



# **DISCUSSION PATHWAYS TO LITERACY LEARNING**

**THOMAS M. McCANN, ELIZABETH A. KAHN, AND CAROLYN C. WALTER**  
*FOREWORD BY MICHAEL W. SMITH*

*Staff Editor:* Bonny Graham  
*Manuscript Editor:* Josh Rosenberg  
*Interior Design:* Jenny Jensen Greenleaf  
*Cover Design:* Pat Mayer

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# Foreword

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MICHAEL W. SMITH  
TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

A story to start. When my niece Kelsy, my mom's oldest grandchild, was three or so, she went to Sunday school for the first time. As one might expect, she was very excited to be going, and indeed that excitement was evident when she invited my mom on the afternoon of her very first day of class to come over to play school. Of course, my mom could hardly say no, so off she went. Kelsy had everything waiting for her in the living room, having set up a chair right in front of Kelsy's chalkboard.

"Have a seat, everyone," Kelsy said, so my mom sat down. Kelsy got down to business right away: "Now, Grandma, can you tell me the first book of the Bible?"

My mom, no biblical scholar, replied, "Exodus."

"WRONG!" Kelsy shouted. "It's Genesis."

This little story has been the stuff of legends in my family for what it says about Kelsy's precocity. But when I look back on it now, I think it's more telling for what it says about school. You see, Kelsy had been to school for little more than an hour and she already knew that what teachers do is ask their students fact-based questions that students often get wrong so teachers have to correct them.

Kelsy's playacting with my mom demonstrates why the project McCann, Kahn, and Walter take up in this book is so very important. A wealth of research clearly establishes that classrooms in general and English classrooms in particular are much more apt to be characterized by Kelsy-like recitations than they are by the kind of generative conversations that the authors share with us throughout the book. A wealth of research also establishes that those kinds of generative conversations have far-reaching benefits for students.

But knowing the problem doesn't mean it's easily solved. Another story. Not long after I got my PhD, I had the privilege of serving as a research assistant on Arthur Applebee's (1989) study of the teaching of literature in programs with reputations for excellence. One of my tasks was to take a log of class activities in the classes I observed. Though I did the work thirty years ago, I will never

forget one of my observations, a whole-class discussion of *A Tale of Two Cities*. The teacher clearly loved the book and was trying to communicate that love to his students. He fired off question after question and students offered brief replies. Sometimes in his enthusiasm he interrupted his students before they finished those brief replies so he could make a point. I estimated that he spoke about 95 percent of the words during the class. After class was over, I asked one of the questions on the interview protocol, something like this: "How does what I saw today compare to your typical class?" His response: "We have this kind of scintillating conversation nearly every day."

That teacher could not have been more dedicated. He could not have known and cared about his content any more deeply. But he also couldn't have mischaracterized his class any more completely. And he's not alone. Indeed, even teachers who are committed to classroom discourse that resembles a "jam session" (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995, p. 19) are undone by their concern that their discussions "get somewhere," typically to some kind of shared interpretative understanding.

Moreover, Kamil and his colleagues (2008) speculate that teachers may not have the skills they need to guide productive discussion. I've been teaching for more than forty years now, and I regularly have the experience of asking a question that is met with empty stares or of receiving an unexpected response and not knowing what to say.

So what to do? My answer in short is to read this book, for it does a better job than any book of which I am aware of providing an alternative to the patterns of discourse that typify discussions in the English language arts. The book achieves this crucially important goal in a radical way: by recasting teachers not as question-askers but rather as problem-posers.

McCann, Kahn, and Walter demonstrate what can happen when teachers engage students in thinking hard about complex problems that have multiple sustainable positions as a way to foster critical thinking, talking, and writing that will prepare students for extended inquiries. They demonstrate how these inquiries can, in turn, provide a context in which crucially important knowledge, skills, and strategies can be both developed and rewarded.

Recasting the teacher's role as a problem-poser rather than as a question-asker challenges the norms of classroom discussion. Since Mehan's (1979) foundational research, the field has known that discussions in school are patterned: The teacher initiates an exchange with a question, a student responds to that question, and then the floor returns to the teacher who provides an evaluation or, as Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995) found, an elaboration. When teachers build their discussion around questions, that pattern is cued. I think of the issue in terms of Maslow's (1966) famous rumination: "I suppose it is

tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (p. 15). The analog to Maslow’s comment might read, “If the only tool that you have is a question, everything starts to look like an answer.” That is, questions cue recitations while problems don’t. Just take a quick look at any of the excerpts that McCann, Kahn, and Walter provide. What you see is students taking extended turns in which they articulate and support their claims. Just take a quick look at Figure 5.8. What you see is a picture that clearly shows that when students are given generative problems they talk to one another and not just to their teachers.

McCann, Kahn, and Walter provide multiple examples that demonstrate that this picture can be realized across grades, tracks, and school and subject contexts. But they do much more than simply illustrate what classroom discussions can look like. They go to great lengths to articulate the meticulous planning that accounted for those illustrations. They share how they identified problems that are compelling to students. They talk about how to build those problems into complex cases. They explain moves teachers can make within discussions to foster authentic conversations. They share a planning heuristic and scales that teachers can use to assess their own and their students’ performance. They demonstrate how one can use the problems to introduce larger units of study. Their work gives their readers not only ready-to-use tools but also understandings that can be adapted for whatever teaching context we find ourselves in.

McCann, Kahn, and Walter also give us another great gift. As they point out, in this era of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability, too often we lose sight of what brought us to the profession in the first place: the joy of thinking and talking and reading and writing with others about issues that matter. When I read the transcripts and the essays that McCann, Kahn, and Walter share, I saw that joy manifested. Any teacher or prospective teacher who reads this book will be far more likely both to experience that joy themselves and to be able to share that joy with their students.

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## Let's Talk about Talk in the Classroom

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After observing some high school classes engaged in intense and sustained discussions about complex issues, we have sought to understand how a teacher can consistently engage students enthusiastically in talking about substantive topics, including the interpretation of texts. We have observed classes in which the students facilitated the discussions and did almost all of the talking. As we share below, we have also observed classes in which students tackled contentious issues, even issues that many teachers would shy away from introducing to their classes. We knew that if we were going to prepare new teachers to enter classrooms ready to rely on substantive talk to foster literacy learning and critical thinking, we would need to know what practices distinguish teachers who engage students in consequential conversations and shared inquiry.

We begin with Ms. Widerhaken's class of eleventh graders in an urban high school, where the students had been discussing the challenges that teachers in a neighboring state had faced when they introduced their students to the concept of *white privilege* as part of a "diversity unit" in social studies classes. The students in Ms. Widerhaken's class read about the case and about similar situations in other schools. They entered into a discussion about the necessity and appropriateness of teaching the concept in their own school. Here is a small part of the exchange:

SILVIA: I don't feel like you cannot build a relationship across races. For everyone who looks at white people, that they are bad also, I don't feel like every white person is horrible, just like I don't think every black person is poor. I still feel like that it should be taught. You are going to think how you want about these things. Some people look at white people like they are all bad. I feel bad right now in this class saying that "white people, white people, white people." You don't know how you would feel towards whites.

RAYMOND: I think it [bigotry] can change but not immediately change. I think it takes more time than what we usually have left. We are still young but I

don't think it can change by that time. I don't know like you said everybody should believe in changing. I still don't think it will change right now. Our kids' kids can see the change but not us.

MS. WIDERHAKEN: What else?

STUART: He said that our kids' kids will see the change. But I don't think the world is that bad.

DARNELL: I believe that we can at least start the change because teaching the next generation about it makes them do more than we could have done in our lifetime and make them keep going on and make this world a better place.

RAYMOND: This white privilege thing, has been going for how long? I don't know. It has been a long time, though. I think it is even going to take even longer for the world to come together.

SHANICE: I say I don't really want to do this [study the concept of white privilege] because at the bottom, people are already constricting. They've already found their opinions that blacks are already having a weak heart. So that I don't think people are going to change what they believe. On bottom, I am going to tell my parents like, "You have to go and talk what you want because people love to believe what they want. They can be secure and they can be higher, though, as a white person. People are already knowing what they believe."

JASMINE: I feel like we are the first who are going to try to change this. We've already had people who feel so positive that black and white people work together. Now we are all together. So we work together and go to school together. What I have trouble understanding is what has changed them because like I just don't understand that because we've already communicated with each other, having black and white progressing together. I don't get it. OK, you can see for many times that they are all equal or like you can make posters. I don't understand how it is going. I just don't get it. I just don't understand why you feel like completely pained. People are already believing what they believe. It seems very impossible because, think about it, we had Martin Luther King and others. We have you. We have everybody. I mean, I don't understand. I need the right people. I don't understand.

SILVIA: I feel like it is kind of our fault. I don't feel like it is white people's fault. It is our fault because some kids are different. I can go to the same store and she goes too and be treated the same way. You see, it is our problem. Around here, you don't see a lot of white people being mean. But some people do that because they have been brought up that way. They are still bad.

SHANICE: It is also about where you come from. A lot of times, it is not just black people and that white aren't that saggy, most of the time. If you are saggy, then it is bound that they come from the hood. White people who do come from the hood, they are saggy just like us. But you have white people come of advantage to that race, the top white. The white people that come from the hood, they are saggy just like us.

The discussions about the prospect of teaching high school students about white privilege spanned three class meetings, following a carefully devised sequence. As we witnessed the discussions and revisited them through analysis of the transcripts, we noted how deeply involved students were in the discussions. We were also struck by how students, as they talked, engaged in several important intellectual and literacy moves, usually associated with “college readiness”: supporting claims with evidence, citing texts and explaining the citations, representing and building on the comments of others, evaluating claims, connecting arguments, summarizing, and arguing for a specific policy. Ms. Widerhaken’s class, and similar high school classes we have observed as part of our research into classroom discourse, exhibited evidence of the two daily goals we have had in our combined 120+ years of teaching English: that students learn something and have a positive experience doing it, even when discussions become heated and topics are emotionally charged and hard to talk about.

In this book, we profile some teachers who have developed particular skills at engaging students in inquiry and sustained discussion in support of that inquiry and as part of the processes of learning to write elaborated compositions and read complex texts. We have observed the teachers and their students in classrooms in schools that were quite distinct from each other. Our observations have been part of a long effort to understand how teachers can engage students in sustained discussions that the learners find exhilarating as they learn some sophisticated procedures for critical thought and for advanced literacy practices.

## **The State of Classroom Discussion**

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In the 1990s, Martin Nystrand and a team of researchers at the University of Wisconsin observed teachers and students in scores of classrooms across three states. In his report, Nystrand (1997) distinguishes *authentic discussion* as discussion about questions that do not have prespecified answers. To illustrate, imagine the following exchange in a World History class that had been studying the French Revolution and Louis the XVI’s attempt to escape with his life.

TEACHER: When King Louis escaped, where did he go?

STUDENT: England.

TEACHER: No.

STUDENT: Germany.

TEACHER: No. Think about Marie Antoinette.

STUDENT: Austria.

TEACHER: Austria. Right. And will this make things better or worse for Louis?

STUDENT: Worse.

TEACHER: Worse. That's right.

Perhaps the interchange in this format was necessary to assess what students could recall about the events in history, but you could hardly call it an open exchange of ideas in a process of constructing deep understanding about the political, cultural, and economic factors that fomented revolution and fostered a reign of terror. In many ways, the teacher signals to the students that they are expected to recite what the teacher already knows: He opens with a question that has a clear answer. He coaxes students to narrow their choices. He offers the last question as a selection between two possibilities. While such brief exchanges might serve a purpose, they are hardly engaging for learners and offer little to help them construct their own understandings: They are simply reciting from recall, or guessing from the clues the teacher offers.

If practices have not changed much since Nystrand's 1997 study—and, in fact, Nystrand (2017) reports that over three decades classroom discussion “has only declined as an instructional activity”—then the recitation episode above is typical of what an observer would find in a history or English class in middle school or high school today. Nystrand (1997) reports that in the scores of schools he studied, authentic discussion occupied, on average, a mere fifteen seconds per class meeting in ninth grade. We will refer to this startling statistic again and again in this book as a point of contrast. We find it a troubling statistic because it means that students, who typically take delight in interacting with their peers, have a mostly passive role in the classroom where the teacher does most of the talking.

## The Impact of Authentic Discussion

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We report ruefully that the students in the Nystrand study seldom participated in authentic discussion. But why should we care? If discussion is not a domi-

nant feature of instruction in middle school and high school classrooms, can't students learn much in a variety of other ways? We know that students learn through a variety of experiences and activity structures. We have seen evidence that students have learned much through dramatic presentations, artistic representations of complex concepts, self-directed learning modules, and individual research. But we also know that engagement in authentic discussion leads to high levels of learning, especially literacy learning. Nystrand (1997) found a strong positive correlation between participation in discussion and performance on measures of achievement in reading and writing.

Researchers at the University of Michigan's School of Education identify discussion as a "high leverage practice," one leading to substantial student learning and essential for advancing skills in teaching: "The purposes of a discussion are to build collective knowledge and capability in relation to specific instructional goals and to allow students to practice listening, speaking, and interpreting" (n.p.). Nystrand (2006) reports that extensive participation in authentic discussion has a positive impact on reading comprehension. Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) report that in classrooms where teachers followed discussion-based approaches, students performed better on measures of achievement than did peers who did not experience such instruction. Langer (2001) reports that in schools that "beat the odds," students frequently participated in both small group and whole class discussions. Hattie's (2009) synthesis of more than 800 meta-analyses reports shifts in student learning and achievement in terms of *effect size*, a summary measure of growth, with standard deviation being the unit of measure. Simply put, a positive shift in performance from pre-test to post-test of nearly +1.00 would be evidence of significant growth. In looking at general trends across studies, Hattie reports that the effect size for classroom discussion was 0.82, well beyond his reported "hinge point" of 0.40, the average across more than 140,000 effect sizes, making classroom discussion indeed a "high leverage practice."

The large effect size from classroom discussion makes good sense when we see learning as socially situated. Vygotsky (1996) reminds us that learning is a social experience: "Unlike the development of instincts, thinking and behavior of adolescents are prompted not from within but from without, by the social milieu" (108). The interactions with others have a powerful impact, in everything from defining relatively simple concepts (e.g., distinguishing one fruit from another) to assessing the advantages and disadvantages associated with several possible courses of action in order to recommend and defend a specific policy. Bakhtin (1986) observes that much thought—"philosophical, scientific, artistic—is born of the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought" (p. 92). We judge that when students in middle school and high school grapple

with each other in trying to understand complex concepts, including interpretations of literature and decisions about thorny policy questions, they learn more than the recall of information, although recall is likely to serve analyses. We have witnessed repeatedly instances when students have noted that they have entered class firm in their positions about issues and shifted their positions as classmates challenged them, offered alternatives, tested assumptions by citing exceptions to rules, and expressed reasonable arguments. We see such flexibility as a necessary habit of mind for entering the intellectual conversations of the university; making decisions at home, on the job, and in the community; and simply thinking about the issues of the day.

Kuhn (1991) and Mercier and Sperber (2011, 2017) report that most often humans draw conclusions first and then search for the support for the positions that they are predisposed to embrace, leading some people to watch only Fox News and ignore MSNBC, or vice versa. But, if teachers want students to assume an academic intellectual position, they will want the learners to recognize and evaluate a variety of opinions to arrive at a deeper understanding of a complex issue, or at least to espouse positions supported by reason rather than advanced as a prejudice.

Sherry Turkle (2015) worries about the decline in conversation as a result of the distractions from and dependence on technology. She sees value in face-to-face talk that goes beyond ramping up scores on achievement tests: “Many of the things we all struggle with in love and work can be helped by conversation. Without conversation, studies show that we are less empathic, less connected, less creative and fulfilled” (p. 13). She cites philosopher Heinrich von Kleist to point to conversation’s benefits as a means for exploring ideas and refining understandings. Turkle observes, “The best thoughts, in his view, can be almost unintelligible as they emerge; what matters most is risky, thrilling conversation as a crucible for discovery” (p. 37). Our work over many years has been an attempt to use classroom conversation as a vehicle for learning and as a mode of school experience that can be exhilarating and satisfying for all involved.

## **Joy: The Unstated Goal**

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Over our careers, we have observed in hundreds of classrooms. As supervisors in high schools, as supervisors of student teachers, and as consultants working in several states, we have been in many classrooms, across several subject areas. In the classrooms we have visited, rarely do teachers say explicitly what the learning target is for a specific lesson. Most often we have observed teachers launch into an activity without connecting it to previous class meetings and

without explicitly identifying its purpose. In some cases, however, a teacher will write objectives on the board, including the related Common Core State Standard. In fact, in some schools, teachers are required to write the learning objectives on the board in the form of “I can” statements, as students’ affirmations, as in “I can cite evidence from a text to support a claim,” or “I can identify the climax in a short story.” Never have we seen anyone, including ourselves, write something like this on the board: “Everyone will enjoy the experiences in this class today.”

Even though we don’t see such statements posted for students to see, we hope and believe that most teachers enter the classroom with the expectation that students will take some joy in their learning. To a certain extent, this pleasure goal still drives what we do with students today, and we know that the exhilaration that learners might experience is reciprocal: If they are enjoying their learning experience, we will take joy in their pleasure. We have seen such intentions pursued in various ways among other teachers.

We know two teachers who have worked for years as partners in teaching an interdisciplinary class in a high school. We will call the course Western World Studies. The teachers pride themselves on their creativity, and they work hard to find ways to engage adolescent learners. But our best intentions sometimes go awry; and when they do, we can reflect on what went wrong to judge how to refine practice. We can think of two well-intentioned examples.

In an effort to engage students in learning about cultures of the Middle East during the Middle Ages, the teachers (whom we will call Mr. Gordon and Ms. Amari) staged a simulated “Middle Eastern bazaar” where merchants met at a crossroads to display and peddle their wares. Each team of students was assigned a role—e.g., spice merchant, rug merchant, clothier, jeweler, potter—and directed to research the role of this merchant in society and the goods that the merchant would likely have for sale. The teachers had reserved the high school’s multipurpose room and constructed makeshift tents to serve as the vendors’ booths. The teachers encouraged students to dress as they imagined Middle Eastern merchants of the Middle Ages might dress. On the day of the bazaar, the students in their roles as merchants assumed a position in front of a tent where they would rely on a small stack of index cards to explain to the passing “customers” (played by classmates) who they were and describe the goods they had to offer. Classmates took turns in rotating through the bazaar to hear all of the presentations and take notes. The activity, with its simulation, movement, costumes, and trappings of place, would seem to be highly engaging for students; but the learners essentially moved around a room and listened to brief lectures by inexperienced lecturers, with the goal in the end to recall bits of information.

In a second effort, Ms. Amari and Mr. Gordon hoped for their students to learn something about the structure of medieval European society. Toward this end, they invited the members of the school's chess team to teach the students the basic moves of chess. One class meeting was taken up with a presentation and demonstration of the basic moves and strategies of chess. When the class met again, the teachers distributed several chess sets, paired students, and set them to playing chess for approximately twenty minutes. After the students had experienced a chess game for a time, the teachers directed the students to take out their journals and respond in writing to this question: How does the game of chess symbolically represent the hierarchy of medieval European society? The students looked stunned and then scanned the room to see if anyone else knew how to respond. After a few students complained that they did not know what to write, the teachers told the class that it was time to stop complaining and to start writing. Since few students seemed to be writing anything, Ms. Amari and Mr. Gordon soon interrupted to ask students to share their interpretations of the symbols. A couple of students made bold attempts, but most reported that they had no idea of the connection between the chess pieces and the narrative they had been asked to read in their history text. The teachers gently scolded the students for not being able to make the connections and were left with dictating to the students the conclusions that they should have reached.

The teachers cared for their students and cared for the quality of their experience in the classroom. The activities that they had planned seemed to have promise: There was a game and play, students interacted with a partner, and the learners had an opportunity to discover and construct meaning. There were at least two obvious problems: (1) The students were not prepared sufficiently to be able to make the leap into symbolic thinking, either because they really knew very little about medieval European society, or they made no connection between the highly abstract game and the details of the historical world. (2) The teachers had made no genuine "dialogic bid," as Nystrand (1997) calls it, to signal to the students that the symbolic conclusions were open to interpretation: It was clear from the journal prompt that the teachers already had a specific interpretation in mind.

As Ms. Amari and Mr. Gordon demonstrate, it is easy to fool ourselves that the discourse in our classrooms is largely dialogic, and it is easy to misjudge what problems will resonate with students and what activities will provide a quality experience. We know that Ms. Amari and Mr. Gordon are reflective enough to see that the outcomes for their lessons were not what they had planned, and they amended their plans to be both more engaging and more dialogic. The business of authentic discussion, while seemingly intuitive and simple, is rather complicated, as we demonstrate throughout this book, and the process of

providing learners with exhilarating and memorable classroom experiences is not an exact science. But for students to engage in inquiry and discussions, the problems at the heart of the inquiry must resonate with the learners and seem of some consequence. To a certain extent, students as a body should have some choice in the line of inquiry they pursue as a community (cf. Stern, 1995). That is just a start. Students must see that they each have as much knowledge and voice as any of their peers to contribute to a group effort to think about the problem and its potential solutions. Each student should feel valued in the classroom and able to take some intellectual risks without fearing ridicule and suppression. The structures for inquiry and discussion should build upon themselves so the discussions of today prepare for the discussions tomorrow, which in turn prepare for subsequent reading, writing, and further discussions. The frequent interactions as a common element of daily experience in the classroom should ultimately build a sense of community, a connectedness among peers within the classroom and across the school. These elements—problem-solving with everyday or “real world” problems, a voice in choosing what to study, a sense of efficacy, and a feeling of community—are basic to human motivation and help to foster satisfaction with the experience of school.

We think that allowing students to engage with one another about issues that matter to the learners is a key element in bringing some joy into the experience of learning in the English language arts classroom. Various thinkers have said more or less the same thing. Linda Christensen (2009) seeks to celebrate students’ lives, language, and stories through a process of seeking justice: “Teaching for joy and justice means creating a curriculum that matters, a curriculum that helps students make sense of the world, that makes them feel smart—educated even” (p. 7). Wilhelm, Fransen, and Smith (2014) support students’ experiencing the joy of reading by entering into the texts that most appeal to their interests and by sharing with friends the multiple pleasures of reading. Wilhelm and Novak (2011) seek to help students read and respond to literature in ways that are transformative and that lead ultimately to connecting with a community and feeling a part of an associated life. Similarly, Wilhelm and his colleagues Whitney Douglas and Sara W. Fry (2014) offer many ways in which students can find joy through service to others. Garcia and O’Donnell-Allen (2015) suggest a variety of ways in which teachers can assume new stances (“poses”) to upset the conventional teaching and learning experiences, ultimately to bring joy to students. In all these cases, teachers strive to make learning purposeful and meaningful for adolescents. Students engage with ideas that matter, and their purposeful inquiries with peers support them to persist with tough reading and to endeavor to share in writing their stand on issues that matter.

## The Discussion of Discussion in This Book

Throughout this book, we examine the practices of several high school English teachers who have been kind enough to allow us to observe in their classrooms and to talk to them at length about what they do to invite students to talk to each other in the classroom for the purposes of literacy learning and critical thinking. As our review above reveals, it is critically important that a teacher of English knows how to facilitate discussion as an essential tool for literacy instruction. Research, as well as our own experience and observations over many years, reveals that consistently facilitating authentic discussion in most classrooms is not easy and not “natural” for most teachers; it requires procedural knowledge, practice, reflection, and problem-solving. We agree with Britton (1983) that “reading and writing float on a sea of talk” (p. 11). But we want teachers to have a keen sense of what students do when they engage with each other in purposeful conversation, both in the classroom and in a digital environment. We also want teachers to be well aware of what especially reflective teachers do when

they plan discussion-based instruction and when they facilitate discussion from day to day.

We begin with a teacher who prepares students to assume the responsibility for discussion, with astounding results. The next chapter accounts for a process of preparing students for discussion, shows students at work, and reports the outcomes of their extensive talk. As we report in detail later, for two class meetings the students did almost all of the talking, focused entirely on the topic at hand, and were supportive and inclusive toward all speakers. Our observations in this one classroom prompted this big question: What factors account for the wide and lively participation of students and their extensive contributions? Were these particularly gifted students in an exclusive school? Was the topic itself the key to prompting discussion? Did the structure of the sequence of discussion activities foster earnest participation? Was this an unusually skilled teacher?

### The Power of Classroom Conversations

#### Learning

*Extensive classroom discussions*

- **Engage** learners in key procedures that transfer to writing
- **Serve** as preparation for elaborated writing
- **Motivate** students to read, research, and write
- **Foster** interpretations and critical assessments of complex texts

#### Feeling

*Extensive classroom discussions*

- **Encourage** students to share with peers
- **Affirm** students' knowledge and voice
- **Foster** discovery of new possibilities
- **Inspire** learners to take action to ameliorate problems

#### Acting

*Extensive classroom discussions*

- **Encourage** students to collaborate in problem-solving and discovery
- **Invite** multiple participants in conversations
- **Affirm** value in differences
- **Build** a collaborative community

To a certain extent, we can say “all of the above” to account for the factors that fostered authentic discussion. But the process of planning and facilitation cannot remain a mystery if other teachers are going to be able to replicate what we saw in a classroom where students were learning much and enjoying their experience. In Chapter 3, we compare classrooms across settings: small town, suburban, and urban. Our intention is to check on several factors: Does discussion depend on being in the right school in the right setting with the right kids? Are only teachers with special gifts and talents able to foster authentic discussion? Is hitting on the hot button topic the key to it all? Can a teacher design discussion activities in such a way that there is a reasonable guarantee of wide and engaged participation?

In part, the evidence we have seen of students’ willing participation in a connected series of discussions is the result of the teachers’ careful planning. Perhaps there are teachers who can enter classrooms each day equipped with little more than a provocative question and set off an intense discussion. In contrast, the teachers we have observed have planned carefully to be sure that students are prepared to discuss across a connected sequence, both for working on a problem during the current week of lessons and for applying the same intellectual moves and protocols in future discussions. In Chapter 4 we follow the planning processes and reveal teachers’ thinking about fostering a sense of support and civility.

Chapter 5 reveals teachers’ practices in the classroom. These practices include the yearlong attention to the tone in the classroom, the sense of community, and the established protocols for engaging with each other, even when problems are emotionally charged. We also look at teachers’ moves from moment to moment in the classroom to unveil the seeming mystery behind those teachers who are able to get kids talking when others can’t. Authentic discussion is by its nature an ill-structured problem. Although it is not possible to map out a flowchart or define a formula to reveal the decisions a teacher should make to initiate, extend, evaluate, and connect discussions, we do generalize about the practices that are likely to invite students into consequential instructional conversations.

Throughout the book, we report our classroom observations when teachers were engaging learners in discussions that led to writing and served as a gateway into a larger line of inquiry. In Chapter 6, we discuss the follow-through for these discussions. The gateway activity would have limited impact if the students were not able to connect these early discussions to their subsequent discussions about literature, film, and other texts. We value coherence and shared inquiry, which require planning, adjustments, and attention to the connections across texts and their related discussion.

We conclude with our observations about the impact that discussion appears to have had on the learners we have observed, including apparent literacy learning and a general satisfaction about being a participant in an English class. We generalize also about the practices that should serve teachers in most settings in initiating, managing, assessing, sustaining, and connecting authentic discussions as key elements in the process of inquiry and literacy learning.

*In a time when many teachers feel burdened by testing and other contemporary challenges, Discussion Pathways to Literacy Learning provides compelling evidence that authentic, engaging discussions about issues important to young adults can happen in any English classroom. The authors provide research-based, practical guidance for preparing for and leading authentic discussions that promote critical thinking, inquiry, and reflection, thereby demystifying this complex pedagogical practice and supporting teachers to bring joy back into the classroom.*

—Emily R. Smith, Fairfield University

*This book is a gift to English teachers and teacher educators. McCann, Kahn, and Walter provide powerful examples of how inservice and preservice teachers can plan and enact a problem-posing pedagogy that engages students in meaningful classroom discussions about issues that matter to them. It is a treasure!*

—Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, University of Connecticut

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Even dedicated teachers who are deeply committed to their discipline and to their students' learning can be blind to the true nature of their classroom discussions. Many would be surprised to discover that they've done 95% of the talking, or that the questions they've asked have right or wrong answers that don't elicit substantive exploration. *Discussion Pathways to Literacy Learning* examines authentic classroom discussion as an essential element in inquiry and literacy learning, illustrated with examples of activities that engage students enthusiastically in talking about substantive topics, including the interpretation of classic and contemporary books and films, as well as current events.

The authors, experienced researchers and teacher educators, draw on ongoing research into the effect of discussion on literacy learning. Beyond demonstrating the strong impact that authentic discussion has on learning, they showcase how students can facilitate discussions even about controversial subjects, as well as show how participation in discussion can be a pleasurable, meaningful experience for adolescents, especially when they can choose the focus for their shared inquiry.

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**Thomas M. McCann** is a professor of English at Northern Illinois University and contributes to the teacher licensure program. **Elizabeth A. Kahn** teaches in the English teacher education program at Northern Illinois University. **Carolyn C. Walter** supervises student teachers at Northern Illinois University.



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