

Different Approaches to Literacy Discussions

Summary: There are many different ways to have class discussions about text. In an article for the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, researchers from Penn State, Ohio State and the University of Oklahoma report on a meta-analysis which revealed the impact different types of class discussions had on different types of students' reading comprehension.

Practical Applications

The authors distinguish between three types of discussion approaches:

- *Critical-Analytic:* These include Collaborative Reading, Paideia Seminar and Philosophy For Children, these approaches have the goal of “querying and interrogating” arguments and evidence from the text.
- *Efferent (Text-Focused):* These include Instructional Conversations, Junior Great Book Shared Inquiry and Questioning the Author, and have the primary goal of “searching the text for information.”
- *Expressive:* These include Book Club, Grand Conversations and Literature Circles and encourages “students to live through the text” and gives prominence to emotions.

(I encourage you to search for information on the specific techniques if they are unfamiliar).

By looking at dozens of studies that analyzed the impact of these approaches, the authors found:

- Nearly every approach was successful at increasing student talk and lowering teacher talk (with the exception of Questioning the Author, which is a more teacher-led strategy).
- Critical-Analytic approaches did in fact have a significant effect on critical thinking, reasoning and argumentation skills.
- Efferent approaches had a very strong impact on students' general and text-explicit (literal) reading comprehension skills. This impact was particularly pronounced for low-income and minority students.
- Expressive approaches, Literature Circles in particular, had their strongest impact on text-implicit (i.e. inferential) reading comprehension. There was less robust data on the Expressive approaches than the other two categories.
- Broadly speaking, there appears to be a “ceiling effect” on student outcomes from using the same discussion approach for more than 6 months in a row; in other words, past that time, students stop gaining a significant amount of benefit.

Conclusion and Citation

The authors conclude that teachers should be strategic when choosing an approach for a given class discussion: “Given the powerful influence of the type of approach in influencing student comprehension, it seems particularly important that practicing educators pay careful attention to the goals of the approach. In the end, not all of the classroom discussion approaches have the same goals nor result in the same kinds of effects.”

Murphy, P., et. al. “Examining the Effects of Classroom Discussion on Students' Comprehension of Text: A Meta-Analysis.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101.3 (2009), pp. 740-764. <http://tinyurl.com/3kj2w6v> (subscription only).