traditional Discourse Patterns

With the proliferation of scripted reading programs and the pressures on teachers to demonstrate “adequate yearly progress” in students’ literate abilities, classroom discussion practices vary and have often taken a back seat to direct instructional experiences (Nystrand, 2006). The focus on direct instruction in decoding and comprehension skills in various mandated, scripted reading programs, the pressures of ensuring each reader is at grade level by demonstrating proficiency on standardized tests, and the lack of “sanctioned” evidence on reading aloud and discussing literature has moved reading aloud and discussing literature to the periphery of the reading instructional framework in all too many classrooms.

Although the evidence for supporting the use of read alouds and literature discussions may not have been directly endorsed by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 1999), qualitative studies, ethnographies, and case study research has been conducted that supports the inclusion of read alouds (Braunger, 1997), free voluntary reading (Krashen, 1993), and literature discussions (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Myhill, Jones, & Hopper, 2006; Nystrand, 1997) as a vital component in a comprehensive reading program. Providing time and support for students to discuss the texts they encounter and to share and consider the interpretations they generate has been demonstrated to have positive effects on literate abilities (Duke & Pearson, 2002). In this article, the focus will be on the classroom discussions and interaction patterns that support students’ thinking beyond the level of literal recall, and helps develop their “interpretive repertoires” to be able

to bring a variety of perspectives and interpretive moves to their transactions with texts. Drawing on a series of classroom based research studies involving intermediate grade students (grades 3-6), the article will present examples of literature discussions focusing on several picturebooks, and will offer instructional strategies for improving the effectiveness of classroom discussions.

Traditional Discussion Patterns

Mehan (1979) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) have described traditional classroom interactions as an Initiate – Respond – Evaluate (IRE) discourse pattern. In this pattern, teachers Initiate a discussion topic, most frequently by posing a question, to which students are expected to Respond, and teachers then Evaluate students' responses. Cazden (2001) and others (Alexander, 2006; Myhill et al., 2006; Nystrand, 1997; Westgate & Hughes, 1997) have documented the ubiquity of this interaction pattern and have offered a variety of approaches for changing the way teachers and students interact in classrooms.

The IRE pattern has been labeled a “monologic discourse pattern” (Alexander, 2006), in which teachers take turns at will, decide on what topics are important to discuss, decide who will talk and for how long, and interject their responses and interpretations controlling the pace and direction of the discussion. As the following transcript from a third grade classroom's discussion concerning the picturebook *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) suggests, teachers in traditional discourse patterns dominate classroom discussions,

speaking more than fifty percent of the time, control the direction of the discussion by asking particular types of questions, and endorse the responses of particular students that align with what has been predetermined to be important or correct. This transcript also demonstrates how students' responses are directly related to the questions and directives offered by the teacher, and often simply "fill in the blanks" in the teacher's sentences discussion (Wells, 1989).

Throughout this article, all names are pseudonyms.

Figure 1: Monologic Discussion Example

Ms. Bond [reading from the book]: The night Max wore his wolf suit of one kind and another. What is he doing?

John: He is starting to do things, like acting scary.

Ms. Bond: He's acting scary. What's he wearing? What's he wearing? Lonny, what's he wearing?

Lonny: A costume.

Ms. Bond: A costume. What kind of costume does it look like?

Lonny: A rabbit.

Teacher: A rabbit? Are you sure? What do you think Sarah? What does it look like he is wearing? What kind of costume?

Sarah: A wolf suit.

Ms. Bond: Right, a wolf suit. Damien?

Damien: A wolf suit, because it said so in the words.

Teacher: Right. [reading from the book] The night Max wore his wolf [emphasis on the word wolf] suit and made mischief of one kind and another. What is mischief? We talked about that. Jennifer?

Jennifer: Being bad.

Ms. Bond: Yeah, when you are doing mischief, are you doing what you are supposed to be doing?

Students [chorally]: No!

In this excerpt, the teacher assumes the role of arbiter of what is meaningful or correct, focuses exclusively on the literal text, and directs the discussion towards particular meanings and answers. The answers she was looking for were often found directly in the written text, not in what the readers brought to the text. A primary goal of this type of interaction is the transfer of knowledge and information from teacher to students, where the discussion goes around in a centripetal direction until the group reaches consensus (Scholes, 1985). In an IRE interaction, teachers directly control the discussions and lead students to the answers they predetermined or prefer.

Gutierrez (1994) has described this pattern of social action and discourse as a “recitation script” that limits opportunities for students to produce elaborated talk, interact with other students, construct their own questions, and participate in the types of discourse they are expected to produce. This pattern supports a transmission approach to teaching, where teachers tell students what is important and students passively listen to receive the teacher’s wisdom. In

addition, Cazden (2001) has described the IRE pattern as a “default setting,” implying that without deliberate attention to one’s language and patterns of interacting with students, teachers will default back to this way of talking due to its strong tradition, many years of apprenticeship in this way of interacting, and how this way of talking with students has been idealized as the most effective way of discussing and delivering the curriculum.

There are numerous reasons why this type of classroom interaction has appealed to classroom teachers. Traditionally, classroom management has been a primary focus in teacher preparation programs, and is a large part of the evaluation systems used to assess the quality of teacher candidates (Darling-Hammond, 2007). The IRE interaction pattern is appealing because it can be used by teachers to control which topics are important, the amount of participation by individual students, the pacing of the lesson, and which responses will be sanctioned as useful or correct. One may conclude that it may be the pressures of trying to “cover the curriculum” that leads teachers to this way of interacting with students and asking questions.

There are other tensions that affect classroom interaction patterns, including the tensions between: (1) the pacing of a lesson and time allowed for students to ponder or explore new interpretations, (2) the search for a single main idea and the possibilities each new interpretation offers, (3) privileging one interpretation to the exclusion of other students’ voices, (4) and the difference

between questions with a predetermined answer and open-ended questions that allow for a range of acceptable answers.

Unfortunately, monologic or IRE interaction patterns focus on the transmission of predetermined facts and concepts, not intellectual complexity and expanding readers' interpretive repertoires. In contrast, interactive discussions create a space in the discussion for students to generate interpretations, articulate their ideas and negotiate meanings with other readers, not simply strive for consensus.

Interactive Discussions

In contrast to the IRE interaction pattern, numerous literacy educators have described an alternative way of interacting around a piece of literature. Sometimes referred to as dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2006), inter-thinking (Mercer, 2000), shared contemplation (Chambers, 1996), exploratory talk (Barnes & Todd, 1995), scaffolded talk (Nystrand, 1997) or co-elaboration (Serafini & Youngs, 2008), educators and theorists have tried to offer teachers a preferred vision for the types of classroom discussions and interactions they would like to see enacted to support students' thinking and literate abilities.

During an interactive discussion, students play an integral role in determining the direction and focus of the discussion. Each student is responsible for articulating their interpretations and ideas to the community of readers to be considered by other students. They assume an active role, listening intently to other students' ideas and interpretations, negotiating meanings

through the discussion and opening lines of communication among students rather than always going through the teacher.

In the following example, taken from a fifth grade literature discussion focusing on *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne (Browne, 2001), the role of the teacher in the discussion is more facilitative than directive, allowing students a greater share of the conversational turns than a traditional IRE interaction pattern, and is concerned with the interpretations students are offering, rather than searching for predetermined, literal-level answers.

Figure 2: Dialogic Discussion Example

Mrs. Hanson: Let's talk about some of the symbols that we have noticed in the book so far.

Keisha: I think the flower symbolizes how life is good and the daughter is happy. You know, friends and happiness.

Adam: It kind of has hope.

Mrs. Hanson: It kind of gives you hope, doesn't it? Maybe with your generation, you can get rid of prejudice and judgment and things like that.

Devon: On the very first page when they're walking together, they're not very happy and the mom just has a straight face.

Lindsay: And then when the mom and Charles are sitting on the bench, they're kind of turned away from each other, they don't want to talk. And then again,

down here [pointing to an image in the Third Voice], they're not looking at each other, talking or hugging or anything.

Keisha: Then in the second to the last picture [of the Third Voice], she has her arm around him. She's probably just saying, "Come on, we're not going back there."

Mrs. Hanson: Are you suggesting that Charles and his mother are very removed from each other?

Sandra: On this page, I notice that she doesn't have a husband. Maybe because she's lost Charles and it only mentions two people in her family so she wants to find Charles.

Keisha: Right here in this picture, Charles is in his mom's shadow is over him. That's how his mom is there again. The hat symbolizes the mom watching over every move Charles makes.

In this interaction, students produce a "chain of utterances" (Nystrand, 2006) where they are able to talk without interruption or re-direction from the teacher. Students listen and respond to one another as well as the teacher. In addition, the teacher responds to the students' ideas rather than the students simply answering a series of questions asked by the teacher. These two transcripts demonstrate the differences between monologic and dialogic interaction patterns, allowing students voices to be heard and positioning the teacher as *one* voice in the conversation, not *the* authoritative voice. These

transcripts are used here as prototypical examples of the differences between monologic or IRE interactions and the dialogic or interactive patterns being recommended.

Promoting Interactive Discussions

Based on classroom observations analyzed during the various research studies undertaken, the following instructional recommendations are offered. In order to promote interactive discussions in the classroom, teachers need to consider the following general principles. Interactive discussions:

- utilize quality literature – if you want students to have better discussions, we need to be sure we read and share texts worth talking about.
- focus on both initial responses, those that occur during the reading of the text, and reflective responses, those that are generated after the text has been read and considered in its entirety.
- utilize visual artifacts and classroom charts that allow students and teachers to refer to things that have been offered previously and to look for patterns in their responses.
- require teachers to have an extensive knowledge of literature and literary theories and reading processes to extend individual student's interpretive repertoires.
- require students to understand the expectations, often different from traditional expectations for responding to texts, teachers are setting in their classrooms.

In addition to the general principles articulated previously, interactive discussions are supported by setting particular expectations for both the teacher and the students and through the use of particular discussion techniques or strategies.

Setting Expectations for Discussion

To begin, the expectations that are established to support classroom discussions should be transparent, clear and obtainable. In other words, students should know why they are being asked to discuss literature the way we are asking them to, there should be open discussions and numerous demonstrations of this type of dialogic interaction, and we should not expect our students to discuss texts in ways that we have not shown them or they have not previously experienced. Expectations that support a shift from monologic, teacher-directed discussions to dialogic, interactive discussions include the following; (a) students responses are honorably reportable, (b) listening well is as important as talking well, (c) address other students, as well as the teacher, when sharing ideas, (d) considered what has been previously offered by other students, and (e) “half-baked” ideas are accepted and encouraged.

Adapted from the work of Chambers (1996), “honorably reportable” requires students to share with the teacher and the community of readers what they really feel and believe about what is being read. For example, students need to be able to tell the teacher that they don’t particularly like the teacher’s absolute favorite book without fear of reprisal. Until students begin sharing their honest thoughts and reactions, our discussions will be fake, and only be concerned with

surface level meanings and interpretations. Honorably reportable means that students' ideas and comments are not immediately dismissed, that they are treated as worthy of attention, and students are able to trust the teacher to listen sensitively and respond in ways that support continued involvement in the discussion.

Additionally, interactive discussions depend on students being able to listen attentively to one another in order to respond and react to the various comments offered. This requires students to directly address one another, rather than using the teacher as a conduit for all comments and ideas. This leads to the proposition that each student in the discussion needs to consider what has been offered by other students before articulating their own interpretations. Interactive discussions build upon each interpretation or comment offered, they are not simply a collection of unrelated ideas. A primary goal of interactive discussions is to share the possibilities concerning a particular piece of literature, not to reach consensus or come to agreement about what a book means. Interactive discussions create a space for readers to articulate their interpretations, consider the ideas of other readers and negotiate the possibilities a particular text offers.

Students need to be able to offer "half-baked" ideas. These are ideas that are in process; ideas that are being explored by a particular student. Through "exploratory talk," knowledge is made publicly accountable, open for consideration and revision, combines challenges and requests for clarification,

and provides opportunities for students to articulate, negotiate and reconsider their interpretations (Mercer, 1995),

Interactive Discussion Strategies

In addition to the general principles outlined, and setting expectations for students, teachers can use these discussion techniques to increase the level of “interactivity” of one’s literature discussions and create opportunities for more voices to be heard and considered. These strategies may be used with a variety of texts across a variety of curricular areas. However, the examples used here are from reading and literature discussions.

One of the most important strategies for changing the interaction patterns during literature discussions is to stop requiring students to raise their hands to offer ideas or enter the conversation. Instead, we need to teach students how to listen for openings in the discussion, and how to politely “get the floor.” When a student raises their hand and waits for the teacher to call on them during literature discussions, the only thing they have to listen for is their name being called. They can simply shut out all the conversation until they hear their name, then simply respond to the teacher. In addition, having teachers determine who will speak next and for how long may give them undue influence in the direction and pacing of the conversation. It takes time to make this shift to allowing students to determine when to speak, and caution must be taken to avoid the domination of the discussion by individual readers. However, the benefits by far outweigh the challenges.

Second, when teachers speak in first-person plural, for example “we need to consider the textual elements,” or “we have to look closely at the illustrations in order to understand what is being represented,” the language is more invitational, suggesting that both teachers and students are working together to comprehend the story being read. The objectives are “reciprocal” (Chambers, 1996), in that both teacher and students (we) are working towards richer, more sophisticated understandings.

A third suggestion is having students “code texts” using sticky notes to mark passages and events they feel are important for discussing before the class gathers to discuss the text. Developing richer, more sophisticated interpretations requires time and attention to the written text and visual images in a piece of literature. Allowing students to refer to their codes in a text encourages students to return to the text to support their interpretations and initial responses during literature discussions.

Another discussion strategy has been described as “handing off” the conversational turn to other students by focusing one’s gaze on someone other than the speaker (Myhill et al., 2006). In this technique, rather than looking solely at the student offering an interpretation, the teacher would look at back and forth to other students, inviting them to participate through their gaze. Using one’s gaze and proximity to a particular student can signal that they are expected to offer something to the discussion without having to ask directly for participation.

Nystrand and his colleagues have discussed the concept of “uptake” in several publications (Nystrand, 1997, 2006; Nystrand, Gamoran, & Heck, 1993). This technique involves “taking up” from what has been offered previously and using students’ input and interpretations as a foundation for the subsequent questions and comments made by the teacher. In order to be successful, this strategy requires teachers to listen sensitively and attentively to what students are saying in order to utilize their comments in subsequent turns.

Another successful strategy for helping students to attend to what other students have said previously, is a strategy called “He said, She said, and I think” (Serafini & Youngs, 2008). In this strategy, individual students are required to describe what two other students have said previously before offering their comments and interpretations. This technique requires students to listen to at least two other students before offering their ideas. In addition, students generally use what has been said by other students in their own comments, building upon and adding to what has been offered. Alexander (2006) has stated that quality classroom interactions are cumulative, suggesting that discussions should build upon the ideas and interpretations that have been offered, and “chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry” (p.38).

Each of the strategies described requires a change in the expectations set for students and the role of the classroom teacher in classroom discussions.

These techniques are not magical cures that will alone change the dynamics of the classroom, but are suggestions for reconsidering the types of interactions that occur in classroom discussions.

Final Considerations

In contrast to the language used by teachers during explicit instruction, which focuses on the pace of the lesson, the learning objectives to be met, and the use of responses to confirm students' answers to the questions posed, the language of discussions invites students to participate, focuses on possibilities, is more tentative in nature, and provides time and support for students to wander in their thinking. As teachers educators, we need to heighten teachers' awareness of the language they employ, and its residual effects on students participation, interactions, and interpretations. Teachers should not allow themselves to revert to a "default setting," controlling classroom interactions through IRE patterns. By enlisting some of the strategies offered here, teachers may become more conscious of the language they use, invite more participation from their students, and delve deeper into the literature they read through their interactive discussions.

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