Reflective Teaching,
Reflective Learning

How to Develop
Critically Engaged
Readers, Writers,
and Speakers

EDITED BY
THOMAS M. McCANN
LARRY R. JOHANNESSEN
ELIZABETH KAHN
PETER SMAGORINSKY
AND MICHAEL W. SMITH

HEINEMANN
PORTSMOUTH, NH
CONTENTS

Foreword vii
Jeffrey D. Wilhelm

Preface
What I Have Tried to Teach My Students xi
George Hillocks, Jr.

Introduction xxii
Thomas M. McCann, Larry R. Johannessen, Elizabeth Kahn,
Peter Smagorinsky, and Michael W. Smith

Acknowledgments xxvii

PART 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO INQUIRY

1 Taking Risks: Reflecting on At-Risk Teaching 3
Julianna Cucci and Jamie A. Kowalczyk

2 Inquiry Versus Naïve Relativism: James, Dewey,
and Teaching the Ethics of Pragmatism 19
Jeffrey Conant Markham

PART 2: WRITING INSTRUCTION

3 Dialogue Folders: Creating Space to Engage Students
in Conversation About Their Writing 35
Kevin Perks

4 Inquiry, Dialogue, and the Teaching of Writing 49
Joseph M. Flanagan

5 The Other Writing Process: Using Inquiry to Teach Writing 67
Tim Pappageorge
PART 3: DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITY

6  The Role of Play and Small-Group Work in Activity-Based Instruction 83
   David A. Ragsdale and Peter Smagorinsky

7  Engaging Students in Authentic Discussions of Literature 99
   Larry R. Johannessen and Elizabeth Kahn

8  It's Always Something: Planning for Sustained Discussion 117
   Thomas M. McCann

PART 4: LITERATURE INSTRUCTION

9  Accepting the Challenge of Chevys: What My Research Means for My Teaching 135
   Michael W. Smith

10 Reading Level Response: Helping Students Write About Literature 147
    Declan FitzPatrick

11 Cultural Modeling in the Hillocks Tradition 166
    Carol D. Lee

12 Critically Thinking About Harry Potter: Applying a Hillocksian Inquiry Framework to Controversial Works in the English Classroom 178
    Joanne M. Marshall

PART 5: INQUIRY, LEARNING, AND REFLECTION

13 From What to How: Developing Procedural Knowledge in the English Classroom 189
    Kierstin Thompson and Jennifer Roloff Welch

14 Increase the Peace: Engaging Students in Authentic Discussion and Inquiry to Help Prevent School Violence 207
    Steven Gevinson

Contributors 221
I almost became George Hillocks’ Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) student at the University of Chicago.

It’s one of my many George Hillocks stories, from a repertoire that is continually growing. You see, as an undergraduate I took two introductory education courses, and they were so insipid, boring, and uninspiring that I dropped out of education altogether in favor of a double major in English and German. But as I neared the end of my undergraduate career (the five-year plan, including a one-year Rotary scholarship to Germany), I continued to want to teach. I wanted a program that would focus on what I considered to be the substantive challenge of teaching, instead of the mindless minutiae I had been exposed to in my first education courses. I spoke to several professors at Ohio universities about my options: Every one of them recommended that I pursue my MAT degree and that I do so at the University of Chicago. Every one of them invoked the name George Hillocks. At least one of them remembered George as an outstanding teacher of seventh-grade English from Euclid, Ohio.

I applied to the program at the University of Chicago and the MAT program at Brown University. In April, my girlfriend, Peggy (now my wife), and I planned a trip to Chicago for an open house offered by UC’s MAT program. But the day before we were to depart, a Friday in early April, both Peggy and I received scholarship offers: I from Brown and Peg from Boston University. We agreed that we both would accept these offers and canceled our trip to Chicago.

But I quickly learned, and have been learning ever since, that if you are serious about English education, George Hillocks is not an easy person to escape.

In fact, while a student in what continues to be the very fine MAT program at Brown, one of our first readings was about George’s questioning hierarchy to promote skills in interpreting literature. We later looked at his review of written composition. He became a character in our discussions and debates, as we asked, “But what would Hillocks say?” It seemed to me that George was everywhere,
particularly when we were tempted to accept a simplistic answer to a teaching problem or to let ourselves off the hook in terms of our responsibility as teachers.

After my first few years of teaching, my desire to be a better teacher led me to immerse myself in professional reading. I remember my excitement with the Theory and Research Into Practice (TRIP) books put out by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). *Writing About Literature* by Elizabeth Kahn, Larry Johannessen, and Carolyn Calhoun Walter made me think for the first time about how to sequence instructional activities; *Designing and Sequencing Prewriting Activities*, also by Kahn, Johannessen, and Walter, taught me about the demands placed on readers by different kinds of texts like extended definition. I devoured *Reducing Writing Apprehension* by Michael Smith and *Explorations: Introductory Activities for Literature and Composition, 7–12* by Peter Smagorinsky, Tom McCann, and Steve Kern—and with big utensils. What I didn’t realize at the time was that the texts I found most useful and transformative were almost all by George’s students. I found out later that these teachers’ public careers began on a famous weekend when George invited his students to his home, locked them in, and said, “It’s time to give something back to the profession. You don’t leave until you write a proposal for the next NCTE convention.”

Eight years into my teaching career I was struggling with my teaching of eighth-grade remedial reading. In the midst of this struggle I heard Michael Smith speak at the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English conference in Stevens Point. He was presenting about how to develop new interests and abilities by building on kids’ existing interests and strengths. He then launched into a talk about how to teach conventions of writing that would help kids understand how to read and write particular texts, like argument. I remember being electrified: This is what I had been looking for. I had been confronted with the fact that I didn’t know how to motivate kids who were unmotivated readers and writers or how to use students’ existing resources to develop new ones. I felt I had underarticulated the complexity of reading and writing. Michael, a student of George’s, was helping me fill in the gaps. Afterward, I rushed up to him and said, “I want to study with you!” And he responded, “That would be great. Do you want to tell me your name?”

I went on to enter the doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin with Michael as my major professor. Michael is the best teacher I’ve ever had. He liked to say that he wanted to be perched on his students’ shoulders, whispering in our ears to think from certain angles. This has certainly become the case for me. I don’t think I read or teach or write anything without hearing Michael’s voice. And I know that it is the case that George is perched on Michael’s shoulder whispering to him who whispers to me, reminding me how to pay attention. Perhaps my greatest debt to George is that he gave me Michael. I know that doctoral students around the country feel the same way about Peter Smagorinsky, Larry Johannessen, Carol Lee, and many other of George’s students.

Doctoral students are part of a peculiar genealogy. There are many folks in the profession like Miles Myers, the former executive director of NCTE, who can trace the lineages of figures in the profession. By this method, Michael is George’s student and I am Michael’s student, which makes me a “grandstudent” of George’s. Likewise
my students are George’s “great-grandstudents.” Given the number of George’s former students now teaching in the university ranks, he has a big family of grandstudents and great-grandstudents indeed. At a recent Maine Writing Project meeting, one of our fellows declaimed, “I am a Hillocksian!” He was greeted by a chorus of us, chanting, “We are ALL Hillocksians!” It was a great moment.

Another great benefit of being one of George’s grandstudents is that one is welcomed into a clan of folks who are among those who are thinking the hardest of anybody about the most challenging problems of teaching the English language arts. Some academic groups are insular. Not George’s former students. They are wonderful colleagues in their own rights, but one can’t help but think that they inherited and learned from George some of his legendary generosity of spirit. In turn, his students revere George for his selfless sharing and great-hearted sense of caring. This past fall, at the Illinois Association of Teachers of English conference (where the idea for this book was born), more than thirty of George’s former students made presentations dedicated to him and founded on what he had taught them. After George received a distinguished service award, his students gathered to pay him homage: literally dozens of students who still teach on the front lines—editors, writers, university professors, and many others like me—had come to thank George for his salutary influences. It was like an Acadian family reunion. George was presented with two thick scrapbooks containing letters and photos and thank-yous from nearly all of the MAT and doctoral students he had taught during his tenure at the University of Chicago.

There’s much more I could say about this gentle giant of literacy education. He has won numerous awards, including the most distinguished awards of our profession; written seminal articles, reviews, and books; led one of the most successful teacher preparation programs in the country; and been a national leader in professional service. But George is proudest of being a teacher, so I will move toward my conclusion by identifying one of the many things he has taught me: how to inquire. His idea of “frame experiments” moved me into the realm of teacher research. He taught me that reading and writing are forms of inquiry and are best taught as inquiry in contexts of inquiry. And George taught me how to think about, theorize, and do this kind of work that has ever since undergirded my career as a teacher, researcher, and writer.

A few nights ago, I was in Chicago to work with the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Center. As soon as George found out I was scheduled to be in town, he shot me an email. He asked if he could attend a session I was leading with teachers at the Marie Curie High School, where he had worked for many years, and if he could invite me to his home for dinner afterward. The email was a nice summary of why George inspires me so much. He is always learning, always in school, always working with kids, and always generous.

During dinner that night, conversation turned to a new book of mine that had just been released. George said to me, “I taught you something that you used in that book.”

“I cited you, I hope,” I said, already worried about how I could possibly remember and acknowledge everything George has taught me.
"No, you somehow neglected to," he replied, then gave a hearty laugh. I was ready to blurt out that he should identify the omission and I would add the appropriate acknowledgment in the next reprint, but he beat me to the punch. "Listen," he said, leaning over the kitchen table, "When I teach anybody anything, I'm not what is important. If I teach something it's because I want you to use it and I want you to make it your own and spread the word. That's how teaching makes a difference."

I've come to expect this kind of generosity from George. Nonetheless, it is important to me that any reader of any of my work knows how grateful I am to George; and I want George himself to know that I am aware of at least some of the debt I owe him. Though he waves off that kind of talk, I think it is important that George's manifold contributions to our professional understanding be acknowledged and celebrated. This book has come about because there are many of the most influential English educators in this country who feel the same way as I do. The contributions are a testimony both to what George has taught all of us individually and to what he has contributed to our field as a whole.

In the final analysis, I suppose, I could say that I almost became George Hillocks' MAT student. But in the end, I have to admit that I did become his student. This is something for which I am extremely grateful. Sometimes we find our teachers, and sometimes our teachers find us. I am grateful that George found me in so many ways: through his writing, his students and their writing, through Michael Smith, and through a valued personal relationship. There is no question that without George's contributions to my own thinking and to the profession, I would not have found teaching to be the exciting, complex, fulfilling, worthwhile pursuit of possibility that I have found it to be.

George's influence has transformed all of us who write here. If you do not know George and his work, then this volume will help make you his student in ways that will certainly be transformative for you as well. You'll enjoy the journey. I know that I have.
I have been asked to write about what I tried to teach my students in the Master of Arts in Teaching program at the University of Chicago, a program that I directed for thirty-one years. That adventure largely defined my life for the years between 1971 and 2002 and probably still does. When I began teaching in 1956, I knew almost nothing about teaching English. I covered the grammar we were supposed to cover; assigned the literature and led recitations about it, not knowing the difference between recitation and discussion; assigned the writing and book reports; and wrote comments on papers telling students what they should have done after they had done the writing. After teaching a year at the junior high and another at the high school, I left to do a year of graduate study at the University of Edinburgh. In 1959, I returned to find that the principal did not want me at the high school. (In a faculty meeting, I had strongly argued against part of the criteria for evaluating teachers that he asked the faculty to approve. He wanted no more of that.) I could go back to the junior high. To my mind, at the time, it was a demotion, and I was quite upset.

However, when I was back at the junior high, one of the first people I sought out was Bernie McCabe, the teacher who had supported my request to buy copies of *Pygmalion* for my ninth-grade class during my first year. By this time, he was a visiting teacher, a floating consultant whose job was to work with interested language arts teachers in the three junior highs, helping them develop their teaching skills and the curriculum. I confessed to him that I did not know how to teach writing. (I thought I knew something about teaching literature but, of course, was mistaken.) He said that he had one lesson, on haiku, that had always worked for him. He said he would be a happy to show me the lesson, but that first I needed to know something about haiku. He reached into his briefcase and withdrew a little anthology of haiku by Basho and several other Japanese poets and some Americans. He told me to read them to see what they’re like. We arranged a meeting for a day the
Bernie began our discussion using the following poem by one of his seventh graders to illustrate the structure and content.

Someone lights a moon.
Then angels with silver chalk
Draw on their blackboard.

The book that Bernie had given me to read said that a haiku has three lines with a total of seventeen syllables (which in English imitate the Japanese structure), with five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third. (Nowadays, writers argue about whether it must have that exact structure.) Bernie pointed out that haiku also have a stable element, a changing element, an allusion to time, and figurative language. He emphasized that students had to have had experience with figurative language for the lesson to proceed. We examined several haiku in the anthology to determine whether they really had that structure. They did.

Bernie said that the problem would be how to teach that knowledge to students and how to help them proceed with getting ideas and generating their own poems. The lesson he showed me begins with a brief introduction to haiku and to Japanese culture and a reading of the preceding poem. It proceeds with an analysis of the features of the poem, admittedly with leading questions.

Then students receive a sheet of eight haiku, several of which break the rules. They read and analyze them for the characteristics. Then in order to focus on the theme, students give titles to each with their answers converging, as one would expect. Next, students write a haiku using a first line supplied in the lesson, “Winter trees are hands.” Students have five to ten minutes to finish this poem and to read examples aloud. Most students do very well with this as the given line does a lot of the work. That is okay at this point, Bernie told me, because what we want is student confidence.

Students next brainstorm for possible topics—real brainstorming with two students to write on the blackboard and the teacher pointing to one student after another for topic suggestions. At the end of the class, students began homework, which is to write four haiku. We discussed all elements of the lesson with Bernie emphasizing the need to prepare the students carefully so that they would not be frustrated. I agreed to try the lesson with Bernie watching. I was excited. I had never thought out a lesson so carefully.

A few days later, I taught the lesson to my best ninth-grade class. They were wonderful and seemed excited themselves. When we finished the brainstorming, we had five sections of blackboard covered with suggestions. The homework was to write four original haiku. I could hardly wait to see what they wrote. To my surprise, all my students had written at least four haiku. I set them to work in small groups, another new activity for me. They were to read each other’s haiku to determine if they had followed the rules, to decide if the topics were good ones, and to
make recommendations for improvement. This activity was followed with time to
revise and with students’ using the remaining class time to read haiku in small
groups and to nominate some for reading aloud to the whole class.

When I read the poems, I loved the results. Perhaps I would learn to teach
English after all. All my ninth-grade classes did this lesson, and all of them produced
a little pamphlet of haiku. Only one student never produced a haiku, but Sam pro-
duced a picture of a peacock for the cover of his class’s pamphlet using three col-
ors of ditto backing on deep yellow paper. And he was very proud of it. The
pamphlets went to all parents.

This lesson became a model for me in my thinking and planning and marked
the beginning of my love affair with teaching English. I began planning all my
work this way, beginning with a concrete student objective (e.g., to write a
haiku) and a detailed analysis of the task involved, including the necessary knowl-
dge of the form, knowledge of the kinds of content, and the procedures
involved in actually producing one. I began to plan in terms of the prerequisite
knowledge for a task and to delay teaching until that was in place. I began invent-
ing activities that would make initial approaches to learning tasks simpler (e.g.,
providing the first line of the poem) and sequencing learning activities from easy
to difficult. Underneath all this planning lay the concept of inquiry, the focus of
this book. That is, I worked to set up lessons so that students could derive and
test rules, generalizations, and interpretations for themselves. Most important, I
learned that what and how much students learned was dependent on my plan-
ning and my care in bringing those plans to fruition in the classroom. I would
never be able to view teaching as a hit-or-miss operation again, one that was sub-
ject to the vagaries of the weather, students’ moods, and other random factors out
of my control. I learned that if students did not learn, on any given day, I should
look for the cause in my assumptions about the learning tasks, my planning, my
teaching, or all three. I suddenly was more excited about teaching English to jun-
or high students than about my graduate work. As I look back on it now, what
I had considered a disgraceful demotion was one of the most important events
in my life.

The first literature unit I worked on using inquiry focused on satire. Inquiry is
the process of developing what Dewey called “warrantable assertions” about some
phenomena about which we have questions. The following example illustrates the
process. I had overheard one little boy telling a friend that he had read Orwell’s
Animal Farm for his book report. The friend asked him what that book was about.
I still remember his reply: “It’s a stupid story about animals taking over a farm.” He
hadn’t liked it. I had seen several book reports on satiric works into which students
had no insight. (In those days, it was common for school systems to require book
reports every six weeks.) It occurred to me that it might be possible to develop a
unit on satire so that students would recognize it and be able to interpret it. I took
that idea to Bernie. He took the idea to teachers at the two other junior highs, and
they agreed to meet with me and Bernie to discuss the possibility of teaching such
a unit to our ninth-grade honors classes.
In late 1959 in preparation for the meeting, I began a search for material that would provide an explanation of satire and how it worked. I had access to the best library in northern Ohio at Case Western Reserve University, but I found nothing. Kernan’s The Cankered Muse was published by Yale in 1959 but eluded my search. Elliott’s The Power of Satire was published by Princeton in 1960, and Highet’s The Anatomy of Satire was published by Princeton in 1962. Wayne C. Booth’s A Rhetoric of Irony would not be published until 1974. Having come up empty, we knew that we would have to buckle down and make the analysis ourselves.

We began by making a list of many satiric poems, short prose works such as fables, and novels. Our question was, How does satire work? It was obvious that some of the poetry made use of what we called direct attack, Juvenal’s Satires, for example. Such works usually announce the object of ridicule and proceed to attack the target, explicating, in no uncertain terms, what the writer objected to. It required little or no inference-making to identify the targets of attack or to understand the reasons for the attack. Later, I learned to call this satire diatribe. It was also obvious that many satires, such as Animal Farm, and other works with satiric content, such as Huckleberry Finn, required, sometimes, a very high level of inference-making. Although, as a boy, I had read Huckleberry Finn nearly every summer (it was my vacation on the Mississippi River!), it never occurred to me that Huck’s decision to help Jim, and thereby, go to hell, was in any way critical of anything. A college professor had to point that out to me.

I recall this analysis as being very hard work, but I knew that if I wanted to teach students how to read satire, I would have to do it. Bernie had taught me that. Eventually, we agreed that satirists employ three primary techniques that require readers to make complex inferences: symbolism, exaggeration, and irony. That, of course, was not enough. The most important questions remained: How does a reader recognize and interpret any of those? How could we teach such inference-making to our students?

We thought that exaggeration was easiest of all to recognize, especially in cartoons and certain written satires. Characteristics, habits, and ideas are exaggerated to such an extent that we recognize that the satirist is drawing special attention to the target so that we recognize it as undesirable. Eventually, with enough clues, we see it as pernicious or even evil. The artist draws our attention to the target because the exaggeration of it does not accord with our expectations of the normal. Pap’s extreme rantings and ravings about Blacks early in Huckleberry Finn condemn him as a thorough bigot. Symbols are a bit more subtle, but the artist draws attention to them as something more than they appear by their appearance, their actions, their language, or simply their repetitive appearances. The animals in fables, for example, are obviously more than simply beasts because they have human attributes. Usually their actions are human. With the clues provided, it is a relatively easy matter to infer that the rabbit lost the race to the tortoise through overconfidence. In fact, that is the only characteristic he has other than his natural speed. We have, first, to recognize that the hare is not simply a hare, that his human characteristics make him something more. We infer those qualities from what he does and what he says.
Irony is more subtle still. It lies in the language. Take the opening lines of Sassoon’s (1918) poem, “Base Details”:

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,  
I’d live with scarlet Majors at the Base,  
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.

Even on a first reading of the opening line, we see that something is amiss. There is a contrast that is unexpected; the word *fierce* does not accord with *bald, and short of breath*. We do not think of heroes as being *glum*. We infer that they are glum because they know their fate as they “speed . . . up the line.” The larger contrast with our expectations is that we tend to think of officers as leading men into battle, not speeding them “up the line to death.” In this kind of irony, what Booth (1974) calls “stable irony,” such verbal contrasts alert the reader that there may be more to the text than the surface meanings, that there is a need to reject the surface meanings and reconstruct the meaning from the contradictions. The final lines of the poem read,

And when the war is done and youth stone dead,  
I’d toddle safely home and die in bed.

Clearly, this is not really a poem about an officer who is fiercely brave, leading young men into battle, but is rather a poem about an officer who is fiercely devoted to his own safety back at the base, all the while sending young men to die in the trenches of World War I.

For adults who are experienced readers, the meanings of this poem may be transparent. But for inexperienced readers, they are not. More often than not, when inexperienced readers encounter irony, they make literal interpretations (“*Animal Farm* is a stupid story about animals who take over a farm.”). Even when they recognize some of the contradictions in irony, more often than not they conclude that the work makes no sense or not very good sense. (“Why would anyone write a poem about an officer who only stays at the base and sends young men to die? That does not make any sense.”)

It was clear to us that reading and interpreting any book-length satire would very likely involve responding to all these problems. Complex satires such as Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *1984*, or even Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* would require students to make sense of complex combinations of exaggeration, symbolism, and irony. Our analysis of the underlying tasks seemed crucial to the success of the unit. When we had arrived at this point, we realized that we still had even more difficult work to do. We had to find a way to teach students to recognize and interpret these satiric strategies.

From the outset, we rejected teacher explanations as the way to introduce our students to the strategies. We knew, for example, that if we simply lectured on exaggeration, symbolism, or irony and explained what those meant in literary works, our students might accept what we said, but would entertain it with skepticism.
because we would have deprived them of the opportunity of coming to their own conclusions about the use of the strategies.

We had to begin with something simple enough for students to recognize with some help. Nowadays, we might have said that we had to envisage a "zone of proximal development," but in 1959, we knew nothing of Vygotsky, whose work wasn’t widely available in this country until 1962. Bernie McCabe suggested cartoons from newspaper editorial pages. Another teacher suggested Mad magazine cartoons. I suggested that we might start irony with a discussion of sarcasm, which our ninth graders used pretty frequently in their conversations. Someone suggested caricature to begin our work on exaggeration. Work on each satiric strategy (exaggeration, symbolism, and irony) began with the simplest examples we could find and moved through increasingly complex examples.

The sequence on irony, for example, began with spoken sarcasm. We’d say to students something like the following: “A teacher distributes a graded test with many failing grades and says with a sneer on his face, ‘What a wonderful job you all did on this test.’” We ask, “What does he really mean? How do you know?” Our expectation was, at this stage in planning, that students would soon see the contrast between the literal meaning of the words and the context of failing papers and the sneer in the teacher’s voice. We devised other examples for students to examine and then the plan was to have them devise their own sarcastic remarks, which proved to be no problem at all.

As soon as they appeared to understand the principle of the tone of voice and the context contrasting with and undercutting the literal meanings of words used, we moved to simple cartoons. One of our first cartoons showed a long, sandy beach fading into the distance with nothing on it except a very long row of large garbage cans, each with a sign reading, “Keep our beaches beautiful.” We hoped that it would not be difficult for students to infer that the cartoonist’s point was that the garbage cans were themselves the primary source of uglification on the beach.

From cartoons we moved to poems. The first we planned to use was a poem by Sarah Cleghorn (1917):

The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day,
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.

Our plan was to begin with a general question to see if students could interpret the poem without further help. We thought that they might not understand the words links or mill. We planned to ask if anyone knew the words and, if no one did, to explain them. If no one offered an interpretation of the poem after the explanation of the words, we would ask if anyone saw any unusual contrasts in the poem. In the actual teaching, my students immediately saw the contrast between the children working and the men playing but did not conclude anything about it.
I had to ask, “So what?” It did not take long for someone to say, “Well you don’t expect kids to be working inside while men are playing outside.” “No,” said another student, “it is supposed to be the other way around.”

“So what do you make of that?” I asked. “This was before child labor laws,” said one boy. I asked him what he could tell us about child labor and the laws that went into effect. “We studied this a little bit in social studies,” he said. “During the Industrial Revolution, it was common for children to work in factories, especially in textile mills. They worked twelve to sixteen hours a day. They were cheap. They did not have to be paid much.” A girl added more details about children being small and having nimble fingers to work with the threads. “And they did not have to go to school,” she added. There was a little laughter and a general murmur of approval. “So you all think that it was good for young children to work in factories twelve to sixteen hours a day?” I asked. The class went silent. “Not really,” said the boy who had first mentioned child labor. “It was bad for their health and they never had a chance to learn anything except their jobs.” “Given all that knowledge you have of child labor,” I said, “what do you make of the poem?” I had one of the students reread the poem. Some smiled at the last line. One girl summed up the discussion: “It’s sort of like sarcasm. You know she does not mean that last line as a good thing—that the men are playing while the children are working. And they work almost every day. So the first lines undercut the final line. You could read it like sarcasm.” And she proceeded to read it sarcastically, the first three lines in a high, light, almost merry voice, but the last line in a lower tone, mustering as much contempt in her voice as she could for the final three words, “men at play.” I reminded students that this was an example of irony used to make a cutting indictment.

We then moved on to a series of increasingly complex poems, from the relatively simple “Base Details” to some poems of cummings and Eliot’s “The Hollow Men.” Often in this sequence, students worked on poems in small groups to identify the targets, the reasons for the attack, and the means of attack, subsequently presenting ideas to the whole class for general discussion. The final poem uses all the satiric strategies we had examined, and it prepared us for the longer works to come, including Animal Farm, Huckleberry Finn, and Molière’s The Physician in Spite of Himself, which the class produced in a slightly bowdlerized version for an evening audience made up of parents and friends. As we worked on the production, the class began their independent reading, selecting one title from a list of more than a hundred satiric works by Swift, Mark Twain, Orwell, Huxley, Bernard Shaw, Jane Austen, Molière, Thurber, Will Cuppy, Dickens, and many other writers. Some works on the list were satiric only in part, such as Dickens’ Hard Times, but could still serve as a means of assessing our students’ ability at identifying and interpreting satire independently. At the time, although we did not use the word, we thought of this activity as a more authentic assessment than a simple paper-and-pencil test would have been. Simple tests about the content of the works read in class would not have allowed evaluation of the major unit objectives; that is, to read and interpret satire effectively. And the independent reading fulfilled the district requirement for a book report every six weeks and was more useful, we thought.
By my third year in teaching, then, I had learned some important strategies in planning that I would pass on to my students in English education:

- doing task analysis,
- sequencing from the simple to complex in a cumulative fashion (so that the purpose of any activity in the sequence was to prepare for the next),
- sequencing from teacher-led to small peer group to independent activity,
- inventing activities that would introduce students to underlying concepts in a way that would be accessible to them (what I have come to call gateway activities),
- using small-group discussions consistently so that students became the authorities on the interpretation of works, and
- devising means of evaluation that would provide insight into students’ ability to meet the major objectives of the lessons.

Underlying all these principles is the idea that when students interpret data for themselves, they learn strategies that they can apply to a wide variety of materials that become more and more complex. Learning the strategies requires real discussions during which students debate their ideas with each other. For the units to work well, students have to become the source of interpretations in the classroom. I realized that if I explained works to them, I only deprived them of opportunities for learning the needed strategies. My scholarly life for the past thirty-odd years has been devoted to articulating these principles and the theories that ground them and to studying the impact that instruction informed by those principles has on kids’ reading and writing.

These were the major ideas I had acquired when I came to teach methods of teaching English at Case Western Reserve University and later for several years at Bowling Green State University. There was much more involved in these apparently simple teaching strategies, including setting meaningful goals for lessons and units; evaluating teaching in light of those goals; deciding which concepts were worth teaching; analyzing the relative complexity of tasks; using inventories to help decide what students needed to learn; and, perhaps most important, inventing new materials and activities to introduce difficult concepts.

For most of these formative years, my interests had been primarily in the teaching of literature. Literature, after all, was the focus of nearly all my graduate work. My oral comprehensives focused on the periods of Old English through the eighteenth century. When Bernie and another colleague, Jim McCampbell, and I began work on our first book, *The Dynamics of English Instruction*, in about 1966, we decided that I would do the lit section, Bernie the comp, and Jim the language. We shared the section on general processes in the teaching of English, such as the use of inventories, classroom discussion, and so forth. Bernie and I knew that we would always work together on various projects, but we decided that I would focus on literature and he would continue his focus on composition. My work at Bowling
Green State University pulled me more and more to writing, and when I became director of first-year English in 1969, I became heavily committed to writing.

At Case Western Reserve and at Bowling Green, the methods classes in English stood alone. There was only one course, and it was isolated from any work in classrooms. I could not deal effectively with classroom management, leading discussions, setting up and monitoring small-group discussions, evaluating teaching in progress, deciding when and how to modify lessons and materials in progress, or even how to recognize an effective lesson.

But when I came to the University of Chicago, I came as director of the Master of Arts in Teaching English program, and no one told me what to do. I remember going to Dean Thomas, who served as dean of the Graduate School of Education and as chair of the Department of Education, to ask what courses I was expected to teach. He told me that I was the expert in this field and that I should make those decisions for myself. I was pleasantly amazed and realized immediately, with some level of trepidation, that I would have the opportunity to help develop the very best teachers I could.

I began teaching at Chicago in the fall of 1971. For the following year I decided to begin the program in the summer with a course on teaching writing coupled with a four-week workshop that would begin after the first four weeks of class. The workshop recruited about forty young people between the ages of eleven and fifteen for a summer program in writing that included special-interest projects for which the attending students could volunteer to work with two or three MAT students. The projects included making a two-minute movie, writing and producing a puppet play, making a slide show accompanied by music and spoken-word literature, producing a cookbook, and so forth. Kids worked on the special projects for two or three hours, one day per week. On the other four days, the workshop focused on a conventional form, such as fables or trickster tales, and personal narrative writing. I hoped that the workshop would provide each MAT student with some real experience in class—opportunities to see the effects of the planning they were doing, to learn how to divide a large class into small collaborative groups and gain experience in running them smoothly, and especially to learn how to observe instruction and reflect on its impact.

The workshop, in conjunction with the course on teaching writing, had the effect of becoming a laboratory for me to develop ideas, with the help of my students, on teaching writing. After the tragic death of Bernie McCabe in 1975, I made the conscious decision to fulfill his work in composition. It was a move that I see in retrospect as an attempt to relieve the sense of utter devastation I felt at the loss of the man who had been my best friend and colleague for more than fifteen years. A few years later, I decided to move the workshop to the fall quarter so that it followed the course on teaching writing. We moved to a Chicago school down the street from the Department of Education where we taught the “low-level seventh-grade class in language arts” (so designated by the Chicago Board of Education) for about fifteen years. The methods of planning and teaching remained parallel to those I have already described in teaching literature. I have described the teaching of writing we did in those workshops in a book called *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice* (1995).
Even though I had been thinking about what constituted outstanding teaching in English for more than ten years before I arrived at Chicago, my ideas continued to evolve and to be refined for the next thirty-one, thanks to the terrific students who came to the program. From the beginning of my work with the MAT program, I wanted my students to be effective planners of curriculum, from forty-minute lessons to yearlong sequences. I hoped they would become inventors of effective lessons and new curricular materials. I wanted them to develop materials and lessons such that their classrooms would be effective environments for active learning with most students on task most of the time and with most contributing to discussions and engaged in the processes of inquiry on any given day, thereby constructing knowledge for themselves and not simply listening to the teacher talk. Even from the beginning, I wanted my MAT students to be able to evaluate the effects of their own teaching in the moment of teaching, making their teaching open to revision immediately in class and later in the quiet of their own thinking and planning. Finally, I hoped that this kind of thinking would allow my students to be teacher-researchers who would continually invent, test, and revise their materials, curricular ideas, and teaching strategies.

At the beginning of my work with the program, I assumed, without making the assumption explicit, that outstanding teachers cared deeply about the moral, personal, and academic development of their students. I suspect that most professors working in English education would have a comparable goal. Hundreds of teachers I have observed in a wide variety of research projects and in my capacity as a supervisor of teachers have made such statements. Indeed, the myth is that all teachers share such caring or they would not be teaching. Certainly, no teacher in my long experience has ever flat out denied such caring.

Saying that we care is easy and trivial. Making such caring manifest consistently in every class is neither easy nor trivial. I believe that consistent manifestations of caring can take place only if the teacher has first a deep understanding of her students as developing people and learners, a thorough understanding of the subject matter taught, and a consistent willingness to depart from the tried and trite to explore better ways of teaching so that the subject matter becomes the vehicle for the student-teacher interactions that lead to the personal, moral, and academic development of young people. Success in the latter entails not only critical inquiry into what passes as a curriculum in the subject matter area, but critical inquiry into ideas that will serve the purpose of teaching more adequately. It entails not only the ability to analyze conventional teaching materials and strategies critically, but also to invent new ones and subject those to rigorous evaluation. Finally, it entails the willingness and ability to reject what is ineffective and to build consistently on what does work. This is a continuous, reflective project enhanced by formal and informal research.

By my second year at Chicago, I had in place the basic program that I hoped would do all these things, that would bring my MAT students to this level of caring. In addition to four or five English courses and three general education courses (educational psychology, philosophy, and special education), the program included five courses in English education that made up an integrated sequence of prepara-
tion for teaching. This sequence began with the course in teaching writing I mentioned earlier. The crucial concern of this course is learning to create environments, including materials and activities, that enable students to learn the complex strategies involved in various writing tasks. In many respects this course was the cornerstone of the program, and prepared students for the fall composition workshop and for a fall-quarter course focusing on creating instructional units that integrate literature, language, composition, and critical thinking.

In the fall-quarter composition workshop, groups of four or five MAT students with an advisor taught a sixth-, seventh-, eighth-, or ninth-grade class for approximately five weeks. Each day one of the group taught while everyone else observed. Following the actual class, we reviewed the teaching, deciding what went well and what did not, and planning for the coming days of the workshop. Each day we spent four hours on these teaching, reflecting, and planning activities. We had plenty of data to work with: the observational notes from four or five observers and the products of student work. We examined everything: how well the materials and activities had worked, the extent to which students were on task or engaged in discussions, how we might have been more efficient, and so forth.

These daily sessions both provided the grist for our planning and introduced my students to the kind of teacher research that is so important to being a reflective teacher. At the end of the workshop, as a group (I taught too), we evaluated our own teaching in part by examining what our students had learned by evaluating pre- and post-test writing samples. Each MAT student researched and wrote about some question related to the workshop; for example, whether our efforts in teaching revision paid off over the long run, the extent to which a particular model for organization worked, how well students learned to use and deal with counter-arguments, the impact of our work with figurative language on writing, and so forth. These papers were exciting and often had an impact on the way a workshop developed the following year. For example, two papers argued that it would have been stronger in teaching narrative to introduce the use of dialogue earlier in the workshop. The next year we did, and it was.

One goal of the workshop was to learn to work collaboratively with other teachers to improve teaching. It had that effect and more. Many MAT students formed close bonds with each other that have been maintained many years after leaving the program. They continue to discuss their ideas with those who were their earliest colleagues; witness, for example, the editors of this book.

The state of Illinois requires that all prospective teachers engage in preliminary observations and work with classes prior to student teaching. In part, the composition workshop met this requirement. But I wanted students to see other teaching as well. MAT students were required to make a range of observations in the fall quarter, collect observational notes, and make analyses of the teaching they observed. During these observations, students also located a mentor teacher with whom they would like to work, usually in the Chicago schools, but often in suburban schools as well. It was the MAT students’ responsibility to ask that teacher if she were willing to act as a mentor. Once an agreement was reached, they observed the mentor teacher’s classes with a view to planning a unit of instruction for those classes.
In the fall quarter, students also took a course in teaching literature in which they created units that integrate literature, composition, and critical thinking that they taught to at least two classes during their winter-quarter student teaching. Prior to dealing with the unit strategies discussed earlier, we focused on choosing unit concepts, which could be generic (satire, protest, tragedy, etc.), authorial (Twain, Dickens, etc.), thematic (love, coming of age, etc.), opus-oriented (To Kill a Mockingbird, Julius Caesar, etc.), or period, or movement-oriented (Harlem Renaissance, Medieval Iconography, Augustan satire, etc.). However, the concept had to be defined and arguably generative. One might decide to develop a unit on war and find many works about war, but if there is no concept of war underlying the unit, then reading one work will provide no insight into reading another. Further, the concept my students chose had to be powerful enough to be applicable to the many works that students might encounter in the future. The concept had to be the object of inquiry itself (Does the concept hold up? Does it really work that way?) and the basis for inquiry into many other related problems.

Finally, the English-education sequence concluded with the MAT paper, required for completion of the degree. It was an inquiry, research usually devoted to the analysis and evaluation of some aspect of what the MAT student taught in student teaching. Perhaps this project, above all, represents what I wanted my students to be and to be able to do: highly skilled planners and enthusiastic, reflective teachers who have the courage and knowledge to evaluate their work against rigorous standards. I like to think that the chapters in this book present some evidence that those goals were met.

References

INTRODUCTION

Thomas M. McCann
Larry R. Johannesen
Elizabeth Kahn
Peter Smagorinsky
Michael W. Smith

The preamble of the Standards for the English Language Arts (1996), sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA), begins with the following statement: “The vision guiding these standards is that all students must have the opportunities and resources to develop the language skills they need to pursue life’s goals and to participate fully as informed, productive members of society.” That vision has suggested standards that call for students to be critically engaged in their reading, writing, and speaking.

If teachers are to enact that vision, they have to devise instruction that departs from teacher-dominated discussion of discrete works of literature or of repetitive practice on the kind of writing prompts that appear on state tests. Easier said than done, especially for teachers facing unprecedented public scrutiny and pressure.

The purpose of this book is to help teachers enact the standards’ vision of critically engaged students and teachers by sharing a coherent model of instruction and a wide range of applications of that model. The approach that this book explores is grounded in the work of George Hillocks, Jr.

In 1997, the National Council of Teachers of English honored George Hillocks with the David H. Russell Award, recognizing his significant contributions to research in the teaching of English language arts. NCTE cited in particular Professor Hillocks’ Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice (1995), a synthesis of theory and practice for the reflective teaching of writing. Although the award focuses on one publication in particular, it also recognizes the impact that the body of Hillocks’ work, both in the teaching of writing and in the teaching of literature, has had on the field. Then, in 2004, NCTE awarded Hillocks its Distinguished
Service Award. Among several letters of nomination, one was signed by 155 of his former students and said, in part:

    We can’t imagine a more worthy recipient of this great award. In responding to the request for signatures to this letter, many expressed a variation on the following sentiment: “I would love to sign this letter. Every day in the classroom I draw on something that I learned from George.” Just as impressively, the list of signatories that follows demonstrates George’s influence beyond the classroom. A number of George’s former students are now working in educational causes associated with social justice. One of those listed below remarked that his students’ involvement in such efforts illustrates “one of the most powerful aspects of George’s legacy—the fact that he connected teaching English to a larger vision of ethical leadership and as a result, so do his students.”

    Beginning with his work at the Euclid Demonstration Center in the 1960s, continuing through his many studies of teaching writing and his comprehensive analyses of composition research, and culminating in his recent analyses of the impact of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning, Hillocks has been a powerful voice for how teachers can help students be more engaged and critical readers, writers, and speakers. His approach is rooted in teachers’ analyzing the demands of the reading, writing, and speaking their students will do and then preparing students to meet those demands by engaging them in meaningful social activity. In short, Hillocks sees teaching as an enterprise that prepares students for success rather than one that corrects students after they have failed.

    This book is designed for the readers who care about instructional practices that are carefully planned; rely on inquiry processes; require frequent, meaningful peer interaction; and lend themselves to reflection. In the preface Hillocks summarizes the principles of practice in the teaching of English that he has promoted with his Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) students. The principles include attention to the scaffolding that will connect students’ prior knowledge to subsequent learning, and the strategic planning of units of instruction that promote a depth of understanding of concepts and procedures. The subsequent chapters offer a variety of examples to illustrate the principles in practice in the teaching of reading, writing, and critical thinking. The contributors also share insights into the planning process so that it is possible to plan beyond the models and not rely on the examples alone.

    Some readers will recognize that this book has some features in common with the NCTE Theory and Research Into Practice (TRIP) books that have been produced by some of the contributors to the current book. They provide not just teaching ideas, but also an account of how to design them. Many teachers of English language arts have turned to the TRIP books by Hillocks (1975); Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter (1982); Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen (1984); Johannessen (1992); Smith (1984, 1991); Smagorinsky (1991); and Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern (1987) for examples of instructional activities and the thinking processes that led to their design. After almost twenty years, some of these texts continue as mainstays in the English methods class.
The instructional practices that the authors of this book promote emphasize active inquiry as a key to learning. The action necessarily involves meaningful interaction with peers. Many of the book’s chapters describe activities that engage learners in inquiry procedures that transfer from one learning occasion to another. The essential peer interactions that characterize the activities emphasize learning as a social experience. The models for lessons and for units of instruction contained in these chapters recommend that each learning episode be embedded in a larger sequence of related learning episodes, advancing the idea that coherence and transfer are vital elements in an instructional plan.

We hope that many readers find the book useful. We can imagine it being a valuable resource for beginning teachers who look for models and guidance in planning instruction. We expect also that veteran teachers of English will appreciate this book as a portfolio of teaching ideas and as a means for initiating dialogue with their peers about how to teach English.

For us, the most valuable books on our shelves have been the titles that have challenged us to reflect on our assumptions and to question our current practices. These books have opened up rich dialogues with our colleagues. We hope that the chapters of this text will serve the same valuable function and become frames of reference for renewing thinking and for generating further inquiry.

References

HILLOCKS, G., JR. 1975. Observing and Writing. Urbana, IL: NCTE.


Standards for the English Language Arts. 1996. Urbana, IL: NCTE/IRA.

xxv ••• Introduction
In the mid-1970s, as students in George Hillocks’ MAT program in English, we learned the meaning of authentic discussion. At that time, Hillocks didn’t use the term authentic discussion; he simply called it discussion. He saw discussion as a key component of an effective English language arts classroom—not as an end in itself but as essential to having students learn to engage in inquiry, to interpret literature, to develop effective arguments, to become empowered as learners, and to gain a better understanding of themselves and others. Hillocks not only taught the English methods courses, but also supervised our clinical and student teaching experiences. He was very clear about the characteristics of a good discussion. First, if the discussion lasts for more than ten minutes or so, then most of the students (say, 80 percent or more) should respond at least once. For an extended discussion (half an hour or more), virtually all the students should respond at least once. Second, the direction of the discussion should not be repeatedly teacher to student, teacher to student, and so on. Rather, sometimes—or better still, often—it should involve student-to-student conversations in which students respond to each other’s comments without the prompting or intrusion of the teacher. Third, the proportion of teacher talk in relation to student talk should be below about a third (33 percent) of the total talk.

When Hillocks observed our classroom discussions, he employed a variety of methods to gather information for us to use in analyzing the interaction. He made seating charts showing the number of responses given by each student in the class; he drew interaction diagrams with lines showing the flow and the direction of the conversations. But his favorite method was the Flanders Interaction Analysis (Flanders 1965, 1970).

Flanders developed a system of ten categories to describe the verbal behavior of both teacher and students in a classroom (Figure 7–1). The first seven have to do
with teacher talk (e.g., praise or encouragement, questions, lecture, giving directions, criticism). Categories 8 and 9 refer to student response, and 10 indicates silence. Every three seconds, the classroom observer indicates, by recording the number of one of the categories, what type of verbal behavior took place during the preceding three seconds. Consequently, after gathering such information for a class period or a portion of a class period, the observer would have several pages with columns of number sequences.

FIGURE 7–1  Summary of Categories for the Flanders’ Interaction Analysis System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Categories for the Flanders’ Interaction Analysis System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDIRECT TEACHER TALK</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Accepts feelings</strong>. Acknowledgement of student-expressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotions (feelings) in a nonthreatening manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Praises or encourages</strong>. Positive reinforcement of student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Accepts or uses ideas of student</strong>. Clarification of,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development of, or reference to student contributions. Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-evaluative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Asks questions</strong>. Solicitation of information or opinion (not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rhetorical).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DIRECT TEACHER TALK</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Lectures</strong>. Presentation of information, opinion, or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orientation; can include rhetorical questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <strong>Gives directions</strong>. Direction or suggestion with which a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student is expected to comply.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <strong>Criticizes or justifies authority</strong>. Negative evaluation of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student contributions or emphasis on teacher’s authorita-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tive position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STUDENT TALK</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <strong>Student talk—response</strong>. Response to teacher’s question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually results in a predictable answer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <strong>Student talk—initiation</strong>. Talk initiated by students;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>includes introduction of new topics and unmediated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responses to classmates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. <strong>Silence or confusion</strong>. Periods of silence or inaudible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbalization lasting more than three seconds.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When Hillocks observed our teaching, he frequently used “the Flanders.” In addition, he taught us the method and had us use it as well when we observed each other teaching. (As a result of the design of the MAT program, we were able to observe each other during our student teaching.) Hillocks frequently cautioned us that during a class period teachers often talk far more than they are aware. This was made dramatically and brutally clear to us when we examined Flanders analyses of our own discussions as we began teaching our secondary classes. Usually there were too many 4’s (teacher-initiated questions) and 5’s (teacher lecturing) and too few 9’s (responses initiated by students). Too often there were long strings of one 5 after another, with only an occasional peppering of 8’s (talk by students in response to teacher) and a few 9’s (talk initiated by students). We found that when we were running a “discussion” in our classes, we almost always talked more than we thought that we had. We felt a great sense of accomplishment when we or our fellow MAT students were able to conduct a whole-class discussion that exhibited a large proportion of 9’s (talk initiated by students) with few 5’s (teacher lecturing). In these cases, we spent a great deal of time analyzing the various elements of the instruction in order to identify factors that we could replicate the next time we planned to have a class discussion.

Our repeated use of the Flanders taught us some important lessons. We learned to be more objective observers and evaluators of our own classroom discussions when no one else was present observing us. We learned how difficult it is to avoid the dreaded “5” when conducting a discussion, and how difficult it is to achieve a preponderance of long strings of 9’s in a discussion. And, as a result, we strove over many years—and still to this day—to discover and to develop strategies that would enable us to have good discussions on a consistent basis with all levels of students we teach.

Recent research has demonstrated a strong connection between discussion-based approaches—those in which students frequently engage in authentic discussion—and student achievement in English language arts (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran 2003; Langer 2001; Nystrand 1997). When these researchers talk about authentic discussion, they are talking about the same kind of discussion that Hillocks defined. They distinguish authentic discussion from recitation, the IRE pattern (teacher initiates a question which has a predetermined answer, student provides a response, and teacher evaluates the adequacy of the response).

Unfortunately, studies of classrooms reveal that students are seldom engaged in authentic discussion. Christoph and Nystrand (2001) and Nystrand (1997) report that, in the classrooms they observed, authentic discussion occurred on average for only fifty seconds per class in eighth grade and fifteen seconds per class in ninth-grade classes. In one sense these discoveries attest to the difficulty involved in generating and sustaining authentic discussion about important academic topics. But they are especially distressing when one considers the significant impact that meaningful discussion has on learning.

One question we have pondered is, why is authentic discussion hard to generate and sustain in the classroom? If these patterns are as pervasive as research suggests, secondary students may have come to expect the teacher to do most of
the significant talking in the classroom. They may have experienced the IRE pattern so frequently that it is firmly engrained. Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) see the traditional pattern of classroom conversation as what Bakhtin (1986) refers to as a “speech genre” that becomes “privileged,” or widely and perhaps dogmatically accepted as the “right” way of communicating in particular settings (7). Therefore, students may believe that classroom conversation is supposed to follow this pattern, with the teacher asking questions to test them on their knowledge, students giving brief answers, and then the teacher commenting—often at length—on the accuracy and sufficiency of their answers. When a teacher throws out an open-ended question with the hope of creating authentic discussion, students may not understand the expectations—they may see it instead as a question to test their knowledge.

Add to this the problem of students who can’t think of a response on the spot, who can’t remember what they read (or didn’t read) the night before, or who don’t have enough information available to generate a response. Add to this students’ concerns about what kind of impression they may make on their peers or the teacher if they speak up in class. Finally, participating in a discussion—especially within a large group of twenty-five to thirty people—takes a certain amount of effort and energy on the part of the students as well as the teacher. At times there just doesn’t seem to be any momentum.

On the other hand, authentic discussion sometimes occurs somewhat serendipitously. For example, Christoph and Nystrand (2001) describe one class in which IRE recitation tended to dominate. Then, in a discussion of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the teacher asked students who they thought was the most important person in the play. Immediately, four students offered markedly different responses, leading to a debate in which more than half of the class contributed vocally and in which those who did not participate vocally were unusually attentive and engaged. As the teacher encouraged students to present and defend their different viewpoints, the exchange between students turned into an instance of authentic discussion. Although this discussion was only 2:41 minutes long, Christoph and Nystrand (2001) report that it had a disproportionately large effect on students for the rest of the semester. For weeks after the discussion, several students continued to mention it to each other in passing between classes. Clearly, engaging in authentic discussion had a strong and lasting impact on the students and their understanding of the play.

But what can we as teachers do if we are not content to wait for the serendipitous? We have found and developed some strategies for generating authentic discussion that can overcome the impediments just suggested so that we aren’t simply waiting and hoping that by chance a discussion may take place sometime. We began working with these strategies in Hillocks’ MAT program and have continued to refine, update, and add to them over the years. Of course, they aren’t foolproof. We both have encountered situations in which one of our tried-and-true activities just seemed to fizzle with a particular group of students or in a certain setting. But this has generally been the exception rather than the rule.
Next, we will discuss six strategies for encouraging and sustaining authentic discussion: (1) approaching the classroom as a forum for collaborative inquiry; (2) showing students the differences among types of questions; (3) using the uptake technique; (4) asking broader, more open-ended questions that focus on a key issue or interpretive problem; (5) providing data and time for students to think about responses; and (6) connecting questions/problems to students’ lives and prior knowledge.

**Collaborative Inquiry**

We recently overheard two teachers discussing Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884/1965). One teacher indicated that she really had problems dealing with the ending in her class: “The way they treat Jim is demeaning and downright cruel. I don’t know what to do with that.” The second teacher responded, “The way I teach the ending is to explain to the kids that it’s showing Tom’s character, not Twain’s viewpoint. Twain is in no way endorsing Tom’s actions.”

The comment by the second teacher suggests that he doesn’t approach the classroom as a forum for collaborative inquiry. Instead he feels the need to lead students to a certain interpretation of the text—to provide an explanation of it to remove any confusion for them. He doesn’t appear to seize on the ending as an opportunity to involve students in an exploration of different interpretations and to engage them as participants in an ongoing critical conversation about the novel. Unless the teacher’s goal is to have students grapple with a text so that they engage in the process of inquiry, the environment is not going to be conducive to authentic discussion. But what about questions that have a definite answer? Are we suggesting that there are never misreadings of a text? We have found that it is possible to take an inquiry approach even with a question that has a definite answer in a text. For example, our ninth-grade students often have difficulty understanding what happens at the end of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Knowing that this is a difficulty for our students, we take an inquiry approach to the question of what happens to Bob Ewell. We begin discussion of the last chapters by asking students individually to write on a slip of paper how they think Bob Ewell dies and what they believe happens to him. We collect the slips of paper and quickly compile the results without identifying any names. Students typically write the following different ideas: Jem killed him, Ewell fell on his own knife, Boo Radley stabbed him, Mr. Tate stabbed him. We list the different possibilities that students come up with on the board and ask, “So which of these happened or does the text never reveal which happened?” We invite a discussion, letting students explain what they think happened, what didn’t happen, and what evidence supports their views. We work hard to avoid giving answers and instead leave it to the students to address a comment such as, “Tate says in the book that Ewell fell on his knife.” Over many years of working with the novel, we have always had students finally arrive at a consensus after they have listened to all the evidence that emerges in the discussion.
Types of Questions

Sometimes it is difficult to engage secondary students in authentic discussion about texts because, depending on the type of instruction that they are used to, they may think that there really isn’t anything to discuss. Their reasoning is something like the following: “There are right answers versus wrong answers, and it is the teacher’s job to see who knows the right answers and make sure that those who don’t are corrected.” Or “there are questions with no right or wrong answers. Anything can be right, so, therefore, what’s the point of giving or listening to answers when all of them are right?”

We have found it helpful in these cases to show students that there are different types of questions one could ask based on relationships between reader, author, and text. Although there are several different question hierarchies or taxonomies that work effectively with secondary students, we have found that Raphael’s (1982) Question-Answer Relationships (QAR) works well, particularly with younger students (Figure 7–2). One purpose of showing students the QARs

![Figure 7–2 Question-Answer Relationships (QAR)](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IN THE BOOK QARs</th>
<th>IN MY HEAD QARs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Right There</strong></td>
<td><strong>Author and You</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The answer is in the text, usually easy to find. The words used in the question and the words used to answer the question are Right There, close together in the text.</td>
<td>The answer is not in the text. You need to think about what you already know, what the author tells you in the text, and how it fits together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Think and Search</strong></td>
<td><strong>On My Own</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Putting It Together)</td>
<td>The answer is not in the text. You can answer the question without reading the text. You need to use your own experience and prior knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The answer is in the story, but you need to put together different story parts to find it. Words for the question and words for the answer come from different parts of the text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Reflective Teaching, Reflective Learning* edited by McCann, Johannesen, Kahn, Smagorinsky, and Smith (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH); © 2005.
is to illustrate that while there are some questions with a definite right or wrong answer clearly present in the text, there are also questions that involve inferences and interpretation.

Along with Raphael’s QARs, we have given students Sarah Cleghorn’s (1917) short poem “The Golf Links,” which is provided by Hillocks in the preface. We were introduced to this poem by Hillocks, who originally used it in a unit he designed to teach students to recognize and interpret satire and irony.

We ask students to read the poem and respond to five questions: (1) What are golf links? What is a mill? (2) Where is the mill located? (3) What do the children see when they look outside? (4) Does the author want readers to be admiring or critical of the men? How can you tell? (5) What is the central meaning or point of this poem? How do you know?

We then ask students to share their responses to the five questions and to explain where each falls on the QAR matrix. Students quickly point out that the first two questions (What are golf links? What is a mill?) can be answered without reading the text. They require knowledge outside of the text, although there are context clues suggesting their meaning. Question 2 (Where is the mill located?) is “Right There” in the text: the mill is very close to the golf links. Question 3 (What do the children see when they look outside?) is also in the text but requires examining different parts of the text (“Think and Search”) in order for students to identify not just that the men are “playing” but what it is that they are playing (golf). Question 4 (Does the author want readers to be admiring or critical of the men? How can you tell?) and question 5 (What is the central meaning or point of this poem? How do you know?) are “Author and You” questions, requiring inferences and usually resulting in less agreement among students. Some students express a straight reading of the poem—it’s nice that the mill is so near the golf course so that the children have something to watch while they are working, something to help them pass the time. Others recognize the irony of men playing and children working. They point out that the children are exploited by the rich men who can spend their time golfing because they are profiting from the labor of children. The next step is that we ask the class the following question: So is this a pleasant poem about children being entertained while they work or a sad poem about the injustice of child labor? After some back-and-forth between those on each side, our classes have ultimately decided that the evidence is stronger for the latter interpretation. Through the discussion, students who initially missed the irony of the poem begin to see how meaning may not be directly stated in a text.

Our purpose in conducting this kind of discussion is to illustrate for students that the answers to questions about texts aren’t always “right there”—some are, but some of the most important and most worth discussing aren’t; they involve interpretation. Also we hope to illustrate that for some questions there isn’t just one answer, but that some ideas about a text may not hold up well on critical examination and discussion. Ultimately, we want to help them see that discussion can be a process of collaboratively “figuring out” or constructing meaning.
The Uptake Technique

The term *uptake* comes from the work of Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) and Nystrand (1997). It has been shown to be a powerful way to generate and sustain authentic discussion. Uptake provides an alternative to the IRE pattern.

To illustrate this strategy, we use a discussion of the poem “The Warden Said to Me” by Etheridge Knight (1968), a poem Elizabeth has used successfully with ninth- to twelfth-grade students. This eight-line poem involves a conversation between a prison warden and an African American prisoner. The prisoner, Etheridge, recounts the conversation with the warden. He begins by saying that the warden asked him, “Why come the black boys don’t run off like the white boys do?” Etheridge adds that the question was an innocent one, he thinks. Etheridge then quotes his response to the warden’s question in a dialect that he does not use in the rest of the poem: “I reckon it’s cause we ain’t got no where to run to.” He also comments that he thinks his response to the question is “innocent” as well.

Uptake involves restating a student response or turning it into a question in order to encourage further elaboration. For example, as students comment on what they notice in the poem, one student says, “Etheridge isn’t capitalized.” Using uptake, the teacher would respond by asking, “So…?” The student then adds, “It’s a lack of respect for him.” If the student stops here, the teacher could say, “A lack of respect?” The student might then respond, “The warden doesn’t respect him because he’s black.”

In using uptake, the teacher does not judge or evaluate student responses by saying “good,” “right,” or “that’s it,” for example. Evaluative comments of this type tend to imply closure and shut down further discussion. They also suggest that the teacher has a particular right answer in mind. Instead, in following up a student response, the teacher can either say nothing, while conveying a look that says “That’s interesting,” or make a neutral comment, such as “interesting observation,” “That’s another viewpoint.” “I hadn’t thought of that.” “That’s a point we need to consider,” and so forth. This strategy can be used with an individual student or with the whole class.

But if we as teachers accept all responses without evaluating them, then what about ideas or interpretations that are problematic? For example, what if a student says that the warden is smarter than Etheridge because Etheridge is the one who committed a crime and ended up in prison, and that’s a pretty dumb thing to do? One way to handle this situation is to list all possibilities that are raised (without names attached) on the board or projector. Inevitably, we have found that students themselves will eventually question the problematic interpretations without the teacher having to do so. If no one says anything, the teacher can survey the list of possibilities and ask students whether all of them work or comment that some of them seem to contradict each other. In other words, the teacher can invite the class to evaluate the list of possibilities. Concentrating on using uptake consistently is one way that we have found to prevent us from slipping into an IRE pattern during discussions.
Questions That Focus on a Key Issue or Interpretive Problem

Uptake is most effective when used with the strategy of asking broader, more open-ended questions that focus on a key issue or interpretive problem.

Examine the following brief transcript that is also from a class discussion of Knight’s “The Warden Said to Me.” In this case, the transcript illustrates a recitation rather than an authentic discussion.

Teacher: Who are the characters in the poem?
Mark: The warden and Etheridge.
Teacher: Good. What question does the warden ask Etheridge?
Asra: Why don’t the black boys run off?
Teacher: How does Etheridge answer that question?
Tanya: He says they “ain’t got no where to run to.”
Teacher: Right! What does that show?
Domi: That they don’t have anywhere to go.
Teacher: Why don’t they have anywhere to go?
Domi: Maybe they don’t have a house? They’ve been in jail so they have no home any more.

As the teacher continued to press students for a reason why the African American inmates have “no where to run to,” a few students offered variations on Domi’s response—without any consideration of why the white inmates would have somewhere to run to—but most remained silent. Often in an IRE recitation such as this one, as the questions become more difficult (“Why don’t the black boys have anywhere to run to?”), the responses begin to wane and students struggle.

One way to avoid this sort of recitation is to pose a broad, open-ended question that focuses on a significant issue or interpretive problem, give students some time to think about their responses, and perhaps have students work with others briefly in collaborative pairs or small groups before attempting to run a class discussion (see also Holden and Schmit 2002). We have used the following questions for “The Warden Said to Me” as a focus with ninth-grade students: (1) What details and patterns do you notice in the poem that seem strange, puzzling, or potentially significant? (2) What things do you learn about Etheridge in the poem?

From this foundation, a class discussion can proceed in the following manner. Notice that the teacher also uses uptake in running the discussion.

Teacher: What did you notice about the poem?
Manish: They don’t speak good English.
Teacher: Who do you mean?
Manish: The warden. He says, “Why come.”
Kourtney: Etheridge too. He says, “Ain’t got no where.”
Teacher: Okay. Anything else you noticed?
Mike: Etheridge isn’t capitalized.
Teacher: What do you think that’s all about?
Mike: A lack of respect for him . . . because he’s black. The warden is racist.
Teacher: Is there anything else in the poem that suggests that the warden doesn’t respect him?
Christina: Yes, he says, the black boys don’t run off like the white boys do.
Teacher: Meaning?
Christina: I’m not sure . . .
Mike: It’s like he’s saying the black boys aren’t as smart because they can’t run off.
Teacher: So who’s smarter, the warden or Etheridge?
Terry: I think the warden is smarter because he’s the warden and Etheridge is in prison.
Mike: No! He doesn’t know that Etheridge is kinda making fun of him. Etheridge is acting dumb. The warden is racist.
Teacher: Why do you say Etheridge is acting dumb?

At this point students may voice disagreement about who’s smarter and why. Eventually someone usually mentions stereotypes and that Etheridge is intentionally fulfilling the warden’s stereotype of an African American prisoner. Students examine the significance of the parenthetical phrase “innocently, I think” that is repeated in the poem. They then tackle the question of what commentary Knight is making about society. But it is the students and their responses, not a predetermined script of the teacher, that set the direction of the discussion. The teacher follows their lead, asking for elaboration and further explanation.

In selecting texts and developing focusing questions for discussion, it is important for teachers to have a good understanding of their students. For example, Elizabeth knew that for her ninth graders “The Warden Said to Me” would be a challenging poem. Elizabeth knew from using the poem in the past that a key interpretive problem for students is understanding the relationship between the speaker of the poem, Etheridge, and the warden. Most of them find the poem “easy” on the surface but consider it pointless, not much of a poem at all. They have difficulty recognizing and interpreting the irony in the poem. Elizabeth knew that a question such as “How does the poem use irony to make a point?” would not be effective in generating an authentic discussion. Most students would have nothing to say. They might say, “I forget what irony is.” But most likely, even given a definition, they would not generate many ideas. One or two students might give a response and the others would probably just say, “I agree.” Also, a question like this—one frequently found in textbooks—cues the students to the fact that the poem is ironic and takes away the opportunity for them to make this interpretation.

Elizabeth felt that asking students what they notice in the poem that is strange or puzzling and what they learn about Etheridge would allow all students to generate a number of different ideas and would get them to eventually confront the irony in the poem as they puzzled through the details. In order for a discussion to work, the teacher has to design key questions for the particular students and context—keeping in mind students’ age, level of sophistication, interests, reading skills, social relationships, and so forth.
The Importance of Data and Time to Reflect

Larry has taught a unit on the Vietnam War in Literature (Johannessen 1992). One discussion activity he has created and used to help students develop a deeper knowledge of the issues in the literature they are going to read is the problem-based case, “A Matter of Conscience” (Figure 7–3). The Vietnam War is a watershed event in American history; however, for many of our students, it might as well be the Peloponnesian War for all they know (Christie 1989). For example, students today do not understand why the draft was such a big deal during the Vietnam period. When Larry asks students to read Tim O’Brien’s (1990) *The Things They Carried*, many of them have difficulty understanding what O’Brien is conveying in his chapter “On the Way to Rainy River.” Failing to comprehend meaning from this crucial chapter often prevents students from understanding or interpreting O’Brien’s meaning in the work as a whole. The case provides data that gives students a way in to the knowledge they need to understand the novel.

In the chapter, Tim, the narrator, receives his draft notice at the height of the Vietnam War. Tim has been to college and has thought a great deal about the war. He has decided that the war in Vietnam is immoral. The moral question for Tim is that if he knows the war is wrong, then he has no choice but to refuse to fight, and so he reasons that he will go to Canada to avoid the draft. Tim goes to a remote lake that borders Canada and rents a cabin. After much soul searching, he discovers that he is torn between his desire to go to Canada and avoid having to fight in Vietnam and his “embarrassment” or fear of being seen as a coward by his family and the community. In the end, even though Tim believes the war is wrong, he cannot go to Canada, and he says of his decision, “I was a coward. I went to the war” (41).

Many students discount his decision, especially in light of his later actions in combat, and conclude that Tim is brave for making the decision to fight in a war that he thinks is wrong. They want to believe the popular mythology of war that anyone who fights in a war is brave, and what makes matters worse is that as a result they fail to appreciate what O’Brien is up to in later chapters, such as “The Man I Killed,” and the work as a whole.

Having students wrestle with the “A Matter of Conscience” case before reading “On the Way to Rainy River” provides data to help them connect with Tim’s problem in the text and activates their prior knowledge so that they develop a deeper understanding of the issue the main character confronts. It is designed to prepare students to think hard about the moral choice the narrator has to make in the novel and to get them to consider some of the consequences of having to make such a moral choice. The case is rich in details. Students are placed in a situation in which they must make a choice and for which there is no easy answer, and they must consider the consequences of that choice—nearly the same moral situation the narrator is in. As students discuss and debate whether it is ethically right for Jim Hardy, the character in the case, to go to Canada to escape the draft or to report for the draft and serve as ordered, they are engaged in the moral issue that the main character in the novel faces.
FIGURE 7–3  A Matter of Conscience

A Matter of Conscience

In the summer of 1969, at age twenty-one, exactly one month after graduating from a large state university in Michigan, Jim Hardy received his draft notice to fight in the war in Vietnam. He believed that the war was wrong. He could not tell for sure if it was a civil war, a war of national liberation, or simple aggression. It wasn’t even clear who started the war, when, or why. He wasn’t sure if Ho Chi Minh was a communist stooge, a nationalist savior of the Vietnamese people, or both, or neither. He wasn’t clear about these and many other matters, especially since the debate over the war had gone from the floor of the United States Congress to the cities and towns across America. He had come to believe that when a nation goes to war it must be reasonably sure regarding the justice and necessity of its cause.

Most of all, he had been convinced that the war was wrong as a result of what he had seen it do to his older brother. Mark was two years older than Jim and had joined the Marines as soon as he turned eighteen. He had gone to Vietnam a happy-go-lucky kid and came back angry and sullen. Mark now had difficulty holding down a job, and he seemed to spend a lot of his time drinking. When Jim asked Mark about the war, if he thought it was right, he looked Jim in the eyes and said, “I don’t know, Jimmy. All I know is that I saw a lot of good men die or get mangled and the only ending I see is more death and destruction. I just keep wondering, what is it going to prove?”

Jim thought about all of the reasons and decided that if he believed the war is wrong, then he could not fight in it. He had even acted on his beliefs by working on the campaign to elect Eugene McCarthy, an antiwar candidate for president. He had attended a couple of student protest rallies against the war on his college campus.

Once Jim knew that the right course of action was not to fight in this war, he did his research and decided that he was going to go to Canada. After all, he wasn’t a pacifist. He believed that there were times when the right thing to do was to go to war—to stop Hitler or Mussolini. Jim got his passport and enough money to last him awhile. He boarded a bus and headed north to the nearest border crossing. He stopped in a small border town and took a room in a cheap hotel. He then wrote letters to his parents and his brother, doing his best to explain what he was doing and why.

The trouble was he couldn’t make himself actually mail the letters. Something was very wrong. Jim was troubled. There was the matter of the generations of Hardy boys who had served their country without question. His father had

Continues
served in the Navy in World War II. His uncle had been in the Army and lost a leg on the beaches at Normandy. His grandfather had served in the Army Air Corps in World War I. All had served with honor. How could he go against them?

He thought of his blue-collar neighborhood in the city. Most of his parents’ friends and the fathers of his friends had served in the military in World War II or Korea. How could he face anyone in his community again? He would be an exile, unable to return home. His mother and father, his high school teachers and counselor, his buddies, and his community would all consider him a traitor or a coward. He even imagined the president of the United States, the Pope, and the Supreme Court all looking down at him shaking their heads at his disgrace. How could he go through the rest of his life with this embarrassment? Was going to Canada—acting on his beliefs—the brave thing to do? Was it the right thing to do?

Questions
What should Jim do: Go to Canada to escape having to fight in Vietnam or report for duty and go to Vietnam?

Why is that the right thing for him to do?

In your opinion, which course of action is an act of bravery and which is an act of cowardice and why?

The case functions as a kind of question a teacher might ask in a class discussion, but it is much richer than a simple query like, “What should a person do when faced with the choice of being drafted to fight in a war that he or she believes is morally wrong?” Contrast this approach with how Larry might have proceeded. Before assigning students to read “On the Way to Rainy River,” he could have posed the following questions to the class: If you believed the Vietnam War was morally wrong and you were drafted to serve, would you go to Canada to avoid having to serve in Vietnam or would you report to the draft board to serve your country as ordered? Why would you do that?

One difference between the case and asking a series of questions is that questions provide no data regarding the moral choice in the question. Asking the questions assumes that students have adequate knowledge of the moral dilemma a young college student might confront in the late 1960s if he were drafted to go to Vietnam. Without more data, and the context of the moral issues of the time, students have little basis for making a decision or wrestling with the moral ambiguities involved. If Larry had just asked the questions, it is very likely that what would have resulted is a brief and not nuanced discussion.
Furthermore, if Larry had approached the problem by simply posing the questions to the class, his students may not have had adequate time to think about the issues and formulate cogent responses. Therefore, when students read the case “A Matter of Conscience,” he has them first write a short composition answering the questions posed at the end. This step is crucial. We have found that it is best to give students time to think about complex questions and problems if we expect them to participate effectively in authentic class discussions. As classroom teachers we sometimes forget how much time we have spent thinking about the complex questions we ask students to respond to on the spur of the moment during class discussions. That is why it is important to have students spend some time writing about the case before asking them to discuss it.

After students have written about the case, Larry typically has them meet in small groups, read their papers aloud, and try to reach a consensus about what they think Jim Hardy should do and why. Working in small groups allows students time to gain a greater understanding of other perspectives. As students’ ideas or hypotheses are challenged by others, they revise and refine their thinking. Small-group collaboration provides scaffolding for students while they are learning new strategies so that ultimately they internalize procedures and are able to tackle new tasks effectively on their own (Hillocks 1995; Johannessen 2001, 2003; Johannessen and Kahn 1997; McCann 1996; Smagorinsky 1989, 1993; Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern 1987). This, in turn, can contribute to more authentic discussions.

After students work in small groups for fifteen or twenty minutes, Larry re-forms the class for discussion. Depending on the class, he either has the groups start by reading the paper that best represents their viewpoints or has students present their solutions and discuss differences. Either way, the result is a very lively discussion.

In the small-group and whole-class discussions, students are wrestling with the same sort of problem and questions that the narrator must contend with in the novel. Students discuss and debate whether Jim should cross the border into Canada to avoid having to fight in a war that he believes is morally wrong or whether he should turn around and report for duty and serve his country as ordered. Students discuss and debate the possible consequences, such as being an outcast for the rest of his life if he avoids the draft or getting wounded or killed and having to kill if he reports for duty and goes to Vietnam. Students often even consider the emotional and psychological damage that he might experience. What is particularly striking about the nature of the discussion, and what makes it stand out as authentic, is that students are actively engaged in an inquiry into the problem posed and issues raised.

It’s worth noting that the case provides data and relates to the novel without duplicating it. It is short enough for students to read several times and easily locate important details, but complex enough to give them much to dig into. The way Larry structures the activity—moving from individual writing to small-group collaboration to whole-class discussion—provides the time necessary for students to develop complex, thoughtful responses.

Students rarely agree on what Jim Hardy should do. Larry often collects student papers or has them keep their papers. Then when they finish reading and discussing “On the Way to Rainy River” or the text as a whole, he has students return
to the case and, in light of the reading and discussions, reexamine what they have written and revise their papers in terms of what they have learned. This natural follow-up writing activity reinforces what students learn during class discussions.

**Connecting to Students’ Lives and Prior Knowledge**

It is vitally important that we design our questions and problems so that they connect to the lives of our students if we hope to engage them in authentic classroom discussion. As Smith (Rabinowitz and Smith 1998) warns, the real danger is that when we focus on what we think is important, we might very well end up “torturing” our students with questions or problems that are important only to us—as he did when he had his students read Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter* and asked them to discuss the hat motif and other symbols and motifs in the novel (103). His students hated it, and as he indicates, they were interested in a whole set of other questions, such as, “Why the hell didn’t she [Hester] just leave if they treated her that way?” (103). When we focus discussion on questions and problems that connect to the lives of our students, we show them that they matter and what they have to say matters.

In addition, as Smagorinsky (1993) and Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern (1987) note, when we design questions or problems we need to design ones that assess our students’ prior knowledge and enable them to expand their knowledge base. Furthermore, we need to make sure that we are connecting what they are learning in the instruction to the literature under consideration.

Larry has used the case “Does She Deserve Honor” (Figure 7–4) to make connections between students’ lives and a novel such as *The Scarlet Letter*. This case works in much the same way as “A Matter of Conscience,” described earlier. It puts the situation in the novel into a parallel but contemporary setting that is close to students’ lives. The case tends to generate authentic discussion as students debate it in small groups or as a whole class. One of the issues that students debate in arguing whether Dinesen should be admitted to the National Honor Society is whether she sets a good example for others. Some students argue that having a daughter as an unwed teenager is wrong. Others argue that her decision to raise the child rather than ending the pregnancy or offering the child for adoption shows strength of character. But usually someone will reply that she would have shown more character by allowing a couple with more resources to be good parents to adopt the child. Another issue that students bring up is whether the ruling is discriminatory toward females. Some students will argue that if the student had been a male instead of female it is likely that the officials of the National Honor Society would not have known about the child and the male student would not have been kicked out of the organization, and so on.

A contemporary case can promote discussion by bringing a novel such as *The Scarlet Letter* closer to students’ own experience. As students read the novel, Larry has engaged them in authentic discussion of similarities and differences between the National Honor Society case and the novel.
Does She Deserve Honor?

Jennifer Dinesen, a high school senior, was denied induction to the National Honor Society (NHS) because she is an unmarried mother. A faculty selection committee at Streamridge High School invited Jennifer to join the school's National Honor Society but then revoked the offer when it discovered that the eighteen-year-old had a daughter. Students are selected for the National Honor Society based on four criteria: character, leadership, service, and scholastic achievement. Dinesen met the academic requirements, but the committee felt that because she is an unwed mother her character is in question and she is not a good role model (leader) for other students.

The rules of the National Honor Society state that “pregnancy cannot be the basis for automatic rejection,” but each school is allowed to set its own standards as long as they are applied consistently. The superintendent explained that Jennifer Dinesen is not the first student at Streamridge to be denied membership in the school's honor society because of sexual activity.

As a senior, Jennifer has a 3.8 grade point average. She has been a member of the Spanish Club since freshman year and served as secretary of the club her sophomore year. She was a starting player on the junior varsity girls' basketball team her freshman and sophomore years. During her junior year, she was in charge of decorations for the school's homecoming dance, and she also worked as a volunteer four hours a week at a local day-care center for disabled children. All her out-of-school time during her senior year has been spent caring for her baby daughter. She has not received any discipline referrals for four years.

Jennifer says, “I'm deeply hurt by the school's decision because I have worked so hard for four years.”

Questions

What is at issue are two qualities the honor society demands: leadership and character. As an unwed mother, has Jennifer lost her character?

Will she lead others in the wrong direction?

Do you agree with the faculty committee's decision not to induct Jennifer Dinesen into the National Honor Society?

Why or why not?

Authentic Discussion in the Classroom

The strategies we have discussed have helped us promote authentic classroom discussion in the service of helping our students construct meaning, achieve deeper understanding, and make connections to literature. At the heart of what we have argued is that we need to create a new kind of classroom, a classroom that is inquiry-driven and not dominated by teacher talk. When we think about our experiences as students in George Hillocks’ MAT program, we still find ourselves using what we learned, striving to find ways to generate good authentic discussions and increase the amount of student interaction in our classrooms.

References


