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What's New in Literacy Teaching?

CONVERSATION, COLLABORATION, AND THE COMMON CORE

Strategies for Learning Together

THOMAS DEVERE WOLSEY   KAREN WOOD

DIANE LAPP 

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It seems to us that opportunities for students to converse and to be conversant with content knowledge and big ideas have never been more possible than they are now. In our information-saturated society, it's important for teachers and students to consider the contexts and purposes for conversation and collaboration. From informal to well-planned interactions, what teachers do to encourage students to use language fluidly during interactive student-to-student conversations may never have been more important in the classroom. Observation of classroom conversation serves as a continuous formative assessment measure as teachers note what is being shared, how it is shared, and what students are learning. In this article, we present scenarios of student collaboration and conversation as an integral element to content learning, designed to promote communication skills.

It helps to understand that communication skills are well grounded in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and how they can be bundled for instruction. For example, the fifth-grade standard for reading literature calls for students to *Compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics* (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.9). An important means of learning to compare and contrast stories is for students to discuss (conversation and collaboration) those stories with others in the class, with the teacher, and with parents or siblings. These interactions are supported by the fifth-grade speaking and listening standard (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1): *Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on* grade 5 topics and texts, *building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.*

In classroom example 1, note the discussion that centers on students employing academic conversation to achieve a science learning outcome. The CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010) and other rigorous state standards call for students to engage in learning through collaboration, conversation, and presentation. For instance, please visit www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/SL to see how this works in the Common Core.

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Classroom Example 1: Online Resources

Jaime and the members of his sixth-grade discussion group sat in a circle with an interesting problem. In science, they were exploring states of matter. Though they recognized the general phenomenon of water boiling, the more scientific explanation of boiling point was much more challenging. As they used an image search engine (e.g., images.google.com) they found a number of photographs of water that appeared to be boiling. But not all the photographs showed water that had reached the boiling point. Jaime noticed that the first picture showed bubbles at the bottom of the glass pot, but that didn't seem to show the actual boiling point as they had read about it in an online article recommended by their teacher.

He pointed out, "Yeah, that's a cool picture. The colors are all bluish, and the glass pot makes it easy to see the bubbles. But didn't the book say that boiling point is reached when the bubbles break the surface?"

Yolanda chimed in, "Oh, yep! You're right, Jaime. That's what it says right here on page 72, and this picture doesn't show that happening."

Josef kept looking online to find another photo. "What about this one?"

The group concluded that this photo was more representative of what they had learned about boiling point.

As they worked together using observation, blended learning of classroom and online sources, close reading, and discussion skills, these students developed a deeper understanding of states of matter. This learning was well grounded in the communication.

Conversation and collaboration promote concept development and the associated vocabulary and language structures at all levels. As Jodi, Josef, and Taneisha discuss a novel in classroom example 2, notice how the students bring up ideas from a text, question the text and each other, and refer to ideas from their teacher.

Classroom Example 2: Text and Class

"Wait a minute," Jodi said while discussing *Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001), "Are you saying that Pi [a character in the

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novel] is not just confronting other people, but he is also confronting himself, who he is, why he is alone at sea?"

"I think so," Josef quietly responded, "But what about that part on the meerkat island? I don't quite see how that fits in."

"What was that term Dr. Lapp used? Symbolism? Do you think the island is a symbol?" Taneisha wondered aloud.

"Yes," said Josef, "I think it is symbolic and that the man-eating plants symbolize each person's personal journeys in life, some of which are our struggles. Sometimes survival isn't known because of our current circumstances.

Taneisha said, "Let's look back at that section to see."

Here again we see how collaboration enabled each student to have a deepening analysis and understanding of text and ideas related to the text.

Guidelines for Planning Effective Discussion

Because examples 1 and 2 seem so natural, it is easy to think of discussion as a spontaneous occurrence in the classroom. However, when the discussion is a planned part of instruction, the possibility increases that students will be both engaged and learning.

Assessing the Students and the Content

Sharing the purposes for communication of outcomes is a must to ensure that students understand the intent and the process (e.g., NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010). Addressing questions similar to the following when planning instruction may help teachers promote discussion that results in content learning:

- What background knowledge might students already have about the topic?
- What knowledge, often from multiple sources or viewpoints, might students need before they can engage in meaningful discussion about the topic?
- What discussion skills might students need to develop in order to participate in an effective discussion?
- Will discussion help promote learning and inquiry about this topic? Are multiple constructions of knowledge possible? (adapted from Wolsey & Lapp, 2009)

Modeling

Desirable discussion behaviors usually need to be taught, often through modeling. Models and instruction may play a key role as students learn to think of discussion as a way to learn, not just as a means of expressing an idea. In their work, Berne and Clark (2008) taught desired behaviors for discussion through modeling. Groups observing them designed the following list of desirable behaviors based on the modeled discussion:

- Ask questions
- Listen carefully to others
- State a reason for disagreeing or provide evidence to support a response
- Identify discussion or comprehension strategies used
- Return to sources to verify, refute, or mediate an assertion

In examples 1 and 2, we witnessed students enacting behaviors that had been modeled by their teachers.

Planning the Discussion Prompts in Advance

Teachers can nudge, prompt, and prod students to answer questions and ask and answer more questions arising during conversation. Teachers should prepare questions in advance (Welty, 1989) that encourage students to look for their own answers but always ground them with text-supported evidence, including responses based on the text itself. We suggest that teachers plan questions for the beginning of the discussion, transitions, and closing the discussion; at the same time, teachers can foster meaningful dialogue by inviting students to generate questions that they might explore through collaboration. But what happens when just a handful of students are participating in the discussion?

Discussion behaviors that promote learning often walk a fine line between more passive members who may not contribute in an active fashion or feel their participation is shut down or not valued, and more active participants who may talk over peers' contributions (Moguel, 2004). Some discussion strategies require equal participation by classmates working in smaller groups such as dyads. In this next section, we share Serial and Focused Serial Retelling (Wood, Harmon, Kissel, & Hedrick, 2011) and Communal Writing (Wood, 2002) among others as approaches to give everyone in the class a collaborative role.

Classroom Strategies That Encourage Effective Conversation

For the remainder of this article, we explore several approaches that we have found to promote student talk. In many of the examples, teachers with whom we have worked have added their own voices in writing and through videos and classroom examples. Though there are many ways of promoting conversation and collaboration, we present the following, most of which also make use of digital tools:

- Serial Retellings
- Communal Writing and Exchange Compare Writing
- Vocabulary Self-Selection Strategy Plus
- Close reading: One approach
- Jigsaw and Graffiti Wall
- Talking Drawings
- Conversation, Collaboration, and Animoto
- Using Opinion or Argument to Promote Discussion
- ReQuest

Serial Retellings

This strategy for encouraging discussion is designed to be incorporated with Sustained Silent Reading, a time-tested means of getting students to self-select texts and read independently during the school day. Some questions teachers have regarding this practice are: How do we get students to really focus on reading for 30 minutes? And, in the context of high-stakes testing and accountability: How can I justify having my class just sit and read? And, for the practice of reading, in general: What is the first thing anyone wants to do when they read an interesting part in a book? Share it!

Of course, we all want to tell someone about a favorite line or event or twist in a selection. That is where Serial Retellings or Focused Serial Retellings (Wood et al., 2011) come in. Both are a means of helping struggling or reluctant readers, in particular, stay focused and interested while engaging in a meaningful instructional experience. In Serial Retellings, the teacher allows students to read their books silently for about 10 minutes (not the usual, uninterrupted 20 or 30 minutes historically advocated).

Then students are instructed to share with a partner something from the book that was interesting, such as a character, an event, or a word. Each dyad shares its "book news" for a few minutes until the teacher tells the students to return to their silent reading time for 10 additional minutes. Teachers can use a bell, chime, or verbal directive to indicate starting and stopping points for sharing. Our students respond well to Apimac Timer, which can be downloaded from www.apimac.com/downloads/.

A variation on this strategy is Focused Serial Retellings, which teachers can use in class to focus students' attention on skills and strategies such as vocabulary, concept development, inferring, connecting with prior experiences, or predicting story outcomes. In the following classroom example 3, Kate Mitchell, who teaches a combination second- and third-grade classroom, has asked each student to look for specific words that they find interesting and want to share.

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Classroom Example 3: Focused Serial Retellings

Matthew (reading *The Goat in the Rug* [Blood & Link, 1976]): This is about a goat named Geraldine whose owner, Glenmae, is going to weave her hair into a wool rug.

Ella: (reading *Swimmy* [Lionni, 1973]): I am reading about a big tuna fish that swallowed all of Swimmy's family, except him because he is so fast.

Matthew: One new word I just learned is *mohair*. It is the big long strands of wool that gets clipped off the goat.

Ella: Is Geraldine scared?

Matthew: No, it says she is ticklish for a goat, but next she watches what Glenmae does afterwards with the mohair.

Ella: My new word is *medusa*. It said it is made of "rainbow jelly." They are a type of jellyfish and have these long arms sticking out to grab things.

Matthew: I have seen them before on the beach. They are clear, and those arms are called tentacles.

Notice that these students identified both facts and language they found interesting. Kate assessed that students were returning to their texts to support the information they were sharing and were listening carefully and responding to what their peers shared. As teachers listen to students' conversations, they can easily assess the comprehension that is occurring and the language that is being used to share the information. These insights often support the next instructional steps.

Communal Writing and Exchange Compare Writing

Another means of encouraging participation by all is Communal Writing (Wood, 2002). Communal writing involves getting four or five students to "put their heads together" in the composition of a single product. Roles can be assigned within the groups, if needed, to ensure the identified tasks to polish the work are covered. Among the advantages to communal writing are the following:

- Benefits the learning of all students
- Expedites assessment (teachers won't have 30 or more papers to score)
- Maximizes participation
- Improves collaboration as students assist one another and serve as models of the writing process
- Enables teachers to monitor and assist students
- Serves as a practice writing exercise
- Engages students in peer editing to "polish" their work

One approach that pairs well with Communal Writing is the Exchange Compare Writing strategy (Wood & Taylor, 2006; Wood, Stover, & Taylor, in press). With this strategy, the teacher determines significant terms to emphasize (approximately 6–10) and then displays and pronounces them for the class. Students are preassigned to heterogeneous groups of 4 or 5 and then use the terms to collectively compose one or two paragraphs predicting the selection they are about to read. After they have read the selection with the key terms in mind, students return to their groups to compose paragraphs, elaborating on and reflecting the actual content. The teacher monitors group progress, assisting where needed. The groups may be asked to edit or orally share their completed passages.

Classroom Example 4: Jolene Graham and the Exchange Compare Writing Strategy

Jolene teaches fourth grade in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. She describes how she uses the Exchange Compare Writing strategy with her students as a collaborative, communal writing activity in her class. Click here to listen to Jolene's description of how she used this in her classroom as well as her suggestions for extending and applying this collaborative strategy in other contexts using digital tools such as Google Docs and TitanPad. Read more about Jolene's lesson, in her own words, at literacybeat.com/2014/06/29/exchange-compare-writing/.

The Many Facets of Discussion

Our next three examples illustrate how discussion provides a way for students to learn new information and collaboratively share what they are learning. In keeping with the idea that learning occurs through discussion and collaboration, these scenarios demonstrate how students reinforce and deepen their learning about content, explore new ideas through engagement with text, and explain new understandings. In each example, students build on their own understanding of the concept, work with text (including visual and audio texts) to construct new knowledge, and use presentation and discussion skills to explain their understandings.

Vocabulary Self-Selection Strategy Plus

Vocabulary development transcends the individual words students encounter as they read; from a

cognitive perspective, vocabulary learning is content learning. Vocabulary is often approached independently of actual reading events or is done prior to reading. In our digital version of the Vocabulary Self-Selection Strategy Plus (VSS+), (e.g., Grisham, Smetana, & Wolsey, in press; Haggard, 1982), images form the basis for powerful word study and word learning. VSS+ interactively extends vocabulary development through the reading process by building on the affordances of technology and discussion.

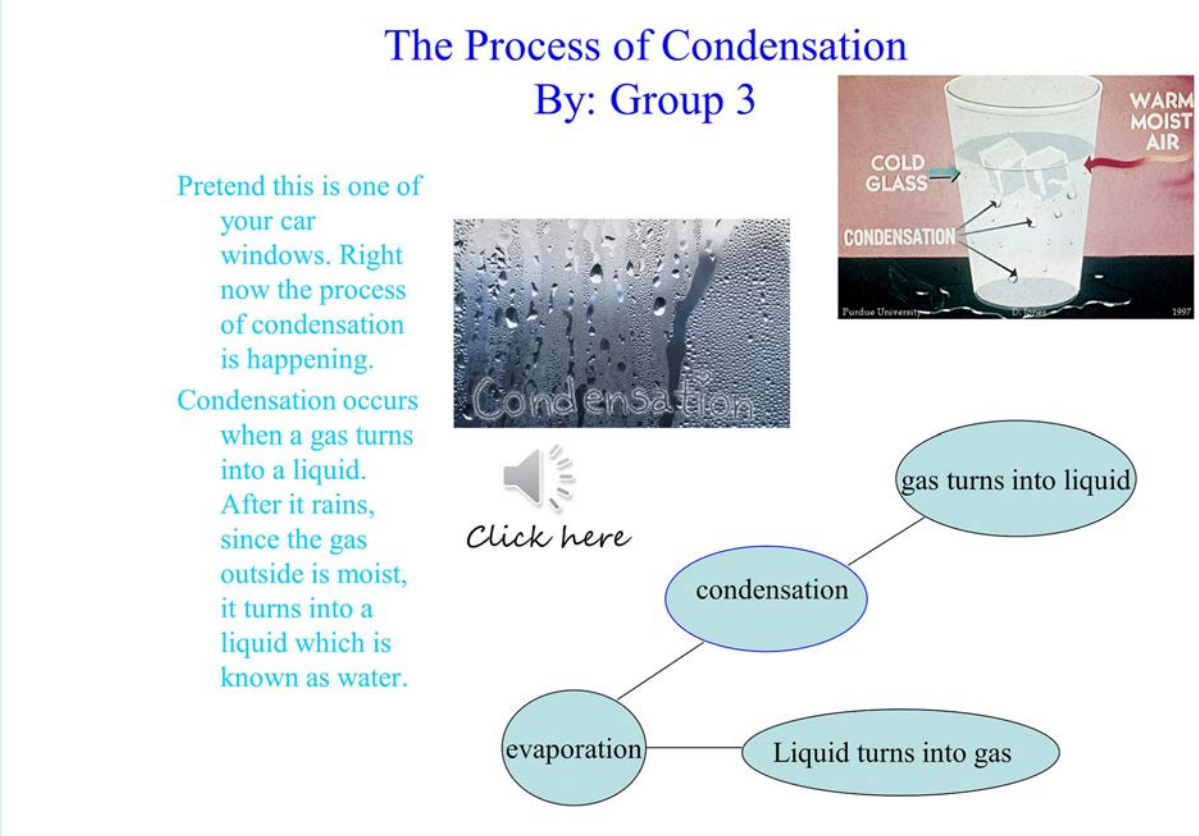
VSS+ asks students to engage with terms and the concepts represented by those terms after they have read a selected text or texts. The steps are straightforward, but the interactions among students can result in deep concept and word learning. Students identify words from a text that they believe will help them understand the content more fully. Next, they create an electronic entry for their class dictionary. In our examples, we used Thinglink and PowerPoint. Each entry needed to include a definition, at least one photograph, a concept map showing related words, and an audio recording explaining the rationale for learning the term (see Figure 1). Learn more about VSS+ by visiting literacybeat.com/tag/vss/.

Close Reading: One Approach

Encouraging students to read closely is one of the basic goals of the CCSS. Close reading involves uncovering layers of meaning in text by analyzing and critically and methodically investigating meaning at the word, sentence, and whole-text levels. Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) and Lapp, Moss, Grant, and Johnson (in press) offer the following suggestions for promoting close reading:

- Prior to or after the first reading, ask questions that cause students to develop a general understanding of what the text says. Focus questions on the general meaning or key details of the text. Examples include "What's the gist of this text?" and "What is this

Figure 1
VSS+ example: The process of condensation



text about?" If you feel this question is not complex enough, you might ask, "What information in the text supports you in identifying the main idea?"

- A next reading should foster deeper thinking, as questions cause students to focus attention on language use, vocabulary, text organization and structures, and author's purpose. Questions that cause students to investigate these areas include "How do the words influence the text's meaning?" and "How does the story change from beginning to end?" Responses to questions indicate that students understand how the text works.
- During subsequent readings, students should answer questions requiring them to infer and form opinions and arguments about the meaning of the text, using textual evidence for support. Examples include "What would logically happen next?" "What clues support your thinking?" and "Do you agree/disagree with the author? Provide evidence for your answers." Conversation between peers as they return to a text throughout a close reading supports their deepening understanding of the text.

Social studies teacher Mr. Victor wanted his students to dig deeply into the life of Frederick Douglass, particularly by engaging in close readings of a biography entitled *Frederick Douglass: Rising Up From Slavery* (Ruffin, 2008). Students were asked to read a selected passage multiple times. Before each reading, he asked text-dependent questions that required students to dig back into the text. After each reading, they engaged in peer conversations to support a response.

Before the initial reading, Mr. Victor asked students to number the text chunks (typically paragraphs) and to annotate and make notes while reading. Their annotations and notes supported their rich conversations. Because the text chunks were numbered, students were able to quickly identify a chunk during discussion. Their annotations and responses also provided a formative assessment of students' comprehension and served as a framework for the related writing they did after their reading. (To learn more about the student collaboration that occurs during close reading, visit www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/depend-text-create-text-31024.html.)

Jigsaw and Graffiti Wall

Another way to incorporate an activity that engages students in collaboration and careful reading of a text is the Jigsaw strategy. During a jigsaw, students take ownership of the text as they work cooperatively within an "expert" group, then return to "teach" their initial or home group the expert information they learned, giving the students the control of the learning process.

Using the Graffiti Wall (Gaikwad, 2011) at the conclusion of the jigsaw process provides a meaningful way for students to display the information they or their group researched and shared. Students can use a Graffiti Wall to visually display data, while peers have a chance to "tour" the information in an appealing way (see Figure 2). Students take pride in their work and have the opportunity to discuss their work and information in an engaging and motivating way.

Figure 2
Graffiti wall example

Classroom Example 5: Lindsay Merritt and Jigsaw

Third-grade teacher Lindsay Merritt, a teacher at Hope Academy in Concord, North Carolina, uses jigsaw to promote student collaboration and engagement with the content. Click here to hear Lindsay's screencast presentation on this strategy. Read more from Lindsay about a lesson she created using graffiti walls and jigsaw in her own words, at literacybeat.com/2014/07/02/jigsaw-graffiti-wall/.

Talking Drawings

Drawing and viewing art and photography are universal media for promoting discussion, collaboration, and extending language in the classroom setting. In this section, we first share the Talking Drawings strategy (McConnell, 1992; Wood et al., in press; Wood & Taylor, 2006) and adapt it for the digital age by using Educreations as an online vehicle for drawing. In Talking Drawings, students are asked to close their eyes and imagine a mental image of the topic to be studied. Then they draw what is in their minds and share their drawings with a partner, describing what they envision (see Figure 3). Next they read the selection under study, and after reading they create another drawing to more closely represent the content of the targeted selection (see Figure 4). Finally their progressions of understanding are shared with partners or the entire class. To incorporate writing, students may be asked to compose a brief paragraph in their dyads explaining what they changed in their before-and-after drawings.

Classroom Example 6: Rebekah Lonon and Talking Drawings

Click here to listen to teacher Rebekah Lonon, of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, as she tells how she uses this strategy in her second-grade classroom and how she has adapted it for the digital age. Read more about Rebekah's lesson, in her own words, at literacybeat.com/2014/07/08/talking-drawings/.

Conversation, Collaboration, and Animoto

Images students create help to provide a foundation for their discussion and exploration of a topic or issue. Phenomena that can be captured in some way as a photograph, screen capture, or video provides a foundation for discussion (e.g., Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998) and, especially, further inquiry. For instance, students in a science class might create videos of their experiments and use these to discuss their experiments. Social studies teachers may ask their students to photograph their explorations of historic sites visited on field trips, or those found on the Internet (and attribute sources appropriately). These visuals can be used for discussion of the events that transpired, or those found online such as the construction or excavation of the site, or contrast how people lived in that time or space.

Third-grade teacher Lindsay Merritt uses Animoto, a digital means of creating collages of photos, to foster discussion. Using this site, students can take images created, photographs, or even video clips, and combine them into videos that can be shared not only with their class, but also the world.

Figure 3
Talking drawings—Before reading

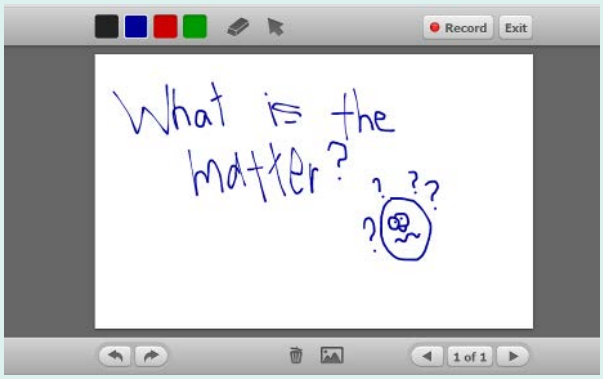
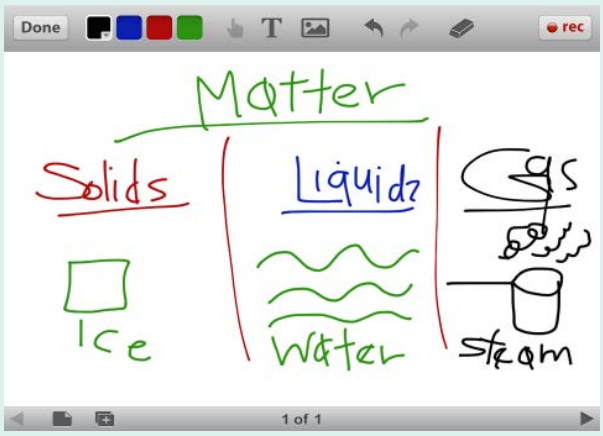


Figure 4
Talking drawings—After reading



Her class read the informational text *Rocket Man: The Story of Robert Goddard* (Streissguth, 1995) and created and tested their own "water rockets." Students documented in their journals the creation process and their launches. They began by taking pictures of the stages of building as well as video clips of the trial launches, just as Goddard did. Then, using the Animoto application, they documented their successes and their failures through text, voice, and pictures.

Lindsay said, "I used Animoto to link the videos students recorded on their launch" (see Figure 5a). "Students were able to view and pause videos to observe the launches and see what changes they could make to ensure success on Launch Day" (see Figure 5b). Finally, "once videos were completed using Animoto, students added a title, date, and any comments for the viewer. They shared with the class through several outlets or for viewing at home" (see Figure 5c).

As we've identified, attention to discussion and collaboration is embedded throughout the CCSS. What students discuss in their social studies, mathematics, or elective courses address these.

Figure 5a
Animoto dashboard

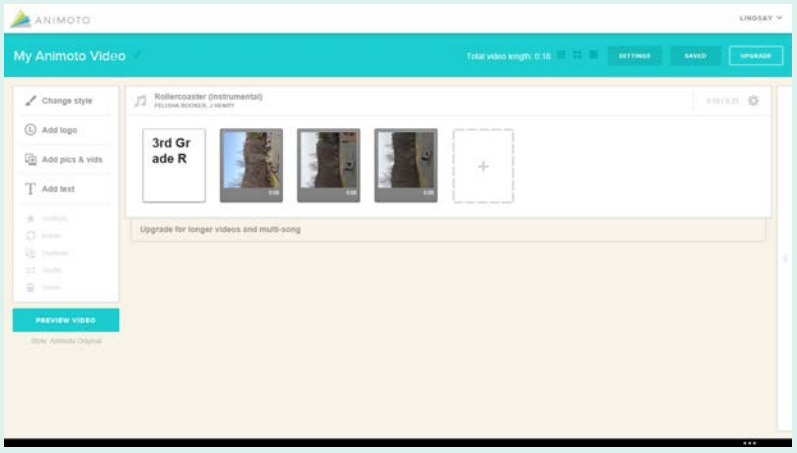


Figure 5b
Animoto video review screen

Figure 5c
Animoto video description screen

Using Opinion or Argument to Promote Discussion

Constructing an effective opinion or argument, or understanding one, has been a hallmark of education since Plato, and argumentation is a highly valued skill as reflected in the CCSS (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010) and other frameworks. Here we note that the term *argumentation* does not appear in the CCSS until grade 6 but, as a foundation, students in the earlier grades are asked to form and write opinions based on evidence and sources.

A key aspect of the CCSS is its focus on forming and writing opinions in the elementary grades. Second grade teacher Rebekah Lonon applies this concept by posing a question about which students can take a stance. Four options are provided, and each is posted in a corner of the room. Students move

to a corner to show their initial opinions about the topic. Once they have chosen a corner, they begin to discuss the reasoning for their choices. Because the groups can be large, Rebekah often encourages the students to meet in small groups (within their side of the opinion or argument) and share their thoughts. She also asks them to find supporting evidence to substantiate their opinions.

After discussion, students construct a solid opinion using evidence from sources, as well as a write-up that explains their thoughts as a group. The six-part opinion organizer (Lapp, Wolsey, & Wood, in press) shown in Figure 6 helps students think through their opinions and how they came to these. They complete each numbered square as they work their way through the process of forming a well-constructed opinion piece.

Once the opinions are constructed and have been rehearsed, each member of the group finds a member of the opposing group and they debate the relative merits of their opinions. This holds students accountable for the task and ensures that each student has an opportunity to share. Students then come together and discuss the topic as a whole group. This experience can be applied to all content areas. The steps found in Figure 6 will help you to initiate this practice in your class.

ReQuest

One additional strategy that supports the reading of a complex text and then engaging in collaborative conversations to address text-related questions identified by students is ReQuest (Manzo, 1969). ReQuest promotes discussion and deep engagement with the text. To understand how to implement ReQuest, please view the following video of Diane and a teacher colleague, Amy Miles, as they teach ReQuest to sixth graders during science instruction: www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxvRvWDvDt8.

As ReQuest and the other examples we have shared illustrate, conversation and collaboration improve the sense of community within school as students learn and achieve a sense of self as a learner and community member.

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Conclusion

In our work (e.g., Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Lapp, Shea, & Wolsey, 2011; Wood, Stover, & Kissel, 2013), we have found that students are very capable of building complex understanding of content and scaffolding each other's learning, especially when digital technologies foreground the cognitive work they do while interacting with each other and with academic and popular texts. Conversation enhances what students learn, remember, and comprehend about a topic or process. Effective conversations increase the engagement students have with learning tasks such as reading complex texts. After implementing the instructional approaches and techniques we have presented in this article, we believe the learning gains and engagement of your students will make your efforts seem very worthwhile.

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Figure 6
Six-part graphic organizer

Explain an opinion you have about this topic: Topic: My Final Opinion (complete this out last):	
1. My current position is:	2. What I think the position of others might be:
3. The response of others to my opinion could be:	4. My response to them is:
5. How do I know?	6. How has my opinion changed?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

THOMAS DEVERE WOLSEY teaches graduate courses in literacy at the University of Central Florida. E-mail him at tdwolsey@msn.com.

KAREN WOOD is a professor of reading education at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina. E-mail her at kdwood@uncc.edu.

DIANE LAPP is a distinguished professor of education in the Department of Teacher Education at San Diego State University, California. E-mail her at lapp@mail.sdsu.edu.

"What's New in Literacy Teaching?" is edited by:

KAREN WOOD (University of North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina)

JEANNE PARATORE (Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts)

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- Jolene Graham is a K–5 Reading Design Coach at Woodleaf Elementary School, Rowan-Salisbury Schools, North Carolina
- Rebekah Lonon teaches second grade for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina
- Lindsay Merritt teaches third grade at Hope Academy in Cabarrus County, North Carolina
- Amy Miles teaches sixth-grade science and English at Health Sciences Middle School, San Diego, CA

International Reading Association
800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139
Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA
www.reading.org