

High Level Discourse in the ELA Classroom

Analyzing and Assessing Author's Purpose

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Abstract: The aims of this manuscript are to analyze the definitions and practices of discourse as they exist in English language arts classrooms currently and to identify why sophisticated discourse is a necessary tool in assessments. Sophisticated discourse is the most efficient and impactful method for ELA educators to assess the ways in which their students are understanding author's purpose in complex pieces of literature. Sophisticated discourse is inclusive and does not discount any persons' ideas surrounding the text. It allows for educators to evaluate all students' understanding of complex ideas in a text more efficiently, and it prepares and encourages students to think more deeply about the literature and how to apply it to real life scenarios.

Introduction

Theodore Zeldin (1988), English philosopher and writer said, "Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards" (p. 14).

The use of discourse in high school classrooms, specifically English language arts (ELA) classrooms, is not uncommon. In fact, it is rare for an English classroom to not include conversation in regular practice—whether it is formal or casual. It is my belief that most educators would agree that discourse is a viable method to track student progress, using methods such as Socratic Seminar or Philosophical Chairs, for example. These activities are beneficial for students and teachers alike and are an ideal way for educators to introduce a higher level of thinking and conversation. Sophisticated discourse, which I have defined for the intent of this manuscript as high-level discussion that includes all members of the classroom and explores abstract ideas of the text, is a method that should be included in high school level ELA classrooms. This level of discourse is specifically beneficial when addressing literature and ideas and theories that go beyond what is stated in the text. This manuscript will highlight the particular benefit of using sophisticated discourse when analyzing author's intent. At the high school grade level, students are expected to begin thinking more abstractly rather than concretely. Sophisticated discourse should be included in all high school level classrooms because it promotes inclusive and diverse thinking, and it allows for teachers to assess their students on their understanding and progression of comprehending complex ideas rather than what they are expected to know based on what is stated directly in the text. It also equips students with skills that are necessary in higher level education and beyond. As educators, regardless of the content area, one thing holds true and this is that we carry the responsibility of making sure that the students with whom we interact become citizens of intellect—those in which are able to portray and explain important ideas, uphold truths, and

maintain new and unique ways of thinking. Sophisticated discourse that explores depth of literature allows for students to adopt these very ideas at a young age.

Sophisticated Discourse in the ELA Classroom: Analyzing and Assessing Author’s Purpose

As mentioned previously, sophisticated discourse includes the higher level of thinking and conversation that is necessary in order to bridge the gap from concrete ideas to those that are more abstract. This manuscript will include case studies and research that examines ways in which sophisticated discourse has been used as an effective and beneficial means of both assessment and instruction for students and teachers alike. For example, studying author’s intent is a necessary ELA content standard at the high school level and often requires a thorough amount of mentoring, practicing, and thinking in order for students to form a firm grasp of it and teachers to properly relay to students how and why this is important. Using this higher level of discourse should be done frequently in high school classrooms not only to increase student participation and understanding of literature, but also to assist teachers in their assessment of standards involving literature.

According to the research that has been examined for this manuscript, utilizing high level discourse in ELA classrooms allows for students to obtain an ability to think epistemically, which further allows them to acquire skills necessary for formal conversation and/or writing.

Inclusivity and Classroom Culture

Providing an inclusive and positive environment for your students to thrive in is crucial. Creating a classroom where professional and complex discussions are had in regular instruction time, in addition to assessments, is an excellent way to establish this precedent for students. It is important to note that sophisticated discourse in its nature is not exclusive—it is incredibly inclusive as it emphasizes diverse ideas and promotes the understanding that each individual reads and, in turn, may understand the text differently. Lloyd et al.’s (2016) vignette. Although an example from an elementary level demonstrates that even younger students are able to think more complexly when presented with a semi-casual approach to discussion.

Grasping copies of the book, *Across Five Aprils*, a fifth-grade teacher and six of her students gather at a round table in the back of the classroom. Responding to the teacher’s utterance, ‘Are these not the most exciting two chapters? Tell me in your own words what happened!’ A student says, ‘My favorite part was...’ to which the teacher responds, ‘Hah! Why was that important?’ Without further teacher prompting, other students add to the conversation, looking intently at one another as they acknowledge and expand on each other’s comments. At one point the teacher interjects, ‘What events happened before this that led you to believe this would be the outcome?’ Again, without additional teacher direction, the students converse on topic. Listening intently, the teacher comments, ‘I would never have dreamed that he would get a letter back! I was

shocked. Were you?’ Repeatedly, each student, independent of the teacher, contributes to the lively conversation. (Lloyd, et al).

The students were comfortable explaining their ideas and thoughts on the story when there was not as much pressure for expectation. The teacher did not ask for a correct answer, but rather they asked the students to explain in their own words and explain why they thought this was important. Walker (2019) describes research on the relation of classroom participation and inclusion in her dissertation on the philosophy of patterns in classroom discourse, “Extant research highlights the relationship between student participation, learning, and inclusion (Shepherd, 2014; Van Es et al., 2017; Wager, 2014 as noted in Walker 2019). Wager (2014) in her descriptive analysis of equitable pedagogy and student participation notes that “as teachers provide access for children to participate, they are providing access to learning, both of which are essential to processes of educational inclusion in the classroom.” (as noted in Walker, 2019, p. 313). The more access that students feel and truly believe that they have to the ability to share their ideas, the more likely they are to feel comfort in participating in the classroom. The sharing of ideas is a community building concept that tends to spread like wildfire among students the more that it is modeled and practiced—and ultimately can end up being the most viable way to assess students on their ability to think complexly about literature.

It is important to note as well when considering an inclusive method of assessing that the author’s purpose is extremely subjective. Each student may (and likely will) perceive the text totally differently than the next. There is not a right or wrong answer in the discovery and analysis of the intent in which a story is written. The wider the variety of ideas that are brought to the, the more opportunity for a rich classroom environment.

Assessing students on understanding rather than expectation

Up to the point of high school in their education, students have been tested and assessed on knowledge in a variety of ways, but primarily by focusing on the content at face value. While this component is, of course, important for comprehension, it is just the tip of the iceberg that will reveal a whole upper echelon of learning for students at this level. Rather than reading for comprehension or content, students will use sophisticated discourse understand more abstract ideas surrounding the text, namely author’s purpose. This is important for students and teachers alike because it encourages thought-provoking and breakthrough discoveries while allowing educators to gauge students’ ability to think critically.

According to Hadley, et al. (2021), there are several steps that educators must take in order to make for a successful discussion for assessment.

Joughlin (1998), in a review of the literature on assessment practices related to oral discourse, identified four areas to guide instructors in evaluating student performance: (a) knowledge and understanding (e.g., recall of basic concepts, facts, and principles), (b) applied problem-solving ability (e.g., application of the knowledge base in derived scenarios), (c) interpersonal competence (e.g., communication abilities), and (d) intrapersonal qualities (e.g., self awareness, poise) (p. 1).

These components are all essential building blocks and should be included in the modeling and instructing of students when helping them understand complex discourse. Educators must not neglect to include plenty of preparation and models for students while planning lessons that introduce and eventually practice sophisticated discourse. As we grow older, become more educated or, in general, develop intellectually, higher thinking becomes second nature. However, students up to this point (from ninth grade and up) may not yet have experienced these deeper and more meaningful conversations in the classrooms.

Discussing the author's intent on an abstract level in assessment exercises, like the Socratic seminar, will allow not only for students to become more comfortable sharing their ideas, but will also allow for students to expand their writing capabilities. This is illustrated in an article by Ian Barnard (2011) of California State University. Barnard writes:

When a colleague and I met with a student recently as part of a capstone interview with the student, we paradigmatically suggested to one another beforehand that we begin the discussion of the student's writing by asking the student 'what were you trying to say?' The assumption seems to be that if we can get to intent, we can get to all the other issues and/or problems around a particular piece of student writing, and that we can do so by preserving the student's 'voice' (p. 3).

Barnard is using this anecdote to illustrate the importance of teaching and understanding intent in literature in order for students to understand the importance of stance and voice in their own writing. This idea of epistemology and allowing students access to their most powerful, thoughtful, and unique voices is applicable not only in the classroom in reading and writing, but beyond.

Application in higher education and the “real world”

It goes without saying that a large and general goal for most educators is to equip their students with all of the necessary tools that they need in order to be successful should they go on to college, or just in life as a whole. The skill of conversing includes comprehension of words and ideas at a level that goes much further than the surface and is one that is necessary for success. The most interesting aspect of higher level, sophisticated discourse, is that it is transferable from content area to content area. For instance, Griswold, et al. (2017) evaluated the Socratic seminar as a means of measuring students' ability to discuss scientific data. He notes, “During a Socratic seminar, students can talk about, reason through, and socially construct the meaning of data through collaborative dialogue. Socratic seminars are foundational to Paideia methods of instruction and are most commonly used with text, not data” (Griswold, et al. 2017, p. 492). This idea that discussion can be used from classroom to classroom, concept to concept, etc., is interesting and thus leads us to conclude that it must, in fact, be quite important in life beyond the twelfth grade.

Conclusion

The overarching idea in all of these findings is that discourse is important in the high school classroom. This, of course, goes without saying and many would not disagree. However, it is in fact the intricate details of the discussion and the consistency with which this sophisticated discourse is performed that makes it so important. By implementing a higher level of thinking and discussion in regular classroom time, students will become more comfortable, and far more likely to engage and share their thoughts. Additionally, students who are able to share their thoughts about and understand the importance of author's intent will be better equipped in their abilities to compose their own writing. Using this method of discourse will encourage students to add depth to their thoughts and will provide them with a means of authorizing their own intent and ideas on texts and in writing.

Sophisticated discourse goes beyond the discussion of literature as it can be used throughout the rest of a student's life. The ability to express important ideas about theory, philosophy, art, language, and so on will allow for students to ease into higher level education and will provide them with a formal way of conversing that they may carry with them throughout their professional lives. As English language arts teachers, we must include sophisticated discourse in our classrooms regularly, specifically when we address intent so that our students understand the importance of translating abstract thinking into powerful words and use this way of thinking to shape their own writing and discussions throughout the rest of their academic and professional careers.

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**About the Author**

Anna Warner is an adolescent young adult English language arts teacher and will be teaching at St. Ursula Academy the 2022-2023 school year. She currently holds a bachelor's degree in English with a concentration in creative writing and a master's degree of education. She is particularly interested in using discourse in the classroom as a way to promote a positive environment.