

Notes from Partnership for Literacy

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Here are some comments from the Exit and Closing Reflections completed by Madison teachers in particular in response to questions about how participation in PFL influenced their practice:

“The two areas that were most important to me that I have already used and will continue to use are engaging in more dialogic instruction and curriculum as conversation. Both of these ideas and what I learned from the Partnership have enhanced my ability to make my classroom more dynamic and successful.’

“I always forget that I have to teach group skills—listening-responding...Summer work is looking for short stories to use for prediction and asking questions.’

“ The dialogic discussion provided a format for allowing students to express understandings, or misunderstandings, as they reflected and questioned their peers in a safe environment.”

“Although uptake is a realistic goal as students engage in curricular conversations, it requires, by design, textual material that fosters a variety of opinions. This limits the literature study and reading strategy that can be pursued for a taped discussion. For instance, activating prior knowledge does not generally produce uptake in a discussion. Also the quality of the uptake is not always considered in the assessment of the conversation.”

“ Student led discussion groups—allowed students to generate Qs that allowed Ss to talk about their Qs. Post-its enabled me to look at Qs students developed over time...Students are responsive to each other...They connect to something in their lives/themes...level of discussion higher.”

“ Engaging in more dialogic discussion was important to me as we tried to encourage more student voice and authentic conversation in the classroom...In the past two years, kids dominated...sensitive to race/gender issues...I am sure that we will all work on culturally relevant curriculum and dialogue.’

“My CELA participation encouraged me to ‘take on’ the reading of a book a week of a culturally diverse nature...It made all the difference..I was able to help my students find the perfect book for them and gave them encouragement in their own ability to stick with a book until completion. I have readers now!’ Add “Frameworks for Poverty” to continue to look at practice w/diverse populations and tchr. Responses because cultures differ...Change the date collected to be more aligned w/the way students are taught today. Update the language on data questions...Assume good practice is happening and find out how that is the case. Then work with the results as they occur.” “Definitely changed...Now I see myself as a problem-solver...I am going to hope we will study together and allow that to move our practice...”

“ I like the role of facilitator...CELA has helped me on that-turn the Q around...Keep on w/ discussions...want to evaluate discussions—want to have a way to have kids evaluate their discussion skills.”

“Validated discussion...students more attentive to text and understanding build—able to support ideas with texts.”

“Common language—more conversation...I felt it was validated to discuss—it’s not a rehash—you are creating something new...Best thinking occurs when they generate Qs about the text.” “Never asked kids to write Q—that worked—I’ll keep it. Discussion works—it’s a keeper.”

Small Group Sessions

One of the most powerful sessions happened when we all sat together and watched the tapes of teachers and students engaged in discussion. During these meetings, we focused on specific aspects of CLASS—uptake, student questions, types of questions asked by the teacher and student, engagement, gender/ethnicity of participants. We also talked about the balance of student vs teacher talk.

Teachers were asked to bring in examples of how they prepared for discussion and how the discussions unfolded. The teachers at Cherokee used a reflection—questioning the text sheet that students completed as they read and then they all brought their questions to the discussion. I am thinking in particular when they all read *Maus*.

In Milwaukee, a relatively new teacher who initially felt uncomfortable relinquishing control of the conversation used journal jots and asked students to pose 3 questions to bring to the discussion. She felt this gave the discussion a structure/form for her to use so students had a specific task to complete to prepare and contribute.

Another Milwaukee teacher (Rose) who had a pretty active and disengaged class, got everyone’s attention when they all read *The Skin I’m In*. She opened the discussion with asking for the students’ thoughts and responses and the level of engagement was very high and the questions were authentic. I think we used a clip of this in some larger sessions to illustrate the use of authentic questions, a dialogic discussion and high level of student engagement.

One of the Madison teachers changed her practice dramatically and her classroom went from chaos to high level of engagement and discussion(most of the time). Her initial interview was very negative and as I reread her exit/closing statements—different teacher. She gave the students post-its and created a “Connections” chart and had students post their ideas—very successful. They then used their ideas for discussion.

My Courses

My students engage in small-group student-led discussions in all of my classes. They write a reflection on the reading and bring their questions and connections. They also participate in Literature Circles reading *Esperanza Rising* in their first literacy methods course. In their final reading methods course, students participate in Reader’s Workshop as they read and discuss self-selected texts. We start the semester by establishing the importance of safe community, groundrules for discussion and the role of the facilitator for the groups. I talk extensively about the four pillars of engagement—student interest, student choice, student voice, and student success. I try to reference most of the hands-on

work we do around these 4 pillars. In my classes student have “ lived experiences” through discussion based on their questions and insights, writing in response to texts and engaging in projects to represent their understanding of themes and relevance of the texts to their own and their prospective students’ lives. I explain the difference b/w monologic and dialogic and use some of the findings from the “Questions in Time” article. My students watch classroom discussion from the Annenberg site and reflect on student engagement, level of talk, balance of teacher/student talk and how much choice/voice students in these clips seem to have in their classrooms.