

Engaged Reading and Ecologies of Classroom Talk

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My ARF talk was based on my book *Opening Minds* (2012) and several papers with my colleague Gay Ivey. These are all in the references at the end of this handout and collectively contain all of the student interview quotes I used, along with the details of associated theory and logic. I was drawing on a set of studies of reading in eighth grade as follows:

- Year 1: Pre-post interviews with 71 students
- Year 2: pre-post interviews (teachers & students), interviews at student reported change points, bi-weekly video audio and field notes of class and group discussions. Plus parent interviews.
- Quantitative data on cognitively and socially engaged reading, empathy, theory of mind, moral agency,.... across 3 schools (311 students).
- Change over 3 time scales: Partly retrospective analysis of change over 4 years in the teacher community, linked to change each year in the student learning communities, and microgenetic change in the classroom.
- Interview 26 of the 8th grade students as 10th and 11th graders after two or three years of instruction not focusing on engagement.

The instruction focusing on engaged reading can be summarized as:

- Choice among personally relevant books or other materials
- 150-200 books per class, no more than three copies of any title
- Instruction woven conversationally into “read aloud” and group and individual conversations
- Talk about books among students was allowed and encouraged
- No comprehension questions, only open prompts such as: Catch me up, or What are you thinking?
- Distributing teaching within the learning community

I showed how the teacher built instruction into the “read aloud” (or “thinking together about books”) and how sustaining uncertainty was important in the process (See Johnston, Ivey & Faulkner, 2011). I linked that to social psychology research on need for closure (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2006):

Low Need for Closure (high tolerance for uncertainty)	High Need for Closure (low tolerance for uncertainty)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Comfortable with difference, expect it, view it as an asset, and value the engagement it provides.• Demonstrate efforts to understand, engage, and persuade.• Resist autocratic interaction patterns; favor democratic patterns and perspective.• Attend to and engage difference in the group; perceive more in-group difference and thus avoid simple contrast with those outside the group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Judge ideas quickly based on the most accessible quality and cling to that judgment regardless of subsequent information (“seize and freeze”)• Reject and show animosity toward those who threaten stable group consensus by disagreeing.• Pressure group members to conform.• Judge conformists in their group more positively than dissenters.• Favor and adopt autocratic interaction patterns and perspective.• Biased toward in-group, and against others who are different.

Teaching children to think together (not just alone) is important

I showed that students think together around these books and that there are benefits associated with knowing how to do that. I showed how the students helped each other figure out the books and how they talked about substantive issues. Compared with controls, children taught how to think together, show an increase in:

- Reasoning ability
- Comprehension
- Expressive language
- Creative thinking
- Examining assumptions
- Willingness to speak in public
- Willingness to listen to and consider others' ideas
- Frequency of providing reasons or evidence for their view
- Quality of interpersonal relationships
- Confidence, self-esteem and persistence
- Supportive group interactions (along with a reduction in negative comments)

Significance of Dialogic English Classrooms

The classroom conversations about books were fully dialogic, which links them to research on the dialogic classroom. Martin Nystrand found that in dialogic classrooms:

“Students recalled their readings better, understood them in more depth, and responded more fully to aesthetic elements of literature than did students in more typical, monologically organized classes” Dialogic classrooms overcome the potential disadvantages of SES, track, race, and ethnicity (Nystrand, 2006).

Language to Expand Social Imagination

I showed how these personally relevant books and conversations about them, build children's social imaginations. These are conversations that include mental verbs and mental state language. Building children's social imaginations has many advantages. *Children with a stronger social imagination:*

- Are more able to understand complex narratives, idiomatic expressions and irony
- Have more positive social skills,
- Are more socially cooperative,
- Have larger social networks,
- Are viewed more positively by peers,
- Misbehave less at home and school,
- Have fewer angry responses in personal interactions.
- Have stronger moral development
- Have better self-regulation

Effects of Focusing on Engagement

In our research with these 8th grade students, (see Ivey & Johnston, 2013), we found the following consequences of a focus on engaged reading:

- Average reading volume went from three books/year to 42 books/ year.
- 13% then 16% more students passed the state competency test with a reduction in achievement gaps across subgroups.

- Increased; strategic /engaged reading, expectation of meaningfulness, strategy generation, stamina.
- Increased thinking together dialogically inside and outside school including symmetrical power arrangements, taking up conflicting perspectives.
- Improved social relationships, including engaging new people (valuing diversity), expanded trust, and engaging parents in new ways, making new friends.
- Improved social imagination, increased empathy
- Increased academic, emotional and behavioral self-regulation
- Increased sense of moral agency - less judgmental of people, but prepared to call out problematic behavior.
- More productive identities and agentive narrative trajectories.
- Increased happiness

Following up 2-3 years later

In interviews with 26 students two or three years into high school where engaged reading was not a focus of instruction, we found that:

Students' explanations of the conditions for engaged reading were consistent with our own prior research and work by others such as John Guthrie: Meaningfulness-relevance-interest, choice, time, and access. However, we were compelled to add to those conditions the social relationships inside and outside of texts and to give more than a nod to uncertainty. However, in the high school, at least some conditions were missing for each student, consequently, we found:

- No boys or English language learners continued reading.
- Only one African American student (female) claimed to read regularly (but didn't talk with anyone).
- Four students continued to be avid readers, all white girls with family members as conversation partners.

Relevant Publications

(These Contain all of the Data Presented)

- Ivey, G., & Johnston, P. H. (in press). Engaged reading as a collaborative, transformative practice. *Journal of literacy research*.
- Ivey, G., & Johnston, P. H. (2013). Engagement with young adult literature: Outcomes and processes. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 48(3), 255-275.
- Ivey, G., and Johnston, P. (2015). *Persistence of the Experience of Engaged Reading*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Literacy Research Association. Carlsbad, CA. December. (posted on LRA website)
- Johnston, P. Ivey, G., & Faulkner, A. (2011). Talking in Class: Remembering What Is Important About Classroom Talk. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(4), 232-237.
- Johnston, P. (2012). *Opening minds: How classroom talk shapes children's minds and their lives*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

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