

A BALANCING ACT:  
NEGOTIATING THE TEACHER ROLES OF INSTRUCTOR AND PARTICIPANT  
DURING A HIGH SCHOOL LITERATURE DISCUSSION UNIT

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by  
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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Research Problem and Rationale for the Study**

I began my teaching career as an English teacher at Willard High School in southwest Missouri. I learned a lot about myself and my teaching philosophy during my six years there. In my last two years teaching high school, I implemented literature discussion into the curriculum and discovered that my students enjoyed reading American literature more when they chose the book they wanted to read from the four or five choices I provided. Choice, coupled with a small group discussion, provided my students the environment to talk about books in a new and different way. They assumed ownership of their learning because they were responsible for generating comments and questions for thoughtful discussion and helping their group members make sense of the text.

Conducting a pilot study was a requirement for my Qualitative Research Methods II class. I had not made up my mind about my dissertation research, but I hoped my pilot study would lead me in the right direction. I had a graduate class with Roosevelt High School reading teacher Molly Adams and learned that she did a literature discussion unit with her students during the spring semester. I asked if I could study one of her discussion groups, and she graciously invited me into her classroom. My original research question focused on how the students in the group help each other make sense of the text. However, as the study continued, I became more interested in how Molly participated in the discussion group. I wondered how her students, struggling readers, influenced her teaching decisions. As I observed Molly, I remembered all of the

questions and frustrations I had when I implemented literature discussion into my curriculum.

My pilot study was a small glimpse into the new questions I had formed during the research process. The pilot convinced me to delve deeper into these questions in an effort to know more about how teachers negotiate their roles as an instructor and participant during a literature discussion group unit. I found few publications addressing what literature discussion looks like in the high school English classroom, specifically those focusing on the teacher's role, so my study contributes to secondary teachers' understanding of the reading instructional strategy. Additionally, my research offers suggestions for teacher education programs as well as further studies that will continue the discussion of why literature discussion is important and how it can fit into high school curricula that are generally focused on meeting state content standards as opposed to providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful, productive talk about literature.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

There is a wide body of research that supports the idea of a social learning environment as critical to students' academic success. The work of Bakhtin (1981), Barnes (1992), Dewey (1924), and Vygotsky (1933/1978) suggests that when students are given opportunities to converse about their learning, each person's ideas contributes to a greater insight of the concept than if he or she attempted to comprehend it alone. The variety of backgrounds and perspectives of all members leads to a co-construction of knowledge, thus enhancing the students' overall understanding.

Literature discussion provides students the chance to offer their own thoughts, opinions, and views about a text. They are free to respond to the literature using their personal, cultural, and academic backgrounds. However, reader-response theorists did not always agree with this relationship between the reader and the text. In the 1950s, theorists Gibson (1980) and Prince (1980) believed there was a right and wrong interpretation of the work, and the reader's own experiences were not a factor in understanding the text's message. However, the thinking about reader-response theory changed over time. Originally proposed by Louise Rosenblatt, the reader's role was brought into focus. She suggested all readers bring their own perspectives to a text. The transaction (Rosenblatt, 2005a) between the reader and the author results in meaning making. My study most closely aligns with Rosenblatt's view of reader-response. In literature discussion, students are expected to offer their own thoughts, comments, and questions about the text to the other group members so that each person can learn from the varied responses and come away from the conversation with a greater understanding of the text.

More recently, Scholes (1985, 2001), Probst (1992, 1998), Langer (1992, 1995, 2002), and Appleman (2000) have contributed to teachers' understandings of reader-response theory. They recognize in today's classrooms, teachers are looking for ways to help their students connect to and interpret literature. In literature discussion, teachers offer students book choices related to a larger unit goal. In my study, one teacher chose books her students could relate to and used them as an outlet for her students to express themselves and their thoughts about the world. Two of the teachers chose books that fit within the History curriculum of their team-taught World Studies class. The teachers'

text selection influenced the content of the students' talk and raises questions about how teachers incorporate literature discussion into their curriculum.

Many researchers have laid classroom talk as the foundation for literature discussion groups (Barnes, 1992; Barnes & Todd, 1995; Daniels, 2002; Gilles, 1993; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Short & Pierce, 1990; Wells, 1999). Exploratory talk, characterized by Barnes (1992) as that which has "frequent hesitations, rephrasings, false starts, and changes of direction," (p. 28) is an avenue for students to try out and develop their thoughts about a text, and the supportive social environment of a small group encourages students to share ideas and understandings. The knowledge of the whole surpasses the knowledge of the individual, thus leading to a richer meaning making experience.

Since the 1990s, the benefits of literature discussion have been written about in books and professional journal articles. Researchers (Daniels, 1994; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 1993; Short & Pierce, 1990) agree literature discussion works because students have the opportunity to select a real book from those carefully chosen by their teacher to spark good discussion. Students engage and actively participate in their own learning. I found a few recent research studies (Berne & Clark, 2006; Carico, 2001; Casey, 2008/2009; Clarke, 2007) that show the power of literature discussion in middle and high school classrooms when it is implemented as it was developed as a reading instructional strategy in the 1990s. However, this study also looks at literature discussion units that do not have the theoretical foundation originally explained by literacy researchers and discusses how the teachers' instructional decisions affect the students' overall success in making meaning of the text during their conversations.

The role of the teacher in literature discussion groups is paramount to their success. Students are more likely to engage in productive and successful literature discussions if their teachers create a supportive learning environment where all ideas and opinions are heard (Barnes, 2008; Short, 1990). Many students have never been taught how to participate in a productive discussion, so the teacher must model appropriate conversation behaviors to ensure the discussions are meaningful for the students.

After these expectations have been set, teachers have to find the balance between their roles as instructors and group participants. Teachers may choose to scaffold their students' learning and ask questions to help them think deeply about the text (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Langer, 1992; O'Flahavan, 1994/1995; Vygotsky, 1978). However, they have to be aware of providing too much assistance or asking surface level questions instead of those that will promote fruitful discussion (Hardman, 2008; Hynds, 1992). Ultimately, teachers need to realize that giving up some of the control typically held by them in classroom may allow their students to grow and learn together.

Literature discussion provides students the environment and structure necessary to engage in conversation. Talking about a book that all members choose to read allows students to co-construct the meaning of a text. Struggling readers often have a difficult time comprehending what they read, and because reading is usually an isolated activity, they have no one to help them make sense of the text (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Thus, they often become frustrated. Literature discussion groups often transform the way striving readers tackle text; the small group becomes the place where students can pose questions and seek answers. Average and gifted readers benefit from literature discussion as well (Daniels, 2002; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Reis et al., 2004; Woods,

2008). In order to develop critical thinking skills, they need others to push their thinking. Discussing a text with others encourages them to defend their ideas. They may also be challenged to rethink and negotiate the meanings they have created from reading the text individually.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study serves two purposes. The first is to better understand why and how literature discussion is implemented in the high school English classroom. I studied three teachers who educate students of diverse reading abilities to see how their literature discussion units unfolded. I have worked with many secondary English teachers, and most of them do not incorporate literature discussion into their curriculum at all. So, I wanted to know why these three teachers made time for it in their school year and how they structured the unit to fit the academic goals they set for their students. Two of the teachers aligned literature discussion with the History curriculum and the other used it to introduce a variety of young adult novels to her students. More needs to be known about when literature discussion fits best in a high school English curriculum and how it can benefit students' understanding of literature.

The second purpose the study serves is to provide more information about how literature discussion as a reading instructional strategy can work in the secondary classroom. Elementary teachers have known about and incorporated literature discussion into their curriculum for years. However, high school classrooms tend to focus more on covering content using anthologies and whole-class reads rather than giving students the opportunity to talk about what they're learning by using a variety of teacher-selected texts. By observing three teachers' literature discussion groups, we learn more about the

decisions they make both as instructors and group participants as well as the classroom environment needed for students to be successful during the unit. These teachers help us think about when to step in and out of students' conversations and how to create instructional materials that will aid them in their understanding of a text.

### **The Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What type of environment is needed for students to maximize the meaning they construct from a text?
2. How do selected teachers negotiate their roles in a literature discussion group?
3. What instructional decisions do selected teachers make to help their students construct meaning from a text?

### **Procedures**

In order to answer these questions, I conducted a naturalistic, qualitative inquiry. Over the course of four months (February through May), I observed three teachers in two different high schools implement a literature discussion unit. I conducted teacher and student interviews, digitally recorded the conversations of one literature group in each classroom, and collected teacher and student artifacts for data analysis. My initial analysis of the data included expanding my observational field notes, writing in my reflexive journal, and creating data briefs after listening to my audio files (Gilles, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Then, I purposefully transcribed portions of the literature discussions that directly related to my research questions and coded them using content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the second phase of my analysis, I applied Barnes and Todd's (1995) terms for discourse moves to aid in my understanding of how the teacher and students' social comments affected their cognitive processes. Additionally, I

used conversational analysis to clarify how the group functioned as a unit, paying special attention to overlaps and latches (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998).

I designed several features to ensure ethical research. I received permission to conduct my study both from the Parkview Public School District as well as the principals at Valley Oak and Roosevelt High Schools. I also received IRB approval from the University of Missouri. All teachers, as well as students and their parents/guardians, signed letters giving permission for their participation in the study. I maintained confidentiality throughout; all student names and places have been changed to protect anonymity. Each teacher had the opportunity to member check his or her chapter of the dissertation and offer a formal written response and/or general feedback, which I included in my Appendix. Finally, I shared my evolving findings with peers and colleagues and modified my text based on their feedback.

### **Methodological Limitations**

There are several methodological limitations to this research. First, all three teacher participants only incorporated one literature discussion unit into the semester I collected data. Therefore, the amount of time I spent in each classroom depended on the length of the teachers' unit. Although I was present for each of the discussions of the groups I studied, because the number of days the groups had to discuss varied, I only got to spend three to six class periods with the students. Second, because two of the teachers decided to have all of their literature discussion groups meet at one time, I could just observe one group in order to digitally record their discussions and keep observational notes. The third teacher decided to have her group meet on different days, but in order to maintain consistency, I observed one of her groups as well. As a result, other groups may

have provided very different conversations as well as different teacher interactions. Finally, this study took place in a suburban city, and all three teachers were Caucasian. Thus, the results are specific to these particular teachers.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is broken down into eight chapters. Chapter One provided a brief overview of the research. It explained the research problem and rationale for the study as well as the most significant theoretical underpinnings. Additionally, Chapter One included the purpose of the study, the research questions, my procedures, and methodological limitations. Chapter Two provides an in-depth review of the literature and theory that influenced this study. It addresses constructivism, as well as reader-response theory, literature discussion groups, the teacher's role in literature discussion, and readers of diverse abilities. Chapter Three explains my approach and the procedures I used to conduct this qualitative research study. It includes my research design, a description of the participants and sites, as well as an explanation of my approval procedures. In addition, Chapter Three outlines my data sources and data collection procedures, initial and in-depth analysis procedures, and the steps I took to ensure the study's trustworthiness. Chapters Four, Five, and Six are narratives of the three teachers involved in this study. I offer both findings and discussion in each of these chapters as they relate to the teachers' classroom environment, the roles they played as participants in the literature discussions, and the instructional decisions they made during the unit. Chapter Seven provides a comparison and contrast of the teachers and how each of them understood and implemented literature discussion differently. Chapter Eight presents my

conclusions and interpretations as well as implications for the classroom, teacher education, and further research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter outlines the theoretical lens under which I am operating as well as the substantive constructs that frame my study. These include: 1) reader-response theory, 2) literature discussion groups, 3) the teacher's role in literature discussion, and 4) readers of diverse abilities.

### Theoretical Lens

According to Douglas Barnes (2008), the heart of the view of learning known as constructivism “is that each of us can only learn by making sense of what happens to us in the course of actively constructing a world for ourselves” (p. 3). When we construct meaning, we integrate new information into our existing knowledge. Barnes (2008) calls this “working on understanding” (p. 4) and suggests a social supportive environment is necessary for meaningful learning to occur. Edwards and Mercer's (1987) term *common knowledge* refers to the belief that constructing knowledge is a social process; this idea supported the work of theorists Vygotsky and Dewey.

Vygotsky's (1933/1978) social constructivist theory states social experiences shape the way we think and interpret the world. Therefore, the group is vital to the learning process because the individual knowledge of the parts leads to the collective knowledge of the whole. According to Liu & Matthews (2005), “The mind is not seen as autonomous from the social cultural group” (p. 392). More knowledgeable peers and adults jointly construct this knowledge through language (Vygotsky, 1933/1978). Dewey's (1924) writing suggests new discoveries emerge when they are co-authored by individuals in a social environment. This environment “forms the mental and emotional

disposition of behavior in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses, that have certain purposes and entail certain consequences” (Dewey, 1924, p. 19). In literature discussion, students have to negotiate their position in the activity of conversation by defending their ideas and convincing others of their thoughts. As a result, the social interaction helps students conceptualize ideas.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic theory also supports group conversation. Bakhtin (1981) believed that it is impossible to separate the individual from the community. We have been members of various communities our entire lives, and our conversations and experiences in these communities have shaped us into who we are. Holquist (1990), an interpreter of Bakhtin’s work, writes, “A dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two. It is the relation that is most important of the three, for without it the other two would have no meaning” (p. 38). Literature discussions are a specific social scenario where students bring their personal, cultural, and academic knowledge. Their speech, in combination with the author’s text and teacher’s words, provide a rich and varied context for learning.

Bakhtin thought that readers made meaning when they “incorporate[d] writers’ utterances into their own internal dialogue; these internal dialogues then become part of the external, social dialogue” (Sloan, 2002, p. 25-26). It is the tension between the internal, or personal, and the external, or social, that stimulates intellectual growth (Watson, 1993). When students are given the opportunity to participate in a literature discussion where different perspectives of a reading are shared, they are encouraged to think and reflect on their own ideas coupled with those of others, resulting in a greater understanding of the text.

## **Substantive Constructs**

### **Reader-response theory.**

#### *Reader-response theory timeline.*

Tompkins (1980) suggests that reader-response theory addresses the question of where meaning lies. From the late 1930s into the 50s, most reader-response theorists believed that meaning could only be found in the text and that one needed special training to locate it. However, the thinking about reader-response changed in the mid 1970s when theorists claimed that meaning was dependent on the reader and text. The one exception to this chronological rule was Louise Rosenblatt, the most recognizable name associated with this theory. In *Literature as Exploration*, originally published in 1938, Rosenblatt acknowledged that the reader “interprets the book or poem in terms of his fund of past experiences” (p. 107). These experiences, along with the author’s words, create a “full interplay between book and reader, and hence a complete and rewarding literary experience” (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 107). Clearly, Rosenblatt was ahead of her time in considering the reader’s role in making meaning from a text when we compare her beliefs to those of early reader-response theorists. Even so, it is helpful to trace reader-response theory from the 1950s through the 1970s to understand how thinking about meaning making has changed.

Although the views of how readers respond to text vary, each theoretical perspective addresses the relationship between the reader, text, and context (Beach, 1993). Beach (1993) discusses five different reader-response perspectives: textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural (p. 8). Although his categories seem to align with the chronological order of the various reader-response theories, this is not

always the case. Some, like Gibson and Prince, can clearly be categorized as textual theorists, those who “focus on how readers draw on and deploy their knowledge of text or genre conventions to respond to specific text features” (Beach, 1993, p. 8). According to Tompkins (1980), they believed that “literary meaning resides in the language of the text” (p. xiii). A reader’s knowledge of a text’s elements of fiction is paramount, and the goal of reading is to seek the right answer, or truth, from the text. Gibson (1980) discussed the “mock reader,” the “mask and costume the individual takes on to experience the language” (p. 2). Gibson did not make room for the “real” reader’s experiences in making meaning from a text. Prince (1980) thought it was the narratee’s job to interpret the narrator’s “series of signals” (p. 24) if he or she was to acquire a deep understanding of the text.

Similar to Gibson and Prince, Riffaterre and Poulet believed that the meaning of a text came from the author’s words rather than the reader’s perceptions. Michael Riffaterre said that a reader’s response should be accounted for, but that “meaning is a property of the language itself and not of any activities the reader performs” (in Tompkins, 1980, p. xiii). Georges Poulet (1980) moved one step further from Riffaterre and claimed that a reader had power before he or she opened the book. However, he thought that the reader’s response to a text was the result of being “dependent on the [author’s] consciousness” (p. 43). In other words, the reader’s response came from being immersed into the author’s portrayal of the world, not from his or her own personal response to the text.

However, Iser’s work brought the reader’s role into focus. Iser (1980) thought that “the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence” (p. 50).

Beach (1993) refers to this perspective as psychological because of the “focus on readers’ cognitive or subconscious processes and how these processes vary according to both unique individual personality and developmental level” (p. 8). According to Iser (1980), the reader’s responsibility was to realize the implications in the text and couple those with the author’s written words to make meaning. This “implied reader” fills in the gaps and discovers the “unformulated” (p. 68). Because these gaps vary depending on the reader’s imagination, “one text is potentially capable of several different realizations” (Iser, 1980, p. 55). In other words, the reader had to work with the text to create meaning. Fish’s theory about reader-response was similar to Iser’s but different in one key aspect.

Like Iser, Fish (1980) thought that the reader interacted with the text; however, he or she did so as “*an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time*” (p. 73, italics in original) rather than generally. Fish viewed literature as an experience that could change every time a reader picked up a text. The “sequence of events that unfold within the reader’s mind” (Tompkins, 1980, p. xvi-xvii) page by page creates the text’s meaning. The act of reading is a relationship between the reader and author every step of the way, and no two readings are ever the same because the life experiences the reader brings to the text are dynamic. Furthermore, Fish’s notion of the “interpretive community” suggests a social perspective (Beach, 1993). In this type of group, readers “share certain strategies and conventions valued by the group” (Beach, 1993, p. 106). So, the reader’s understanding of the text is enhanced by those with whom he or she discusses.

In stark contrast to Gibson and Prince's thinking in the 1950s, some reader-response theorists in the 1970s believed meaning lies almost entirely with the reader. Holland (1980) called readers' life experiences "identity themes" and believed that responding to literature was a highly personal journey. Readers are free to interpret the text in whatever way they see fit. Bleich (1980), too, thought that readers' emotional response was key to their interpretation of the text, but this was only subjective, not a form of knowledge. In order for one's response to assume this form, he or she must belong to a "community of interpreters" (Tompkins, 1980, p. xxi). He wanted to put the power of knowledge into the hands of those who were seeking it instead of those who were deemed authorities, like teachers or institutions. Bleich gave students the ownership of their reading rather than those who were considered experts.

Each one of us brings personal, social, and cultural contexts to our reading, thus making the same text slightly different for every person who encounters it. Readers' interactions with the text allow them to make their own unique meaning. Rosenblatt's (2005a) complex way of thinking about reading challenges us to rethink the way we approach and teach literature. According to Rosenblatt, people who *only* seek the right answer or lessons to be learned from their literature are missing the point. Reading is something to be experienced. A writer suggests the message he or she intends, and readers interpret whatever they can as they call on previous experiences, prior background, and expectations to create meaning. This transaction is "two-way relationship" (Rosenblatt, 1980, p. 387) between the reader and text that results in meaning making. Rosenblatt (2005a) called this transaction, the "coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and text," (p. 29) the poem. The poem is "the experience

shaped by the reader under the guidance of text” (Rosenblatt, 2005a, p. 29), and it changes if any of the contexts surrounding the reading experience are different.

Rosenblatt (1980) noted that the “matter of the reader’s focus of attention during reading is of paramount importance” (p. 387). The reader’s purpose determines how he or she will read a text. Rosenblatt used the terms efferent and aesthetic to refer to two ends of a continuum of reading. During efferent reading, “the reader’s attention is focused primarily on what is to be carried away, retained *after* the reading event” (Rosenblatt, 1980, p. 387). In contrast, aesthetic reading “fuse[s] the cognitive and affective elements of consciousness—sensations, images, feelings, ideas—into a personally lived-through poem or story” (Rosenblatt, 1980, p. 388). Rosenblatt believed that both ways of reading have a place in the classroom and that students continuously move along an efferent—aesthetic continuum when they read. The location of a reader on the continuum depends on his or her purpose for reading the text.

Rosenblatt (2005b) encouraged teachers to provide opportunities for both efferent and aesthetic reading. Texts can be used to teach students about grammar, skills, and facts. But students must also be given the time to think about their individual responses to literature and then even more time to talk about their readings with people who bring different contexts to the discussion. The joy of reading the same words as someone else is the opportunity to share our reactions with someone who might have approached the same text from an alternative perspective.

### ***Recent research on reader-response theory.***

Robert Probst’s thoughts about reader-response are similar to Rosenblatt’s. He wonders why we mainly focus on the conventions of a text when our students are not

likely to be literary scholars. It is important that students understand “how texts work upon them” (Probst, 1992, p. 69), and knowing about texts is the best way to achieve this. However, reading for meaning moves beyond knowing about texts. Probst (1988) believes that when readers have the chance to see themselves in what they read, they have a “personal investment in the experience” (p. 23). As they reflect on their thoughts and emotions, meaning is made. This action when reading allows students to “remake” (p. 24) themselves as they read. Their ideas are corroborated or challenged, and in the process, they grow intellectually. Probst’s (1988) main point is that students must be “active and responsible” (p. 24). When teachers tell students what they should know about a text, they “ignore the limitless variability of the human experience” (Probst, 1992, p. 59). Students should have the opportunity to create their own meaning. However, Probst acknowledges the importance of the teacher. Sometimes students make simple errors when they read, and these should be addressed and corrected. Looking closely at text conventions helps teachers clarify their students’ misunderstandings.

Like Probst, Robert Scholes (1985) views reader-response from a teacher’s perspective. One of Scholes’s main research interests is how teachers use literary theory to teach English. Similar to other recent reader-response theorists, Scholes (1985) believes “Our job is *not* to intimidate students with our own superior textual production; it is to show them the codes upon which all textual production depends, and to encourage their own textual practice” (p. 24-25, italics in original). The responsibility a teacher has to his or her students is to teach them how to read, interpret, and criticize literature. Ideally, according to Scholes, the reader is able to process a text without confusion. However, when the text presents the reader difficulty, the reader shifts from processing

the text to interpreting it. Readers interpret the text for meaning. The final step is criticizing, “producing text against text” (p. 24). When readers are able to discuss a text in more than one context, they criticize. Scholes says these contexts can be literary, verbal, or social. Moving through the entire process gives readers *textual power*. Teaching this process provides teachers the opportunity to “help students to recognize the power texts have over them and assist the same students in obtaining a measure of control over textual processes...” (p. 39). Students do not have to be passive readers of texts; rather, they can learn how to read them critically and gain confidence by sharing their views. In a more recent publication, Scholes (2001) further explains how educators can teach their students to learn the craft of reading, thereby improving students’ ability to read and interpret a variety of texts.

Judith A. Langer (1995) believes readers’ understanding changes as they move through a text. She uses the term *envisionment* to refer to “text-worlds in the mind, and they differ from individual to individual” (p. 9). Envisionments are understandings of the world shaped by a person’s personal and cultural experiences. According to Langer (1992), the goal of literacy instruction should not be “the bits of information that appeared in the text, but [readers’] final envisionments—the text-world they have constructed” (p. 39). Envisionments are built when students have the opportunity to express and share their thoughts and feelings. Answering text-based questions “do not reflect the envisionment-building process the student has gone through” (Langer, 1992, p. 40). In order for students to truly make meaning from a text, they must be given the opportunity to participate in activities that provide them the chance to think about themselves and the world in a new way. According to Langer (1995), “Teaching and

learning environments that regard students as lifelong envisionment builders legitimate students as thinkers in their classrooms and unhesitatingly invite them to further develop their understandings” (p. 57). Allowing students to respond to literature in meaningful ways promotes their understanding of a text.

Langer reiterates her support of a social learning environment in her book *Effective Literacy Instruction*. This publication is the result of a five-year study of classes in twenty-five schools that attempted to improve student learning. Langer (2002) defines effective teachers as those whose “students are learning to write, talk about, and extract meaning from knowledge and experience in the ways that school, work, and life demand in the twenty-first century” (p. 1). One of Langer’s major findings was that the classrooms of effective teachers “are organized to foster collaboration and cogitation, helping students hear and weigh ideas and perspectives, become inquisitive and reflective, and learn with and from each other” (p. 40). These teachers gave their students the opportunity to participate regularly in small group discussions, including literature circles and peer writing groups. Langer (2002) discovered that the collaborative environment provided support for students’ learning and understanding of a variety of literacy activities.

Deborah Appleman’s (2000) book, *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*, suggests high school students are capable of using literary theory, generally reserved for college-level English classes, to make sense of text. Chapter Three, entitled “The Lens of Reader Response: The Promise and Peril of Response-Based Pedagogy,” champions the teaching of reader-response theory to high school students but also warns teachers of limiting its scope simply to students’ personal

reaction to the text rather than a transaction between the text and the reader. Appleman (2000) believes reader-response theory helped teachers focus on the reader, thereby changing the texts they chose to teach and what they asked their students to do with the text.

However, teachers who present reader-response theory only as a means of connecting with a text personally may narrow their students' attempts to make meaning. For example, in the quest to select literature that "in provocative ways provide matches between our students' world and the worlds of the characters" (p. 43), students may find the text difficult to talk about because it's too close to reality. Other students may claim they can find no meaning in the text if the story doesn't directly apply to them in some way. According to Appleman (2000), one of our goals as English teachers should be to provide our students with stories whose characters lead lives very different from their own so they can learn from others' experiences. To create this learning opportunity in classrooms, Appleman (2000) recommends teachers situate reader-response theory "within a multiple perspective approach" (p. 52) so students can find meaning in other ways. Other perspectives teachers might consider teaching their students are the Marxist lens, the feminist lens, and the historical/biographical lens (Appleman, 2000). Students who approach meaning making using a variety of literary theories have more opportunities to make sense of a text than if they only applied reader-response theory.

### ***Summary of reader-response theory.***

The views about how readers respond to text have changed from the 1930s to today. In the 1950s, theorists Gibson (1980) and Prince (1980) believed a reader made meaning from a text simply by reading the author's words. There was a right and wrong

interpretation of the work, and the reader's own experiences were not a factor in understanding the text's message. However, the thinking about reader-response theory developed over time. Originally proposed by Louise Rosenblatt, and supported by theorists Iser (1980) and Fish (1980), the reader's role was brought into focus. All readers bring their own perspectives to a text, and meaning is made when they couple their experiences with the written work. The transaction (Rosenblatt, 2005a) between the reader and the author results in meaning making. Some (Bleich, 1980; Holland, 1980) suggest a text's meaning lies almost entirely with the reader and that these interpretations do not have to be supported by the author's words.

More recently, Scholes (1985, 2001), Probst (1992, 1988), Langer (1992, 1995, 2002), and Appleman (2000) have contributed to teachers' understanding of reader-response theory. They recognize in today's modern classroom, teachers are looking for ways to help their students connect to literature. Teachers are choosing books children can relate to and are encouraging their students to use these books as an outlet to learn more about themselves and the world. The readers' experiences and interests are a factor in meaning making. Teachers are selecting real books for their students to read to promote the love for reading as well as to provide a text that sparks discussion.

### **Literature discussion groups.**

#### ***Classroom talk.***

Research highlights the importance of talk in the classroom as an avenue for students to make sense of and better understand texts (Barnes, 1992; Barnes & Todd, 1995; Berne & Clark, 2006; Carico, 2001; Clarke, 2007; Daniels, 2002; Gilles, 1993; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Short & Pierce, 1990). Educators who use

literature discussion in their classrooms know that when they give students the time and opportunity to discuss their thoughts and viewpoints about a text in class, they learn from one another and create a deeper meaning of the literature than if they were to read it with no social interaction (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). Saying our thoughts aloud encourages others to react, respond, and question. New perspectives are introduced because everyone has a different lived experience. Our ideas are corroborated and challenged, reaffirmed and changed.

Barnes and Todd (1995) investigated the connection between talk and learning in their book *Communication and Learning Revisited: Making Meaning through Talk*. The “‘reconstruction’ [of a person’s knowledge] in the light of new evidence is at the center of learning” (p. 11). Before students enter into a small group discussion, they have an understanding of the material based on their own interpretations and experiences. But the most important learning takes place when students’ conceptions are modified as a result of the opportunity to talk. Barnes and Todd (1995) write, “Talk is flexible: in talk [students] can try out new ways of thinking and reshape an idea in mid-sentence, respond immediately to the hints and doubts of others, and collaborate in shaping meanings they could not hope to reach alone” (p. 15). The dynamic and unpredictable nature of a small group discussion provides students the environment they need to learn ‘on the spot.’

More recently, Barnes (2008) returned to the importance of providing students the opportunity to engage in talk. He writes, “In my view, many teachers move towards presentational talk (and writing) too soon, when pupils are still at the stage of digesting new ideas” (p. 7). Too often, teachers ask students to prepare their final answers and interpretations of a text before they’ve had the chance to really think about and consider

it. Moving students into this presentational stage too early limits the prospect of students connecting new information to previous knowledge. Instead, they may rush to produce what they perceive to be the ‘right’ answer as opposed to thinking out loud and considering the thoughts of their peers.

Language is a means of learning, and children’s exploratory talk allows them to progress through a text as they see fit (Barnes, 1992). Barnes (1992) characterized exploratory talk as that which has “frequent hesitations, rephrasings, false starts, and changes of direction” (p. 28). The group creates a meaning no one individual had before. Children may begin one conversation, abandon it, and then decide later whether or not to return. These “messy conversations” (Wells, 1999, p. 157) allow students to learn from one another and create their own meaning rather than relying on the ‘right’ answer provided by the teacher. The most effective small groups in terms of student learning “requires coherent activities that result in the sustained production of student knowledge” (Nystrand, Gamoran, & Heck, 1993, p. 21). Teachers who view the acquisition of knowledge as a means of interpretation rather than transmission believe their role “to be the setting up of a dialogue in which the learner can reshape his knowledge through interaction with others” (Barnes, 1992, p. 144).

Researchers Neil Mercer and Lyn Dawes (2008) write about the value of exploratory talk. When students are given the opportunity to talk amongst themselves, the talk is more “symmetrical” and “it is usually acceptable for anyone to ask a question, to interrupt a speaker and to disagree with an opinion” (Mercer & Dawes, 2008, p. 65). Students are freer to engage in a conversation that is constructed by them rather than led by a teacher because they create the ‘rules’ of the discussion. Mercer and Dawes (2008)

point out students must be taught how to engage in a productive discussion.

Traditionally, students have not been responsible for maintaining a conversation about text without the teacher's presence, so many students either do not know how to participate in a discussion or may not understand the teacher's expectations. However, Mercer and Dawes' (2008) years of observational research have found "if learners are to make the best use of talk as a tool for learning, then they need some chance to use it amongst themselves, without a teacher" (p. 56).

Trying out exploratory talk in a small group setting benefits the individual as well as the group. According to Mercer and Dawes (2008):

Talk of an exploratory kind is thus not only useful for an individual to sort out their thoughts, it can also help two or more people to solve problems because they are sharing ideas (some of which may be only partly developed) in a genuinely collaborative interaction. (p. 66)

As a result, students are encouraged to introduce their ideas to the group without fear of being criticized or ridiculed. They work together to make meaning using bits and pieces of every member's contribution. The group reaches a collective understanding created by the exploratory thoughts of each individual.

Pierce and Gilles (2008) found that students can engage in *critical conversations* if they are given the opportunity to engage in exploratory talk. Pierce and Gilles (2008) define critical conversations as those "instances in which students were using talk to critique and take thoughtful new action" (p. 39). Talk became crucial in developing these conversations because a classroom community had been established for students to trust one another. Furthermore, teachers Kathryn Mitchell Pierce and Jean Dickinson had to create "spaces" (Pierce & Gilles, 2008, p. 40) in their classrooms for exploratory talk to encourage students to think deeply about a text. Students needed both the time and

opportunity to explore a text in a small discussion group, in addition to support from their teachers, to move into talking about social and ethical issues. Pierce and Gilles (2008) suggest teachers who establish a “culture of talk” (p. 43) in their classrooms encourage the exploratory and critical talk so important in helping students evaluate and make sense of texts.

Wells and Ball (2008) acknowledge the importance of exploratory talk in creating a *dialogic classroom*. Dialogic classrooms promote a balance of teacher-led discussion and conversations generated and conducted by students. The focus is inquiry and problem solving rather than transmission of facts (Wells & Ball, 2008). In order for meaningful dialogue to occur in the classroom, students must feel a sense of ownership and comfort in relaying their exploratory thoughts to both their teacher and peers. According to Wells and Ball (2008), “when students are directly involved and have a ‘sense of agency’ in the ongoing activity that they are most interested and motivated to engage in dialogue...they have something to contribute” (p. 170). The more involved and interested students are in classroom activities, the more likely they will participate and take risks, resulting in meaning making and long-term understanding. Literature discussion groups provide the reading instructional format necessary for students to talk about a text and make meaning together.

### ***History and logistics of literature discussion groups.***

Literature discussion groups (also referred to as literature study, literature circles, or book clubs) in a Language Arts classroom are usually comprised of four or five members who choose to read the same text together. The discussions are student-centered because students are responsible for generating a reading schedule, preparing

points for discussion, and relying on one another when a member of the team needs help constructing meaning from the text (Daniels, 2002; Peterson & Eeds, 2007). Equal participation from all group members in addition to attention to all group members' interests is important to facilitate the connection between the curriculum and the students. If the social structure breaks down, non-participants will feel disempowered, thus halting the learning of the entire group (Jaramillo, 1996).

Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds first published *Grand Conversations: Literature Groups in Action* in 1990. Nineteen years later, their book is still the 'go to' source for teachers of children of all ages who plan to integrate literature discussion into their curriculum. *Grand Conversations* was republished in 2007 and offers teachers a reminder of why literature discussion works for students of all abilities. In Chapter Three, Peterson and Eeds (2007) spell out four beliefs and practices about literacy instruction that guided them into developing the concept of literature discussion groups. Peterson and Eeds (2007) believe: interpretation is a transactional process, children are makers of meaning, collaboration is essential, and dialogue is the best pedagogy.

Two key components of successful literature discussion groups are the use of real books and a student's sense of ownership. Textbooks do not create a sense of wonder and are not on a student's favorite book list. But when students choose from a selection of books chosen carefully by their teacher, and when they decide as a group a reading schedule that works best for everyone, they make the decisions usually reserved for the teacher. Additionally, students choose how to interpret a text rather than being told how to do it. According to Peterson and Eeds (2007), "We believe that genuine meaning, meaning over which readers have ownership, arises only if those readers are able to

structure it themselves, through their own interpretations, in the light of their experiences and their intent” (pp. 18-19). Students need the opportunity to bring their own experiences to a text in order for it to be meaningful. Coupled with others’ experiences and interpretations, the potential for meaning making increases for every member of the group.

Teachers who decide to use literature in the classroom in place of, or in addition to, textbooks recognize students are more likely to connect to a story than a series of units. Literature discussion groups allow students to share these connections and learn from one another. Peterson and Eeds (2007) write, “Children will come to see themselves as readers who bring their own meaning to the text in an authoritative way, who share their interpretations with others, and who listen to what others have to say” (p. 23). The collaborative structure of literature discussion groups creates the potential for “both inquiry and critique” (Peterson & Eeds, 2007, p. 25), thereby enhancing students’ meaning making.

Dialogue is the best way for students to come away with a better understanding of a text. Peterson (1988) offers his definition of dialogue:

Reading beyond a mere exchange of information and sharing of ideas, participants in dialogue seek to disclose 'original meaning.' They collaborate one-with-the-other to comprehend ideas, problems, events and feelings in the light of their own background, experience and intent. Through heartfelt responding, partners in dialogue work to expand what they know about selections of the world's meaning. (p. 1)

Literature discussion makes room for many questions and more answers. Students offer opinions and make judgments. “Dialogue recognizes that knowledge is something students actively construct” (Peterson & Eeds, 2007, p. 26). We learn more when we have others to help us question and evaluate. Our journey of understanding should not be

a solo endeavor. To best construct meaning, considering multiple perspectives is essential.

*Talking about Books: Creating Literate Communities*, edited by Kathy Gnagey Short and Kathryn Mitchell Pierce, was published the same year as *Grand Conversations*. Short and Pierce (1990) wanted “to create classrooms where students do not just learn literacy skills, [but also] become members of a literature community who use reading as a way to learn” (p. vii). The book chapters are written by teachers of children of all ages and focus on the power of talk in creating literature communities. Whereas *Grand Conversations* focused on literature discussion for elementary and middle school aged children, Short and Pierce’s book was the first to include middle and high school teachers’ ideas about how literature discussion can work for older children. Additionally, *Talking about Books* addressed the use of literature discussion in classrooms with children labeled learning disabled.

Two teachers of note in Short and Pierce’s book are Carol Porter and Evelyn Hanssen. They wrote about planning and implementing literature discussion groups at the middle and high school level. Porter (1990) found literature discussions successful in her high school classroom because students could “try out their ideas, seek answers to questions, and respond to the ideas and questions of others” (p. 115). She felt they were learning from each other and deepening their understanding of the text when they met to discuss their interpretations and views of the reading. Porter’s (1990) literature discussion groups met to figure out a reading schedule and determine how they would balance their reading of a book with other classes and obligations. Porter (1990) claims “Student voice in this portion of the decision making is important in developing

responsibility for their learning” (p. 107). Instead of relying on their teacher to create a plan of action for them, the students assumed ownership of their reading and learning and thus felt more committed to themselves and the group (Porter, 1990).

Hanssen (1990) also discussed the importance of student ownership in literature discussion. She writes, “if students are really going to take ownership of their own discussion, teachers have to let go of some of it” (p. 204). Although Hanssen believes teachers can be a part of literature discussions, she also thinks students need to learn how to “develop the ability to initiate and sustain discussions, exploring issues in depth” (p. 205). If a teacher’s presence holds students back from being able to do this on their own, he or she limits students’ opportunity to maximize learning from one another.

Educator Judith A. Langer’s research corroborated the early research on small group literature discussion. Langer (1992) found in her study of fifteen teachers from a variety of city and suburban schools that small groups of students discussing literature works because “students are encouraged to discuss their initial impressions, raise questions, review predictions or responses they have written in their journals, or...address issues they think are interesting for the group to consider” (p. 43). Small group discussions benefit students’ understanding of the text because they are given the opportunity to discuss substantive issues that matter most to them rather than guessing what the teacher wants them to say.

In 1993, Kathryn Mitchell Pierce and Carol Gilles compiled the work of teacher researchers interested in classroom talk in *Cycles of Meaning: Exploring the Potential of Talk in Learning Communities*. Contributors included teachers of children of various ages as well reading abilities. The chapters addressed how to create and sustain learning

communities as well as how to use talk and literature to help students learn. Gilles's chapter, "We Make an Idea: Cycles of Meaning in Literature Discussion Groups," analyzes the talk of thirteen junior high students labeled learning disabled in order to "explore how meanings are made" (p. 200). Gilles found that students' conversations did not progress in a linear fashion. Rather, they would move from one topic to another and return to those they found most important. Gilles (1993) called this movement of discussion "cycles of meaning" and stated they "are more than utterances; they are the meanings and understandings that individuals and groups create over time as they transact with one another by discussion rich texts" (p. 206). Moreover, she noted the students' teachers played an important role in fostering these conversations because they selected interesting and meaningful books as well as facilitated discussion. Ultimately, Gilles found that literature discussion worked for students because they had the opportunity and freedom to collaborate and talk about the text in ways that mattered most to them. Regardless of a student's reading ability, creating time for social talk about good texts led to meaning making for all.

Cintorino (1993) studied the small group literature discussions of two classes of tenth graders in two school years. The students discussed *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee both years, but how they talked about the text differed. The first year of the study, the students answered teacher-prepared questions about the book. The second year, the students wrote in journals and chose their own topics of interest to discuss in small groups. Both years, the students listened to the recordings of their discussions. From the students' talk and her own analysis of the recordings, Cintorino found that the social environment provided in a small group setting helped students make sense of the

text. She noted, “The opportunity for learning is increased enormously if students are allowed to make meaning for themselves, among themselves” (p. 31). Simply having the opportunity to talk about the book in small groups, regardless of the approach, aided students’ overall understanding of the text.

Harvey Daniels contributed his thoughts about literature discussion in a 1994 book entitled *Literature Discussions: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*. Like the other books published in the 1990s about literature discussion groups, Daniels believed the groups worked for students for three reasons: engagement, choice, and responsibility. However, Daniels added something new to the conversation—role sheets. Daniels (2006) explains in a recent article that he designed the role sheets assigning students to jobs like “Questioner, Connector, Illustrator, Word Wizard, and Literary Luminary” (p. 11) to help students focus on the text and prepare material for the discussions. However, he quickly learned some teachers relied on the role sheets too much. As a result, the conversations became “mechanical” (Daniels, 2006, p. 11). Since 1994, Daniels has written a new edition of his book clarifying his thoughts about assigning students jobs and warning teachers about how discussions can be stilted if they limit their students to role sheets (Daniels, 2002).

Daniels’s (2006) latest thinking about literature discussion groups has resulted in a new way of approaching them. In place of role sheets, Daniels suggests teachers show students how to keep track of their thinking using post-it notes, bookmarks, or graphic organizers. He also notes teachers must be more explicit in social skills instruction. They must share their expectations and model what a productive discussion looks like. Finally, Daniels states teachers need to move beyond assessing students’ work in

literature discussion groups with a simple final project. Rather, they should be looking at their students' thinking along the way as well as using a rubric designed by both teacher and student to determine how much a student has grown as both a discussion participant and a reader.

***Recent research on literature discussion groups.***

One goal of talking about a text with one's peers is to participate in a "discussion in which alternative individual interpretations are critically examined and compared" in order to lead to a collaborative construction of the text's meaning (Wells, 1999, p. 148). Students are then able to extend their own personal meaning because they have a greater understanding of the text. Multiple perspectives "help students develop and analyze their own understandings" (Langer, 1995, p. 59). Conversing about a text is valuable because each member brings his or her own experiences to the discussion. Carico's (2001) small five month study of four female middle school students discussing *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry* (Taylor, 1976) found that the girls' varied school and personal experiences led to different interpretations of the text. She noted that although there were times when the discussion was unfocused, most of the time the girls engaged in meaningful and critical talk. For example, they discussed religion and personal connections to the characters' actions. Ultimately, Carico concluded that talking about literature in the classroom is a valuable way to learn and keep learning.

Heather K. Casey (2008/2009) observed a 34<sup>th</sup> year seventh grade teacher for six weeks in a classroom of 19 students, six of whom were identified as struggling with reading and writing. Casey (2008/2009) focused on the struggling students and found the teacher's use of learning clubs motivated and engaged them. The learning clubs were

similar to literature circles, and often were tied to a piece of literature, but did not have to be. The learning clubs were “organized around student interests” and offered “a sustained supportive atmosphere” (p. 284). The teacher permitted her students to select texts, and she strived to create a safe learning environment where all student opinions were considered. Casey concluded that because the teacher was able to respond to the unique needs of her struggling readers, they were able to stay motivated and engaged in the learning process. As a result, her students were able to build their literacy learning and improve their reading and writing skills.

After taking a class with Dr. Mark Faust, a professor at the University of Georgia, Jennifer Cockrill decided to try book clubs in her high school classroom. She wrote about her experience in a book she co-authored with Dr. Faust, Cheryl Hancock, and Holly Isserstedt—*Student Book Clubs: Improving Literature Instruction in Middle and High School* (2005). All of Cockrill’s students read *The Great Gatsby* (1928/1999) in small groups, and she asked them to fill out a survey about their book club experience at the end of the four week unit. Although the students were not given the opportunity to choose a text from four or five choices, the format of the book clubs was similar to literature circles. Cockrill’s students met in their groups regularly to discuss the novel. She learned her students enjoyed the freedom to discuss anything they wanted to about the book but liked for her to post possible general topics for them to talk about on the board before the discussions began. Although Cockrill felt posting topics might limit her students’ discussion, she found that giving them very broad topics related to the entire text helped her students maintain focus. Cockrill did attempt to remove herself from the groups’ discussions but wished she would have encouraged her students’ personal

connections to the text more at the beginning of the unit to boost their confidence about interpreting the novel. Overall, the students felt they had a better understanding of the novel because they were given the opportunity to discuss it with their peers.

Additionally, Cockrill noted that as the unit progressed the students began to have more confidence in themselves as readers to make meaning from the text.

When children are able to relate what is presented to them with what they already know, language becomes a powerful tool to express ideas and add to the group's collective knowledge (Barnes, 1992). Mercer (2000) called this collaborative help the intermental development zone (IDZ). It is similar to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, but instead of a more learned individual scaffolding those who are less advanced, an IDZ is formed by participants who are essentially all on the same level. Berne and Clark (2006) studied small group discussions in a ninth-grade English class and found that the students often used comprehension strategies such as questioning, searching for meaning, interpreting, and summarizing when talking about the text. The employment of these strategies provided the group several points for discussion and resulted in meaningful and thoughtful conversation. However, Berne and Clark also noted that students often moved from topic to topic and did not pursue the comprehension strategies beyond the surface level. The authors suggested that in order for students to best assist their peers in creating a deeper understanding of the text, they must be taught to engage everyone in the group discussion and purposefully address comprehension strategies.

The most successful literature discussion groups are those that have an open rather than closed approach to tasks (Barnes, 1992). Students and teachers who

participate in a group with an open approach are receptive to one another's ideas. They believe that the function of the group is to collaborate socially, and they often ask questions, revisit old ideas, and summarize the day's discussion. Successful discussions are responsive "*to the learner's view of what is required*" (Barnes, 1992, p. 79, italics in original). On the other hand, a closed approach to tasks results in few questions posed to the group. Consequently, consensus is often reached early, thwarting the discussion and learning process.

Clarke (2007) spent one year studying the literature discussions of a fifth-grade class. He used critical discourse analysis to analyze the data of one group's discussion of the book *Shiloh* (Naylor, 2000) and found that power struggles related to gender resulted in largely unsuccessful discussions. Clarke concluded that the group's overall learning experience was limited because the girls in the group were excluded by the dominant boys. He suggested that in order for literature discussion groups to be successful, teachers must address gender issues with their students and coach them on ways of improving group discussions.

With a teacher's careful guidance and instruction, an open approach to tasks can be modeled and practiced in the Language Arts classroom. However, a closed approach to tasks may result if teachers participate in literature discussions too often, thus taking control of the conversation rather than giving students the opportunity to lead the discussion. According to Barnes and Todd (1995), "To achieve collaborative inquiry it is necessary to do everything possible to counterbalance the long-term effect of the individualism and competition that play so large a part in schooling" (p. 101). Teachers

may consider providing opportunities for their students to participate in small group discussions and allowing them to assume ownership of their learning.

*Summary of literature discussion groups.*

Many researchers have laid classroom talk as the foundation for literature discussion groups (Barnes, 1992; Barnes & Todd, 1995; Daniels, 2002; Gilles, 1993; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Short & Pierce, 1990; Wells, 1999). Students who have the opportunity to discuss a text with their peers learn from one another, and meaning making is enhanced for every member of the group. Exploratory talk is an avenue for students to try out and develop their thoughts about a text, and the supportive social environment of a small group encourages students to share ideas and understandings. The knowledge of the whole surpasses the knowledge of the individual, thus leading to a richer meaning making experience.

Since the 1990s, the benefits of literature discussion have been written about in books and professional journal articles. Researchers (Daniels, 1994; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 1993; Short & Pierce, 1990) agree literature discussion works because students have the opportunity to select a real book from those carefully chosen by their teacher to spark good discussion. Furthermore, students create their own reading schedules and discuss issues in the book they care and want to talk more about. Students engage and actively participate in their own learning. Recent research (Berne & Clark, 2006; Carico, 2001; Casey, 2008/2009; Clarke, 2007; Faust et al., 2005) continues to show the power of literature discussion in middle and high school classrooms.

### **The Teacher's Role in Literature Discussion.**

The benefits of talking about a text with others as opposed to thinking about a text in isolation are numerous. Dewey (1938) advocated learning as a social process. The teacher becomes a leader and facilitator rather than a dominator. When children are allowed to construct their own meaning of a text instead of learning by transmission, their understanding increases and they become responsible for their own learning (Dewey, 1938). Students are able to internalize concepts by constructing their own meaning from the conversation. They are able to learn more when they are involved in hands-on activities that push them beyond their current level of understanding.

#### ***Creating a supportive environment.***

Perhaps the most important role a teacher has in literature discussion groups is creating a supportive environment for conversation. In order for conversations about texts to be successful, students must feel comfortable sharing their exploratory thoughts and able to conduct a productive discussion. Wells and Ball (2008) suggest “cycles of meaning production, application, and appropriation are impossible for individuals unless there is a real possibility of being understood and considered seriously by others” (p. 181). Therefore, the teacher's role in helping make these things happen becomes paramount to how the group will function. In *Talking about Books*, one of the first books published about the importance of talk and literature discussion in the classroom, Short (1990) writes, “the kinds of social relationships and conversations that are encouraged will greatly impact the thinking process of learners” (p. 34). Teachers who focus on a collaborative community of learners show students that learning goes “beyond cooperating with someone else to learning from and with others” (p. 34). In other words,

small group discussions can be more than simply listening to others' ideas; they provide opportunities for students to grow and learn together. The key to making this happen is for teachers to establish "collaborative social contexts for learning" (Short, 1990, p. 35).

Short's (1990) work with numerous elementary and middle school teachers focused on the importance of teaching students the value of collaboration.

"Collaboration encourages us to see others in terms of their potentials, not their limitations, and so opens up new possibilities for everyone to work together in learning through a shared process of inquiry" (p. 42). True collaboration is not about judging another's comments as right or wrong. Instead, it's about listening to various perspectives and using the life experiences of everyone in the group to make sense of a shared text.

Teachers have many responsibilities in creating a successful collaborative social context. According to Barnes (2008), "Successful group work requires preparation, guidance and supervision, and needs to be embedded in an extended sequence of work that includes other patterns of communication" (p. 7). Simply grouping students together and expecting a productive discussion is unrealistic. Rather, teachers must take time to carefully prepare and instruct their students on the components of working together as a collaborative community. Mercer and Dawes (2008) write, "there must not only be a sense of trust and a common endeavor, but also a shared understanding of how to engage in productive discussion" (p. 66). They believe teachers should set ground rules before small group discussions begin to ensure all students understand the characteristics of a constructive discussion.

Mercer and Dawes (2008) offer their list of expectations students must meet to enable exploratory talk and promote a collaborative group discussion:

- Partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas.
- Everyone participates.
- Tentative ideas are treated with respect.
- Ideas offered for joint consideration may be challenged.
- Challenges are justified and alternative ideas or understandings are offered.
- Opinions are sought and considered before decisions are jointly made.
- Knowledge is made publicly accountable (and so reasoning is visible in the talk). (p. 66)

Clearly, these expectations must be learned. Students who do not have much experience with literature discussion may not know what these ground rules look like in a student-led conversation. Therefore, in order for students to feel comfortable sharing their exploratory thoughts and taking risks in a small group setting, teachers need to model expectations and students need to practice them.

### ***Teacher scaffolding.***

Vygotsky (1978) believed that a teacher's role in assisting students' learning was to provide scaffolding with the understanding that they would eventually be able to master the task on their own. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the zone between what students can do alone and what they can do with the assistance of a more learned peer or teacher (Vygotsky, 1978). As the student becomes more knowledgeable, the scaffolding the peer or teacher provides lessens until the student becomes independent. Maloch (2002) noted in her five-month study of a third-grade teacher that much teacher guidance is necessary when students transition from a typical teacher-centered discussion to one that is student-centered, as with literature discussion groups.

Students need to be taught how to interact in small groups, and teachers need to think about the difficulties students might face so they can help their students address them.

Langer's (1992) chapter entitled "Rethinking Literature Discussion" outlines how teachers can scaffold ways to discuss and ways to think to promote successful discussions of literature. Strategies a teacher might use to scaffold ways to discuss include: tapping the students' understandings, seeking clarification, inviting participation, and orchestrating the discussion (Langer, 1992). Teachers' efforts to scaffold students' learning of how to engage in a conversation help students understand the appropriate ways to involve students in the discussion. Students need to be taught how to agree or disagree with a comment as well as how to extend a comment to invite participation from all members of the group if the discussion is to be beneficial.

In addition to scaffolding ways to converse in a small group, teachers can also scaffold ways to think. Teachers who value small group literature discussions believe students' conversations aid each group member's process of making sense of the text. However, sense making is limited if students only discuss text-based questions. In order to help students push their thinking from a literal to critical level, teachers may scaffold ways of thinking such as focusing, shaping, linking, and upping the ante (Langer, 1992). *Focusing* helps students narrow their conversation to a few key, important elements of the book. *Shaping* encourages students to explain their thinking and offer examples to support their conclusions. Scaffolding *linking* shows students how to connect their thoughts to other parts of the reading or discussion or to their own experiences to help them interpret the text. *Upping the ante* challenges students to think about the text from an alternative perspective to gain new insight (Langer, 1992).

O’Flahavan (1994/1995) also studied teachers’ scaffolding role during peer led discussions; additionally, he researched the teachers’ coaching role before and after the discussions. Although O’Flahavan worked with elementary teachers, his findings can be applied to the secondary level. He found that both the scaffolding and coaching roles are necessary to promote students’ ability to manage a successful discussion. O’Flahavan and his colleagues taped the discussions of students in grades one through six and discovered three types of scaffolding roles used most effectively by teachers: elicitor, framer, and group process monitor. As an elicitor, the teacher helps his or her students extend and explain their thinking. The teacher may ask students why they feel they way they do about a character or what they would do in the character’s situation. The teacher “helps students gain perspective on their thinking” (O’Flahavan, 1994/1995, p. 355) as a framer. For example, the teacher asks how students arrived at a conclusion or why they thought a certain way. As a group process monitor, the teacher helps the group stay on track. The teacher reminds students not to interrupt and to listen to each group member’s contribution.

The students who had teachers coaching them both before and after their small group discussions had more opportunities to be in control of the discussion and were able to reflect on their performance (O’Flahavan, 1994/1995). Good coaches help their students assess the conversation and look for ways to improve. For example, teachers can help their students learn how to include everyone in the conversation or how to talk about a topic in depth. Teachers may also use this opportunity to teach students literary terms such as irony or symbolism with the expectation that students will utilize this

language in subsequent discussions. Finally, good coaching requires teachers to adjust how they respond to the group based on its needs (O’Flahavan, 1994/1995).

### ***Teacher questions.***

Teachers need to be mindful of the types of questions they ask their students during literature discussion. Susan Hynds’ (1992) research found many literature teachers “concentrate on meaning-making processes, rather than more ‘reader-centered’ processes such as engagement or personal evaluation” (pp. 81-82). Comprehension is important to students’ understanding of the text; however, if it is the sole purpose of the discussion, teachers risk restricting what their students learn about literature. Hynds (1992) notes, “teacher-controlled activities, including study questions, often undercut the reader’s creative meaning-making processes” (p. 85). Instead of giving students the opportunity to explore the text’s meaning on their own, study questions often require one correct answer. As a result, reading becomes more of a chore than a pleasurable experience. According to Hynds (1992), “teachers’ questions not only affect students’ literary responses and interpretation processes; they effect the stances students take towards texts and toward reading in general” (p. 92). Uninspiring and one-dimensional questions deter students from reading rather than promote it. Therefore, the kinds of questions teachers ask are paramount to how students view the act of reading.

Frank Hardman’s (2008) observational research corroborates Hynds’ findings. He discovered many teachers in England, as well as Kenya and Nigeria, mostly have the same types of interactions with their students as those written about by Mehan in 1979. Mehan (1979) researched how teachers question and receive responses from their students. He noted an IRE pattern. The teacher *initiates* a question, a student *responds*,

and the teacher offers an *evaluation* of the students' response. This type of teacher-interaction provides little opportunity for class discussion, thereby limiting students' active participation in their learning. Hardman's (2008) international research suggests these kinds of interactions are still commonplace in classrooms today. He claims teachers must be taught how to use strategic questioning that does not limit students to a right or wrong answer. Additionally, teachers need to learn how to offer constructive feedback to support their students' learning and thinking.

Gallimore and Tharp (1990) wrote about a theory of teaching as assisted performance, and they identify questioning as a means of assisting performance. According to Gallimore and Tharp (1990), "Questioning explicitly calls for an active linguistic and cognitive response: It provokes creations by the pupil" (p. 181). However, they point out not all questions teachers ask assist; some assess. Teachers ask assessment questions when they want to discover what their students know without assistance. "The assistance question, on the other hand, inquires in order to produce a mental operation that the pupil cannot or would not produce alone" (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990, p. 182). The student's performance is assisted and teaching occurs when the teacher asks questions that are within the student's Zone of Proximal Development. The guidance provided by the teacher's assistance, rather than assessment, questions in this situation furthers the student's learning.

### ***Teacher roles.***

The amount of scaffolding a teacher provides in literature discussion groups affects the conversations. Short et al. (1999) observed the literature discussions of multi-age children in four different classrooms during the month of May. Half of the literature

discussion groups had a teacher present; the other half did not. The researchers concluded that teachers should be aware of their contribution to literature discussions. A teacher's presence can enhance students' learning, but he or she should be aware of facilitating too often. Short et al. (1999) noted that teachers too often "challenge[d] students intellectually...to create new zones of proximal development and were missing opportunities to create these zones by sharing [their] own connections" (p. 380). In other words, teachers need to participate as readers as well as instructors.

Lauren Freedman (1993) reflected on her own talk in her seventh-grade Language Arts classroom and concluded that encouraging student participation by referencing page numbers and asking probing questions is important, but "if teachers set the agenda and limit the content with our talk, we often lose the students and hinder rather than help them make meaningful connections" (p. 230). Rather, teachers should be both guides and participants to show students that they too are learners. Langer's (1992) research supports Freedman's conclusions. Students who are supported, rather than directed, in their small group discussions "come to engage in authentic discussions about literature; they agree and disagree with each other, challenge each other, and defend their views" (Langer, 1992, p. 50). Students need time and encouragement to assume effective discussion behaviors on their own. The teacher is key in providing the scaffolding necessary to develop these behaviors.

Maloch's (2002) study echoes Short et al. (1999), Freedman (1993), and Langer (1992). The teacher she studied acted more like a facilitator rather than a leader; she stepped back from the conversation and gave her students the opportunity to explore their interests. Equally important was the teacher's presence to help scaffold her students'

learning and interactions. She was an authentic participant in the literature discussion and offered her own opinions of the text but allowed her students to maintain control of their learning. Furthermore, she provided her students the necessary support so that they could engage in successful discussions.

Barnes and Todd's (1995) conclusion about the teacher's role in their study of small group talk in two schools concurs with Maloch's findings (2002). They state, "The teacher's presence can support and refocus the students' talk; the teacher's participation radically changes its nature and not necessarily for the better" (p. 103). Students who want their teacher's approval may sacrifice the exchange of ideas to please their teacher. A teacher can certainly help students with questions they have about the text or push their thinking, but he or she should remember that oftentimes, students are equally as capable of providing this support to their peers.

The teacher's expectations of students' behavior in a literature discussion group influence the conversation. The social norms of what a literature discussion looks like are established early. "The way we [teachers] interact with children and arrange for them to interact show them what kinds of people we think they are and gives them opportunities to practice being those kinds of people" (Johnston, 2004, p. 79). Teachers who have preconceived notions about what their students can do as readers and thinkers may influence how they choose to participate in the literature discussion. Therefore, Barnes (1992) suggests that children should be allowed to approach a text in a way that makes sense to them. If they are more concerned about saying what they think the teacher wants to hear than the subject matter, the dialogue and learning may not be as deep. Furthermore, educators might consider allowing their students to inquire. Students

who have control over their own topics of discussion are more likely to generate conversations that will lead them to constructing meaning from a text (Wells, 1999).

Wollman-Bonilla (1994) studied a sixth-grade teacher's interactions with two literature groups. One group contained less able readers, while the other was comprised of average readers. Wollman-Bonilla found that the teacher played a much more active and controlling role in the struggling readers' group. Many of these readers had been members of teacher-directed reading groups before, and Wollman-Bonilla concluded the students assumed the behavior to which they were accustomed. However, she also noted that the teacher's question and answer format placed him into the position he attempted to avoid in the literature discussion groups. The teacher's average reader group usually excelled without much guidance because their comprehension of the text, in addition to their interest level, surpassed that of their peers. Wollman-Bonilla's (1994) research suggests that some groups may need more explicit guidance from their teacher than others. In addition to this support, students must be taught how to participate in informal discussions about literature, especially if they do not have much prior experience with this type of reading instruction.

However, negotiating our roles as teachers is often easier said than done. Barnes and Todd (1995) write, "One of the most difficult demands upon teachers is to relax their normal control of the students' attention and trust them to focus upon the given task" (p. 103). In order for small group discussions to be effective, the teacher must be willing to give up some of the control of which he or she may be accustomed. Probst (1988) writes, "by choosing to view reading as an act of creation rather than a search for one true meaning, the teacher relinquishes the traditional authority of the pedagogue" (p. 53).

Working on understanding is ultimately the students' job (Barnes, 2008). Barnes (2008) notes, "Only pupils can work on understanding; teachers can encourage and support but cannot do it for them" (p. 4). Teachers who prepare and support their students' participation in small group discussion should allow them to handle their problems and accomplish the task. O'Flahavan (1994/1995) states, "Teachers must learn to listen to students' interpretive talk, fight the urge to control it, and provide support when students demonstrate or request that they need help" (p. 356). Unless an issue impedes the effectiveness of the group's discussion, it's better for teachers to permit the conversation to happen organically. The students will discuss the issues that matter most to them in their attempts to make sense of the text (Barnes & Todd, 1995).

### ***Summary of the teacher's role in literature discussion.***

The role of the teacher in literature discussion groups is paramount to their success. First, teachers must lead by example and help their students create a supportive learning environment where all ideas and opinions are heard (Barnes, 2008; Short, 1990). Many students have never been taught how to participate in a productive discussion, so the teacher must model appropriate conversation behaviors to ensure the discussions are meaningful for the students. After these expectations have been set, teachers have to find the balance between their roles as instructors and group participants. Teachers may choose to scaffold their students' learning and ask questions to help them think deeply about the text (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Langer, 1992; O'Flahavan, 1994/1995; Vygotsky, 1978). However, they have to be aware of providing too much assistance or asking surface level questions instead of those that will promote fruitful discussion (Hardman, 2008; Hynds, 1992). Ultimately, teachers need to realize that giving up some

of the control typically held by them in classroom may allow their students to grow and learn together.

**Readers of diverse abilities.**

*Struggling readers.*

In July 2006, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) formed a study group on middle and high school literacy to investigate the crisis in adolescent literacy. Their report addressed some alarming trends that highlight the literacy problem in the United States. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), only one-third of 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders read at the proficient or advanced level. Of the two-thirds who read below the proficient level, about one-quarter were unable to read at the most basic level. The reading abilities of minority students were of even greater concern. NAEP reported that almost half of African American and Latino 8<sup>th</sup> grade students read below basic level (Grigg, Daane, Jin & Campbell, 2003).

Although the demands and expectations for literacy achievement have been raised as a result of federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the fact is that reading performance has essentially remained the same for the past three decades (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003). Statewide tests implemented to measure the reading proficiency of all students show this problem as well. A 2004 report from RAND Education stated that fewer than half of all students' reading ability is labeled as proficient or advanced on both state assessments and the NAEP (McCombs, Kirby, Barney, Darilek, & Magee, 2004). According to Carnevale and Desrochers (2003), approximately two-thirds of newly created jobs in the next decade will require some form

of post-secondary education. Students must be able to comprehend and apply content knowledge to real-world situations in order to succeed at the post-secondary level. The adolescent literacy problem needs to be addressed now in order to prepare students for a knowledge-based global economy.

NASBE (2006) stated that one reason why adolescents struggle to read is because they do not have the literacy skills necessary to navigate their way through difficult texts. The organizational structures and vocabulary of many secondary textbooks require students to sift through lengthy and complicated passages simply to gather information or locate the main idea. Unfortunately, many teachers assume that a focus on early reading is sufficient to give students the tools they will need to make meaning from a text. Although this focus is necessary, middle and high school teachers must also employ various teaching strategies to help their students succeed academically.

Other researchers provide additional explanations for why adolescents struggle to comprehend text. Allington and Cunningham's (2002) book *Schools that Work* is a comprehensive look at one elementary school in New York, two elementary schools in Texas, one elementary school in Colorado, and three elementary schools in North Carolina that strive to be learning institutions where all children read and write. Although *Schools that Work* focuses on elementary schools, the implications for teaching can be applied to middle and high schools. Allington and Cunningham (2002) noted many school and classroom libraries contain reading materials that are too challenging for striving readers. Struggling adolescent readers are also likely to find texts in libraries that are too difficult to read independently with success. These readers are not able to employ effective reading strategies because the primary goal becomes simply decoding

the words. If they do not enjoy what they are reading, frustration increases and they are likely to shut down.

One reason why adolescents struggle with comprehension in middle and high school is because of a limited vocabulary. Students who do not know the strategies they can use to figure out an unknown word often skip it or abandon the text. Two recent research studies offer different viewpoints on how teachers can aid their students in learning how to read unfamiliar words. Bhattacharya and Ehri (2004) gave 150 students in grades 6 through 10 with below-average word-reading skills a Word Identification subtest. The students were recruited from 16 remedial reading classes at five intermediate, junior high, and high schools located in New York City. Of the 150 tested, 60 students scored at the third-, fourth-, or fifth-grade-equivalent reading levels and were selected for the study. The students were split into three groups. One group received instruction on how to analyze the graphosyllabic units of 100 multisyllabic words. The instruction consisted of four sessions lasting 30 minutes. The second group read the words as unanalyzed wholes, and the third group received no special instruction. Bhattacharya and Ehri (2004) found that “syllable training enhanced readers’ decoding ability on transfer tasks” and “also boosted readers’ ability to retain spellings of words in memory” (p. 343). In contrast, the whole-word training “was not found to help struggling readers on any of the decoding or spelling transfer tasks” (p. 343). The researchers concluded teaching struggling adolescent readers to read multisyllabic words by analyzing the graphosyllabic units in the words is valuable. However, they also noted this teaching worked more effectively with students reading at the third-grade-equivalent level and less so at the fourth- and fifth-grade-equivalent level. So, although this type of

instruction may work for the weakest readers who need decoding practice, it may not serve other struggling readers who read at higher grade levels.

Harmon (2002) took a different approach to teaching struggling readers how to read unknown words. She participated in 17 small group discussions with three pairs of middle school students and then worked with pairs of high schools students. Harmon (2002) called the small group discussions facilitated peer dialogues because “the teacher and two students explore, use, and analyze independent word learning strategies within the context of real reading” (p. 606). The two students in the group self-selected words they found difficult in the text, and Harmon helped them “focus on strategic actions such as making connections to the text and other texts, searching beyond the sentence level for clues, and, most important, keeping in mind that word meanings must make sense” (p. 608). She found many struggling readers did not know these strategies and concluded word learning is a process teachers need to address throughout the year so their students know how to construct word meanings independently. Once struggling readers have developed various word learning strategies, they are more likely to better comprehend a challenging text.

Another reason why young adults may struggle is because they have not had enough time in school to practice their reading skills. A position statement from NCTE’s Commission on Reading (2004) outlined the definition of adolescent literacy and cited current research to inform educators about how adolescents read. The research showed teachers that “the majority of inexperienced adolescent readers need opportunities and instructional support to read many and diverse types of texts in order to gain experience, build fluency, and develop a range as readers” (p. 2). The more striving readers read,

their familiarity with language structures increases, vocabulary develops, and reading for meaning becomes more efficient and effective. Discussions about reading strategies help readers focus on the act of reading, thus increasing the reader's confidence and ability.

Krashen (1993) reviewed hundreds of research studies completed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that investigated the benefit of voluntary reading in his book *The Power of Reading*. Loertscher (1993) points out that when possible, Krashen "reanalyzed experimental data with current statistical tools to recheck the results of previous studies" (p. 33). According to Krashen's (1993) research, voluntary reading is the best predictor for reading comprehension, a well-developed vocabulary, the ability to spell, correct grammar usage, and writing style. The best way to ensure the voluntary reading that leads to students' academic success is to give them access to books. The more students read, the greater their literacy development and academic success.

### *Gifted readers.*

The recent research on teaching gifted readers indicates the reading instruction they need does not match what they receive. Reis, Gubbins, Briggs, Schreiber, Richards, Jacobs, Eckert, and Renzulli (2004) observed 12 third- and seventh-grade reading classrooms in both urban and suburban areas for an entire academic year. The study focused on talented readers and whether or not they received a differentiated reading curriculum or instructional strategies. Reis et al. (2004) define talented readers as "students reading at least two grades above their chronological grade placement who also had advanced language skills and advanced processing capabilities in reading" (p. 315). They found only three of the 12 classrooms differentiated reading instruction and therefore concluded talented readers' needs were not being met. According to Reis et al.

(2004), “When their needs are ignored, talented students’ reading progress is stunted and their opportunities to learn how to react to challenge are diminished” (p. 315). As a result, they are not able to develop to their full potential as readers because they are left to learn and succeed on their own. Reis et al. (2004) suggest teachers do not have the knowledge or resources to fully support talented readers and recommend that teachers be given the time and professional development they need to alter how they approach the reading instruction of these students.

Wood (2008) claims that although many teachers feel confident in their ability to teach striving readers, they have received little or no professional development on how to meet the needs of their gifted readers. Because teachers view them as capable and proficient readers, these students are often not included in a reading instructional program. Therefore, less time is spent with gifted readers than striving or average readers (Kingore, 2002). One reason for this, Tomlinson (2002) suggests, is that teachers feel pressure from mandates such as No Child Left Behind to improve the scores of their below proficient and proficient readers. Therefore, if the student is already a highly proficient reader, little time is spent with that student improving his or her reading skills. However, Wood (2008) warns that neglecting gifted readers may lead to “stagnant reading growth, underachievement, boredom, low motivation for reading, or outright refusal to read” (p. 19). They simply cannot always be left to read independently the same books that are often used with average readers, two situations Wood (2008) finds prevalent in classrooms today. Sean Cavazos-Kottke’s (2006) study supports Wood’s conclusion.

Cavazos-Kottke (2006) observed five middle school boys identified as talented readers as they browsed for reading materials in a large bookstore. He interviewed the boys to learn more the particular texts and authors that interested them. After the boys chose reading materials from the bookstore, Cavazos-Kottke asked each boy to separate the books into three categories: those he would be interested in reading, those he would expect to encounter at school, and those that would satisfy both categories. He found that the boys' selections they would be interested in reading differed from recent studies that explored books boys in the general population enjoyed. For example, prior studies revealed middle school boys prefer texts that are short, highly visual, humorous, and connected to real life. However, Cavazos-Kottke's (2006) study found "For all of the boys, the escapist qualities of imaginative fiction were strongly preferred over the immediate connections to their lives that young adult realistic fiction might provide" (p. 144). Furthermore, not one of the boys' selections was included on the past three years (2003, 2004, 2005) of the International Reading Association's Young Adults' Choices project book lists. Although small, this study suggests talented readers may not enjoy the same books as their average peers. As a result, some language arts teachers may not provide the texts that will encourage and challenge their talented readers, thereby possibly limiting these students' literary growth.

So, what are the solutions? Experts in gifted education agree that teachers must learn how to differentiate the reading curriculum for their advanced readers. Many researchers suggest that gifted readers be given the opportunity to discuss challenging reading material in literature circles (Daniels, 2002; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Reis et al., 2004; Woods, 2008). Reis et al. (2004) write, "Talented readers should have

opportunities to work together and engage in critical reading and analysis, advanced vocabulary development, challenges such as comparing themes across fiction and nonfiction, and consistent exposure to advanced reading opportunities” (p. 334). The authors recommend literature circles as a good way to help implement these opportunities. Materials for enrichment should be offered, and students should be allowed to choose books that promote critical thinking and inquiry. Copeland (2005) notes the Socratic Seminar is a good way to get all students involved in a thoughtful and reflective discussion. A goal of educating gifted readers should be to encourage student-led discussions of accelerated reading materials. They are ready to accept the challenge of thinking deeply; they need only to be given the chance.

*Summary of readers of diverse abilities.*

Recent research on adolescent literacy indicates concern that many middle and high school students are reading below proficient and advanced levels and that those numbers have remained static for several years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003; McCombs et al., 2004). A NASBE (2006) report suggests many students simply do not have the reading strategies or skills to succeed academically, but other researchers pinpoint different reasons for why some students struggle. Allington and Cunningham (2002), NCTE (2004), and Krashen (1993) suggest students need access to reading materials that are interesting and appropriate for their grade level. The more students read texts that are entertaining and fit their skill level, the more likely students will read. This practice will help them move from the striving to average reader category.

Although equipped with the strategies and skills necessary to read texts above average in difficulty, gifted readers often are not taught by teachers who know how to

address their needs. Many teachers do not know how to differentiate instruction for their gifted readers or do not have the resources to challenge them. Gifted education researchers (Reis et al., 2004; Woods, 2008) fear gifted students will not progress as much as their peers if they are not asked to perform beyond their capabilities. They suggest gifted readers be given challenging reading material and the opportunity to discuss it with peers of like abilities to encourage their growth in the literacy classroom.

### **Summary.**

The review of the literature suggests students in today's literacy classrooms need real books and an opportunity to discuss them with peers. Although early reader-response theorists (Gibson, 1980; Prince, 1980) did not believe readers should bring in their own experiences to interpret a text, this way of thinking changed in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Louise Rosenblatt and many literacy researchers (Barnes, 1992; Barnes & Todd, 1995; Daniels, 2002; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Short & Pierce, 1990) recognize the importance of students reading literature they can connect with and respond to on a personal level. If educators wish for their students to make meaning and enhance their understanding of text, they should consider allowing them the time to talk. As Barnes (1992) explains, exploratory talk is the draft thinking students say out loud when they are processing a text. Oftentimes exploratory talk simply gets ideas out in the open for others to grab onto and question or develop. Other times, the comment is ignored or sidetracked in favor of a different thought. What's important is that students have a chance to talk with their peers about why a text is meaningful to them. In a small group setting, the combination of lots of ideas leads to a greater understanding of the text for all.

Research from the past twenty years has found the literature discussion group is the small group format that works for students of all reading abilities (Daniels, 2002; Gilles, 1993; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Reis et al., 2004; Short & Pierce, 1990; Woods, 2008). When students are taught how to execute a productive discussion and are supported by their teachers and peers during discussion, meaningful conversations can take place. Students respond well to the format of literature discussion groups because they get to choose their book and work with others to create a reading schedule. The students assume more ownership in their learning than in a traditional classroom, and this sense of responsibility encourages many students to work hard and make a commitment to their group.

Although much research has been dedicated to understanding why and how literature discussion groups are a successful form of literacy instruction, not much is known about how teachers negotiate their roles as instructors and group participants. Maloch (2002), Short et al. (1999), and Freedman's (1993) work helps us begin to understand the struggles teachers face when deciding how involved they should be in literature discussions, but nothing has been published about how high school teachers make these decisions. What type of environment must teachers establish for students to maximize the meaning they construct from a text? What roles do they play as participants in the group? What instructional decisions do they make to help foster their students' understanding of the text? These questions guided and framed my research.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand how three teachers negotiated their roles as instructors and participants during a literature discussion unit. The teacher is instrumental in providing the instruction and modeling required for successful literature discussions. The social norms established early in the process affect both the teacher and students' participation. The teacher's role in a literature discussion has been researched (Freedman, 1993; Maloch, 2002; Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999), but more needs to be known about how and when high school English teachers decide to participate in the discussion and what decisions they make to help their students understand a text. This decision can be hard for teachers because they want to ensure their students understand the important elements of the book. But they also realize that the advantage of literature discussion is the opportunity for students to create their own meaning through their conversations with peers.

### **Research Design**

#### **Paradigm.**

As a constructivist, I believe multiple realities are co-constructed by both the researcher and participants (Hatch, 2002). Additionally, I believe that students, when given the opportunity, co-construct their knowledge with their peers and teacher (Vygotsky, 1933/1978). Schwandt (2000) writes, "We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth" (p. 197). My study aimed to investigate literature discussion groups. In order to understand how the classroom teacher affected students' learning in a

literature discussion group, findings were constructed by myself, the literature discussion participants, and the teachers.

I also believe research knowledge is gained through naturalistic methods (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to “reconstruct the constructions participants use to make sense of their worlds” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15), research must be conducted in the natural setting. Therefore, participant observation and interviews were completed in the school environment.

### **Tradition.**

I chose to frame my investigation as a descriptive case study in order to provide a “rich, ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29).

According to Yin (1993), the case study tradition is appropriate when the researcher desires to “define topics broadly and not narrowly, cover contextual conditions and not just the phenomenon of study, and rely on multiple and not singular sources of evidence” (p. xi). My investigation of a literature discussion group fit all three of these criteria. I conducted an exploratory case study, one designed to define questions and hypotheses for future research about literature discussion groups (Yin, 1993). The purpose was to be “illustrative not definitive” (Patton, 1990, p. 173). Therefore, this study focused on the interactions of three teachers and their students. I chose this approach because I looked at a bounded system; I “fence[d]-in” what I planned to study (Merriam, 1998, p. 27).

### **Researcher role.**

My relationship to the teacher and students in the literature discussion group was “observer as participant” (Merriam, 1998, p. 101). My research activities were known to the group, and my first priority was to gather information rather than participate in the

conversations. I was present during the discussions but sat outside of the group to lessen the students' focus on me. Additionally, I established relationships with the students before the discussions began through interviews and informal conversations so they would feel more comfortable with my presence as they talked about the text. During the process of data analysis, I co-constructed meaning with the teachers and literature discussion group participants through informal and formal interviews as well as member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were three high school language arts teachers and the student participants of one of the literature discussion groups each teacher worked with during the day. I attended every literature discussion meeting of each selected group and observed the teachers' interactions with their students so I could form a complete picture of how the teachers affected the literature discussions. Although two of the teachers team taught with another teacher, their partner teachers did not participate in the literature discussions.

I purposefully selected (Patton, 1990) the teacher participants because I knew they taught at the local high schools and had implemented literature discussion into their Language Arts curriculum. With the help of two of the teacher participants in this study, Lewis and Molly, I searched for other teachers at Valley Oak High School and Roosevelt High School who taught a literature discussion unit. I discovered Lewis's students participated in literature discussion during a meeting with Valley Oak High School English teachers at a local university. After Lewis agreed to participate in my study, I asked for his help in locating other teachers at Valley Oak who implemented literature

discussion into their curriculum. He was able to find one other teacher who did literature discussion and expressed interest in being involved in my research. I spoke with her, and she agreed to participate. Molly contacted other members of her department at Roosevelt High School, and she could not find another teacher who did literature discussion. I was fortunate to find teachers who taught students of diverse reading abilities. One teacher educated struggling readers, another taught Honors students, and the third taught Advanced Placement students.

The student participants were chosen with the help of the teacher once the groups had been formed based on their selection of the text they chose to read. In all three cases, the teachers chose a group who had turned in both the parent consent and student assent forms. The two teachers who team taught chose to have all literature discussion groups meet at one time. Therefore, I could only sit in on the conversations of one group. So, in order to establish consistency, I chose to observe one group of the third teacher as well. Each literature discussion group numbered five or six students. I formed relationships with the students by visiting them and conducting informal interviews.

### **Sites**

The research study was conducted in two 10-12 grade high schools in a Midwestern city with a population of approximately 90,000. One high school was located in the center city and the other was located on the south side of town. The racial composition of the student population for the 2008-2009 school year of the center city school was 65.9% white, 24.9% African-American, 4.3% Hispanic, 0.4% Indian, and 4.5% Asian. The free and reduced lunch rate was 28.3%. The racial composition of the student population for the 2008-2009 school year of the south side school was 81.1%

white, 11.9% African-American, 2.1% Hispanic, 0.5% Indian, and 4.5% Asian. The free and reduced lunch rate was 12.1%

(<http://www.dese.mo.gov/planning/profile/building/bl010093.html>).

### **Gaining Access to the Site**

I contacted the teacher I worked with for my pilot study to see if she was interested in participating in the dissertation study. She expressed interest and contacted the school's principal to inform him of the study. The other two teachers in the study agreed to participate after I spoke with them about my research question at a meeting with the University of Missouri and the high school's writing teachers. One of them contacted his principal, and she gave her support. I received the approval letter from the school district for my project January 13, 2009.

### **Approval Procedures**

#### **Campus IRB approval.**

I submitted an Exempt application on January 8, 2009 to Campus IRB. I received approval January 14, 2009.

#### **Informed consent process.**

The teachers, the students who participated in this study, and the students' parents/guardians were asked to give written informed consent before I began my research. I explained the research background, the purpose, the procedures, confidentiality, benefit/significance, and risk of this study when I asked participants for their informed consent. See Appendix A for the teacher consent form, Appendix B for the student assent form, and Appendix C for the letter home to parents/guardians seeking permission for their child's participation in the study.

### **Ethical considerations.**

Participants' confidentiality was maintained in that participants' names do not appear in the completed study. Pseudonyms are used in any written report, including this one. In addition, the name and location of the school was changed to a pseudonym and disguised. Considering the participants' privacy and the researcher's ethics, I used the digitally recorded data only for analysis and for no other purpose. This project did not involve any risks greater than those encountered in everyday life.

### **Data Sources and Data Collecting Procedures**

I gathered data from late January through May 2009. I used three data collection strategies: interviews with students and teachers, transcripts of the literature discussion groups' conversations, and documents/artifacts (e.g. teacher assignments, reading schedules, teacher scoring guides, student assignments, etc.) Table 1 illustrates the data sources that informed each research question.

Table 1

#### *Research Questions and Data Sources*

Research Question	Data Sources
1. What type of environment is needed for students to maximize the meaning they construct from a text?	Field note observations of teachers and students, teacher and student interviews, students' classwork, selected transcripts, reflexive journal
2. How do selected teachers negotiate their roles in a literature discussion group?	Field note observations of teachers and students, teacher interviews, teacher artifacts, students' classwork, selected transcripts, reflexive journal
3. What instructional decisions do selected teachers make to help their students construct meaning from a text?	Field note observations of teachers and students, teacher interviews, teacher artifacts, students' classwork, selected transcripts, reflexive journal

I spent four to seven weeks with the participants based on the teacher’s literature discussion unit schedule. One to two weeks were spent in the classroom to learn more about the setting and conduct interviews, two to four weeks were spent observing and recording the literature discussions, and one to two weeks were spent conducting follow-up interviews. Tables 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the chronology of data collection for each teacher.

Table 2

*Chronology of Data Collection in Mr. Blazer’s Classroom*

Month	Date	Data Collection
January	30	Initial teacher interview
February	2, 3, 9	Field notes
	9	Initial student interviews
	12, 17, 19, 24, 26	Field Notes, digitally recorded <i>Heart of Darkness</i> literature discussion group
March	4	Field Notes, digitally recorded <i>Heart of Darkness</i> literature discussion group
	10	Follow-up interviews with teacher and students
	12	Follow-up interview with one student

Table 3

*Chronology of Data Collection in Mrs. Adams’s Classroom*

Month	Date	Data Collection
April	2, 3	Field notes
	7	Initial teacher interview
	13, 14	Initial interviews with students

	15, 22, 29	Field notes, digitally recorded <i>Rooftop</i> literature discussion group
	20	Field notes, initial interview with one student
May	6	Field notes, digitally recorded <i>Rooftop</i> literature discussion group
	12	Follow-up interview with teacher
	14, 18	Follow-up interviews with students

Table 4

*Chronology of Data Collection in Mrs. Thompson's Classroom*

Month	Date	Data Collection
April	28	Initial teacher interview
	28, 29, 30	Field notes
May	4	Initial student interviews
	4, 5, 6	Field notes, digitally recorded <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> literature discussion group
	8, 14, 18	Field notes
	18	Follow-up interview with teacher and students

**Observations.**

In order to familiarize myself with the classroom routine and introduce myself to the students, I observed the teachers and students before the literature discussions began. To investigate how the classroom teacher affected students' learning in a literature discussion group, I observed the literature discussion groups' conversations.

I digitally audio recorded the literature discussions so that I could transcribe portions of the conversations for data analysis. I took field notes during each visit and

kept a reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to record my personal thoughts and interpretations for further data analysis. Janesick (1999) also recommends keeping a researcher journal as a way to describe and explain my role in the study. Furthermore, she suggests that the journal can be used as a data set to triangulate data.

### **Interviews.**

In order to understand the students' personal model and view of reading as well as their thoughts about literature discussion, I interviewed them before the conversations about the text began. I chose to complete these interviews in focus groups rather than individually so that the students felt comfortable sharing their experiences. After the students completed their study of the text, I interviewed them again in focus groups. I asked them to reflect on their literature discussion experience, including their views about the teacher's participation in the conversations. My goal was to understand if and how the students' peers and teacher helped them construct meaning from the text. I also conducted two in-depth, one-on-one interviews with the teachers, once before and once after the literature discussion unit, to understand their perspectives and roles in implementing literature discussion groups. Since open-ended questions allow the participants' answers to take any direction (Seidman, 2006), I asked open-ended questions (see Appendix D). The student interviews lasted 15 to 20 minutes, and the teacher interviews were 45 minutes to one hour in length. I digitally recorded the interviews so that I could transcribe portions of them for data analysis.

The transcripts of both the literature discussions and interviews were written as regular orthography. I did not attempt to represent phonological features even though there was important variation among my participants. Although details of that variation

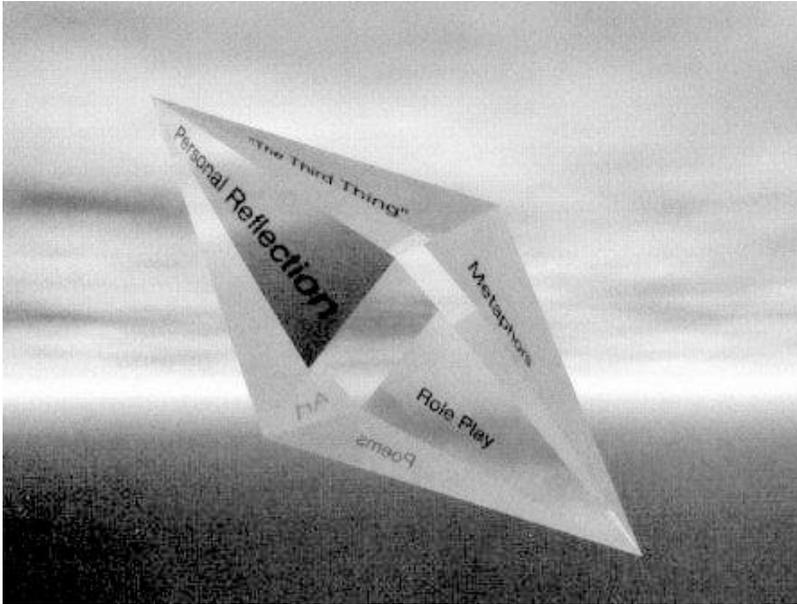
could provide greater insight into the nature of the conversations, they were not the focus of this study. I wished to maintain consistency and not highlight one phonological variation over another. All of the participants' content words were transcribed. Filler words such as *um* were not always transcribed. I used /??/? to indicate words and/or phrases that were inaudible or unclear. Ellipses were used to indicate where one speaker left off or was interrupted.

### **Documents and artifacts.**

During the observations and interviews, I kept field notes, theoretical notes, and methodological notes (Corsaro, 1985). These notes aided in data analysis and my reflection. I also reviewed teachers' relevant documents as supplementary data. These documents included handouts distributed to accompany the literature discussion and the classwork of the literature discussion group participants.

In addition to the aforementioned documents and artifacts, I asked the teachers to generate other forms of data to strengthen my analysis. Although triangulation is generally accepted in qualitative research as a sufficient way to establish the trustworthiness of a research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), Richardson's (2000) idea of "crystallization" provides an alternative view of data collection and analysis. Janesick's (2000) explanation of Richardson's term is clear: "Crystallization recognizes the many facets of any given approach to the social world as a fact of life. The image of the crystal replaces that of the land surveyor and the triangle" (p. 392). Whereas triangulation suggests three kinds of data sources, crystallization makes room for additional forms of data that can contribute to data analysis. Figure 1 is an example of a crystallization figure

Dr. Jill Ostrow created during the process of data analysis (Hubbard & Power, 2003, p. 128).



*Figure 1.* Ostrow's Crystallization Figure

I asked the teachers to create metaphors and email me during the unit to get different perspectives on their participation in the literature discussion groups.

The advantages of incorporating the writing and the arts into qualitative research studies are well supported by research. Richardson (2000) states, "By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable" (p. 923). We write to discover, and by asking participants to write about their experiences in various genres, they are given the opportunity to explore their thoughts in meaningful ways.

### **Initial Data Analysis Procedures**

All field notes, expanded observation notes, transcripts from recorded interviews and literature discussions, documents, and artifacts were used for data analysis. I began analyzing the data as I collected it in order to gain knowledge and provide guidance for

future observations (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). The quality of the research was improved by beginning the formal data analysis early (Hatch, 2002).

The case study tradition is based on thick, rich description (Cresswell, 1998). I used my observations, interviews, documents, and artifacts to describe both the setting and the literature discussions. I listened to all of the literature discussions multiple times and created data briefs for each conversation. First designed by Gilles (1991) to organize data, data briefs are “a summary of the [literature circle] discussion and the researcher’s perceptions of the themes and behaviors of the participants” (p. 120). Creating the data briefs corroborated the initial themes that emerged in my reflexive journal.

After I felt I had a good knowledge of the information presented in the data and recorded memos of my interpretations, I chose to transcribe select portions of my digital audio files that directly related to my research questions. Then, I “reread the data, coding places where interpretations [were] supported or challenged” (Hatch, 2002, p. 181). I began my content analysis by reading my data line-by-line and assigning labels “**suggested by the context in which an event is located**” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 106, bold in original). The context of my situation was a literature discussion, so I coded the conversations based on the decisions the teachers made to help their students construct meaning from the text during the discussions. I also coded the students’ talk to help me understand the teachers’ roles. The analysis of data provided insight into how teachers negotiated their roles as participants during the discussions.

I made generalizations by analyzing the data. In order to do this, I looked at the chunks of conversation I transcribed. These generalizations were based on the themes that emerged during the interpretive data analysis (Hatch, 2002). I borrowed from

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method to analyze the emerging themes. I identified a particular incident from a literature discussion and then compared this incident to teacher and student interviews as well as my field notes. These comparisons led to categories that were later combined and refined into my findings (Merriam, 1998).

### **In-Depth Data Analysis Procedures**

From my data briefs, I chose key transcripts to analyze using two different lenses in addition to my content analysis. Analyzing the same data with various methods revealed new understandings. I looked at my data from talk (Barnes & Todd, 1995) and conversational analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) perspectives. I also looked for possible negative cases to enhance the trustworthiness of my study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These findings were written as a narrative report to contribute to the teacher and students' knowledge of how literature discussion group conversations can be most effective in helping students construct meaning from a text.

Barnes and Todd (1995) analyzed the social and cognitive functions of small group conversations. In order to understand the teachers' role in the literature discussion groups, I decided to consider both the social domain and the cognitive strategies present in the groups' discussions. How the group functioned as a social unit was affected by the decisions the teachers made to help their students construct meaning from the text. Additionally, the teachers' desire for his or her students to come away from the discussions with a better understanding of the book affected the cognitive strategies both the teachers and students employed.

The main point of conversational analysis is to discover how the participants “make sense of one another’s actions” (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, p. 146) based on the talk-in-interaction. The sequence of turns studied in-depth provides insight into the situational context. The conversation analysis method looks at a small amount of talk in a very detailed way. Transcripts indicate turn-taking and overlap, gaps and pauses, breathiness, and laughter (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). Everything is noted using a specific transcription glossary. All of these details are important because conversation analysts are concerned with what naturally occurs during the conversation, and these occurrences help researchers analyze the relationship of the speakers. To understand how selected teachers and students negotiated their roles as participants in a literature discussion group, I narrowed my focus to overlaps and latches.

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four techniques for establishing trustworthiness in a research study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I have created a table to explain the methods I used to meet these four criteria for trustworthiness, and a brief explanation of these methods follows.

Table 5

*Trustworthiness: Corresponding Criteria and Methods*

Criteria	Methods
Credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Triangulation and crystallization of sources and methods</li> <li>○ Peer debriefing</li> <li>○ Negative case analysis</li> </ul>
Transferability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Member check</li> <li>○ Thick descriptions</li> </ul>

Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Systematicity of observations and data collections</li> <li>○ Thick descriptions</li> <li>○ Expert debriefing</li> </ul>
Confirmability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Audit trail</li> <li>○ Triangulation</li> <li>○ Peer debriefing</li> <li>○ Expert debriefing</li> <li>○ Systematicity of observations and data collections</li> <li>○ Member check</li> </ul>

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### **Credibility.**

I observed my participants both before and during the literature discussions. This time period enhanced the credibility of my study because I observed the students and teachers in their natural environment as well as a literature discussion from beginning to end. I triangulated and crystallized the data by using a variety of data collection methods: observation, interviews, documents, and artifacts. Cho and Trent (2006) acknowledge crystallization as a form of transformational validity “in which meanings are both deconstructed and reconstructed in a way that makes initial connotations more fruitful” (p. 324). I asked my fellow classmates familiar with qualitative research to provide peer debriefing throughout the Spring 2009 semester. The teachers were asked to do a member check to corroborate the findings. This was important to the credibility of my study because I want to represent each participant fairly and accurately. During data analysis, I looked for and addressed negative cases.

### **Transferability.**

The key method I used to meet this criterion of trustworthiness was a thick description (this meets the dependability criterion as well). This method was important to the case study tradition because the focus of a case study is the context of the situation,

and the “interpretive component” is what matters (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 329). In order for this to be understood, I provided much detail and description of the participants, the environment, and the literature discussions.

**Dependability.**

I was systematic in my observations and data collections. I planned the timeline of the study with the teachers and was present for every literature discussion. The data I collected was labeled and filed in a neat and organized manner to ensure both the protection and confidentiality of the data. For expert debriefing, I asked my advisor, Dr. Carol Gilles, to read my data analysis several times during the study. She has much knowledge in the fields of talk in the curriculum and literature discussion groups.

**Confirmability.**

In addition to the triangulation, crystallization, peer and expert debriefing, systematicity of observations and data collections, and member check described above, I kept an audit trail to ensure confirmability. All digital recordings were kept. My observation notes and interview transcripts were detailed. Both the recordings and documents included specific information such as the day and time recorded so that a reader could follow my exact steps in collecting and analyzing the data.

## **Chapter Four – Findings and Discussion: Lewis Blazer**

Three main research questions guided this inquiry into the use of literature discussion groups at the high school level: a) What type of environment is needed for students to maximize the meaning they construct from a text?, b) How do selected teachers negotiate their roles in a literature discussion group?, and c) What instructional decisions do selected teachers make to help their students construct meaning from a text? I collected data from teacher and student interviews, teacher and student artifacts, digitally recorded and transcribed literature discussions, and researcher field and reflexive journals.

The following four chapter narratives illustrate the findings by focusing on each teacher in the study separately and by concluding with a comparison and contrast of the three teachers. I will begin by introducing each teacher and the context of the literature discussion unit; then, each research question will be addressed.

### **Lewis Blazer's Classes**

Lewis Blazer taught two sections of sophomore World Studies and one section of senior Pop Culture at Valley Oak High School (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). At Valley Oak High School, all World Studies classes are team taught by an English and History teacher. The class periods are 90 minutes long and the class meets the entire school year. At the conclusion of the class, students receive two credits, one in English and the other in History.

The students at Valley Oak High School (81.1% white, 11.9% African-American, 2.1% Hispanic, 0.5% Indian, 4.5% Asian, 12.1% free and reduced lunch) self-select their English courses and choose between regular, Honors, and Advanced Placement World

Studies. Although students are free to choose the World Studies course of their choice, the students in Lewis's class enrolled in advanced English classes in junior high, so they continued this path in high school. The Advanced Placement World Studies curriculum is designed to prepare students for the Advanced Placement test taken at the end of the academic year. Students who perform well on the test receive college credit.

I chose to study one of Lewis's World Studies classes because literature discussion is not part of the Pop Culture curriculum. The class I observed was the smaller of Lewis's World Studies classes and met from 7:50—9:25 a.m. I selected this class because the other had more students and therefore could have posed some difficulty in audio recording since all of the literature discussion groups met at one time in Lewis's classroom. Lewis's class had 24 Advanced Placement students, 15 boys and nine girls. Seventeen students were Caucasian, four were Indian, and three were Asian. Lewis told me in his initial interview that his first hour students were shy, and he believed the small literature discussion groups would hold his students accountable and encourage them to participate.

### **Literature Discussion in Lewis's Classroom**

During our first interview, Lewis explained he would have all four literature discussion groups meet at the same time. Although his students originally had three books from which to choose, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859/2007) was eliminated because it was longer than the other two options and many of his students had already read the book. Lewis presented a short book talk of the students' choices, *Frankenstein* (1831/2003) and *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1994). Students wrote down and submitted their top choice to Lewis and four groups were formed. Two groups read *Frankenstein*

(1831/2003), and two groups read *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1994). Both books were chosen by Lewis and his partner teacher Jeremy because they fit well into the History revolution unit and are often on Advanced Placement reading lists. This unit was the only one during the school year in which students participated in literature discussion groups. The students completed six literature discussions, ranging from 35 to 40 minutes in length, over the course of four weeks. On the days the students did not meet in groups, they focused on the History portion of the World Studies class led by Lewis's partner teacher. On two separate occasions Lewis led a whole class discussion approximately 15 minutes in length and asked students to give examples of how their books fit the definition of revolution the class constructed at the beginning of the unit. Other than those brief discussions, the students talked about the texts only during group meeting times.

Most students received their first book choice, and I chose one of the *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1994) groups to study because all students in the group had submitted both student assent and parent consent forms (see Appendix E for a synopsis of the book). All of the literature discussion groups met at the same time, so I could only choose one on which to focus my digital recordings and observation notes. The literature discussion group I studied was composed of six students: one Asian female, two Caucasian females, one Asian male, and two Caucasian males.

I conducted the interviews with the students in pairs and first met Mary and Walter. Mary, a Caucasian female, ran track and cross country and loved to horseback ride. She said she enjoyed reading for fun but didn't have as much time to read what she liked because of all of the academic reading she had to complete during the school year.

Walter, a Caucasian male, played soccer and golf for Valley Oak High School, had a great sense of humor, and seemed to be well liked by his peers. Like Mary, Walter said he liked to read but rarely read for fun during the school year because of time constraints. Next, I spoke with Carl and Michael. Carl, an Asian male, liked hanging out with friends as well as playing video games and basketball. He enjoyed reading non-fiction articles online. Michael, a Caucasian male, played football for Valley Oak High School, and he loved listening to music in his spare time. He particularly enjoyed science fiction and technology books. Finally, I interviewed Suzy and Katy. Suzy, a quiet and reserved Asian female, played cello, and loved the book *Twilight* (2005). Katy, a Caucasian female, participated in show choir and theatre and liked mystery and romance novels most.

### **Getting to Know Lewis**

“Literature circles are like building a house. Each student brings a different set of skills and perspectives, but together they construct an original and unique interpretation of the meaning and significance of the novel.”

Lewis Blazer’s response to a fill-in-the-blank question I emailed him after the first day of literature discussions fit with everything I knew about him as a teacher. This simile reflected his beliefs about why he chose to incorporate a literature discussion unit into his curriculum and the expectations he had of his Advanced Placement World Studies tenth grade students. During my first interview with Lewis, I learned his original goal after graduating from the University of Missouri with degrees in English and Religious Studies was to pursue his Ph.D. and teach college. However, after three years of working full-time with junior high and high school students as a youth minister, Lewis changed his mind.

Lewis enjoyed the relationships he formed with youth as a minister, and he began considering teaching as a possible career choice. Lewis's brother was a math teacher at Valley Oak High School in the Parkview Public School District, so Lewis decided to begin subbing for the district to see if teaching was a fit for him as well. Two weeks into the 2003-2004 school year, Valley Oak High School needed someone part-time to teach the History curriculum in an extra section of World Studies. Although Lewis was not certified to teach History, he accepted the job and took classes during the school year and the following summer from Riverview College to earn his provisional teaching certificate from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Lewis taught History full-time the following school year, and in the Fall of 2005, when an opening emerged, began teaching English.

I asked Lewis about his decision to accept the part-time History teaching job even though his degree was in English. He told me that although his passion was for the English curriculum, he viewed teaching as an "avenue to be creative." Lewis believed students needed teachers "that care about them, that care about teaching, that care about the material, and are willing to work hard, and I think if you have all three of those things you kind of make a pretty good teacher." Lewis "fell in love with teaching," and to him, it didn't matter what he taught. So, he decided to "abandon his quest to go to grad school because I liked what I was doing so much."

During Lewis's fifth year of teaching, he became the English department head. Although Lewis said this responsibility added a "new dimension" to teaching, he sometimes felt he was "swimming upstream" because "there are not many people that see

education the way I see it, or the point of it, or the methods you use to reach kids.” As department head, Lewis was reminded:

a little bit of the reasons why I got out of the ministry. It started to become more about administration, numbers, data, and fundraising. I don’t really love teaching because of the administration side, but as department chair, half of my energy and time is spent managing other things than my kids, so it’s frustrating.

However, Lewis’s desire to teach outweighed the frustrations he had as a department chair. He continued to have a passion for teaching English and looked forward to beginning a literature discussion unit with his students.

### **Lewis’s reasons for using literature discussion.**

First, I wanted to know how Lewis learned about literature discussion. He told me he didn’t have “any formal training on how to conduct a literature circle” but learned an instructional strategy from his peers at Valley Oak High School called “scored discussions.” These discussions were miniature versions of Socratic Seminars comprised of six to eight students discussing one set question with no teacher participation. Lewis’s understanding of the scored discussions coupled with his own experiences participating in student led discussions resulted in his desire to try literature discussion in his own classroom. Additionally, Lewis liked “Vygotsky’s collaborative learning model” and desired to fulfill Valley Oak High School’s expectation that all teachers strive to try new instructional strategies to improve student achievement.

My question about why Lewis chose to use literature discussion in his classroom revealed Lewis’s core beliefs about teaching:

Well, I’m very against the idea of teacher directed, stand up in front of the class, tell your kids what they should think, make them regurgitate those thoughts and opinions or ideas on a test later and grade them on how well they’re able to memorize your ideas. So, I always want kids to establish their own meaning, to interpret things, to learn how to think, to learn how to analyze and then to validate

their opinions and their arguments as a teacher not by telling them they're wrong about their interpretation, but by helping them learn how to support their ideas with actual textual understanding.

Lewis said literature circles helped his students accomplish the goals he had for them because they were able to share their opinions and validate their thoughts in a “low risk” environment. Lewis noticed literature circles helped kids gain more insight from the text because they could talk about their ideas and learn from peers’ ideas that may have been different from their own. Lewis’s desire to have his students share their reader reactions to the text fits with writings about reader-response theory. Rosenblatt (2005) believed readers called on their previous experiences and background to create meaning. Since people have different lived experiences, sharing varied reactions to a text gives us the opportunity to enhance our overall understanding. According to Langer (1995), environments in which students can express and share their thoughts and feelings about a text leads to a greater understanding of the world. Literature discussion provides students with this opportunity, thus encouraging the process of meaning making.

Although Lewis did not receive formal training in literature discussion as a kind of reading instruction, his reasons for using literature discussion in his classroom are supported by the research. Bakhtin (1981), Barnes (1992), Dewey (1924), and Edwards and Mercer (1987) believed social interaction was fundamental to the learning process. Students who are given the opportunity to converse build on others’ ideas to create a more complete understanding. Therefore, when students have time to interact socially about a text, they may make more meaning than they would have if they read the text in isolation. Teachers who used literature discussion in their classrooms wrote about how and why these conversations worked for students of all abilities (Faust, et al., 2005;

Daniels, 2002; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 2008). They noted students who are members of small, supportive social environments learn from one another by offering their own opinions and interpretations of the text and listening to the ideas of others.

### **Environment Created**

#### **Lewis's strategy to establish successful literature discussion practices.**

Lewis's main strategy to establish successful literature discussion practices was to have each group create its own norms to be followed during each group meeting. Lewis wrote the first rule: always sit in a circle facing each other. In my field journal, I noted Lewis asked his students why he wrote that norm. They responded that sitting in a circle would help them hear everyone and would make each member feel like an equal part of the group. Lewis directed his students to sign the norm sheet as a sign of their commitment. He did not offer any other suggestions for group norms, and they were not discussed again until the students offered feedback about the unit after the last day of discussion. Lewis mentioned in my first interview with him that his students should know what is expected of them during small group discussion based on the Socratic Seminars they participated in earlier in year.

During the first day of discussion, the groups' first task was to create the rest of their norms. The group I studied added six norms to the one Lewis provided. They committed to the following list I quoted directly from their handout for the duration of the unit:

- No interrupting (respect).
- No criticizing ideas (respect).
- Stay up to date (respect, responsibility).
- NO distractions (respect for our body, it is a temple).
- Random animal impersonations (environmentally friendly).

- Government will reflect a system of government—3 branches each with own check on other groups. Modeled after the U.S.A. government.

However, over the course of the unit, several of the norms were not followed, and the norms the students did choose to follow disrupted or stifled their conversation. The norm most frequently not followed was “no interrupting.” At some point during all six discussions, one or more members were interrupted. These interruptions seemed to affect two group members in particular. During the fourth discussion, Katy began drawing her ideas on paper. In an email I sent Lewis dated February 27, I asked if he was pleased about the quality of responses he received from his students of the questions he asked them to complete during the discussions. Overall, Lewis thought the groups were getting sidetracked too easily, but he mentioned Katy’s contribution to her group’s answers. He wrote, “I do like, however, that Katy feels the freedom to draw a symbolic picture that depicts the relationship between characters and themes in the novel. I wonder if she does this because she doesn’t feel that her voice is heard in the circle, and drawing is her way of contributing ideas without imposing them.” Katy never mentioned this concern to me, but she was often interrupted by more dominant members of the group.

The second group member affected by interruptions was Suzy. In my follow-up interview with her, she expressed her difficulty in adding her opinion into the conversation. She felt two members were controlling and did not feel her ideas were adequately considered. I transcribed a portion of one of these discussions using a conversational analysis approach. By specifically transcribing overlaps, I was able to take a closer look at turn-taking. I have included the transcription glossary (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) I used to note these occurrences as Appendix F.

Suzy: Oh, like in *Hercules*? With the scissors and [the  
Walter: “The elder woman’s glance of unconsumed wisdom and uncanny and fateful appearance and the fact that both women are thought as guarding the door of darkness may evoke a brief memory of the sybil in Virgil’s *Aeneid* who guards the door of the underworld into which Aeneis is to venture. A less remote literary reminiscence is of Dickens’ Madame Defarge who [Suzy says “Oh!”] in *A Tale of Two Cities* knitted on the steadfastness of faith, and who says she is knitting shrouds. Her knit work incorporates the names of the exploiters who are to incur retribution and /??/?/ is called vengeance.”

Michael: I remember talking about that.  
Walter: “These are only fleeting associations. Predominantly, the two ladies are credibly /??/?/. Marlowe thinks of them as faithful in knitting a black pall because she knows that some of these men who the women introduce to the company will never return alive from Africa.”

Michael: Okay, write that down.  
Mary: Is Marlow a girl?  
Suzy: I think it’s a guy, isn’t it?  
Walter: No, Marlow’s a guy.  
Mary: Why did you say she?  
Katy: They’re talking about the woman.  
Mary: Oh.  
Suzy: So, would it be like them guarding the heart [the  
Walter: Yeah, they’re like  
Suzy: guarding the darkness would be like guarding that [conference room?  
Walter: Yeah, that’s what they symbolize, like guardians of the underworld?

Michael: Those who go into the room and go into the darkness, or Africa, usually don’t return.  
Suzy: Ohhhh  
Walter: Like they’re guarding darkness.  
Suzy: Woah, okay, [that’s deep!  
Carl: I still don’t get why there’s one fat one and one skinny one.

During this short conversation, Suzy was interrupted four times. Although she did not mention the names of the two group members she felt were controlling in my follow-up interview with her, in my field notes I wrote that Walter and Carl seemed to dominate the discussion most frequently. Walter wanted to read the essay in the back of his copy of *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1994), and as a result, he cut off Suzy’s attempt to connect the book to another text. When Suzy tried to share her thoughts about what the two women

knitting guarded, she was interrupted twice by Walter. Finally, when Suzy wished to acknowledge Michael's comment, Carl broke in to express his continuing confusion. Suzy rarely had the chance to complete a full thought.

One of the norms the students did choose to follow was requiring a member who distracted the group to impersonate a random animal. The group followed this norm consistently, and the conversation derailed every time. The students' focus would turn to the person requested to impersonate the animal, and sometimes a discussion about which animal the student would impersonate ensued. These conversations disrupted the flow of the students' thinking, and it usually took them three to five minutes to get back on track.

Walter suggested the group should reflect a three branch system of government modeled after the United States government to keep the members' comments in check and balanced. So, as they answered Lewis's questions, a member (usually Walter) would put the discussion up for a vote, thereby halting the discussion entirely. Because Mary was the recorder, she was not allowed to vote, so her voice was not represented in the final decision. However, though the conversations were sometimes stifled by this norm, this was not always the case.

Walter: Okay, let's take a vote. All who think superiority, raise their hand.

Katy: I'm still thinking.

Mary: I'm not allowed to vote.

Katy: Okay, but listen. Okay, so I think the idea is superiority and the way they're getting there is to cover up by saying we're not going to be a threat.

Suzy: Yeah, exactly.

Mary: But, so the ideology is

Katy: Is superiority then. Yes, I vote.

Walter: But then why would it say that he's saying that's, what redeems it is the idea only, like almost like the idea is a good thing, but then the idea wouldn't be like superiority.

Michael: It covers up...

Katy: Well, they wouldn't say the idea is superiority.

Michael: Yeah. They would say it's progress.

Katy: Yeah.

Walter: So is that the idea?

In this conversation, Walter attempted to put the group's ideas to a vote, but Katy continued the conversation with the support of Suzy and Michael. Walter gave in and decided to ask questions, and the conversation continued for the next few minutes. Although it may have been easier to decide on an answer based on a vote, some group members decided to abandon the norm and continue the discussion.

Lewis assumed his students would know how to participate in a meaningful literature discussion based on their previous Socratic Seminars. However, Lewis mentioned several times he noticed that as he walked around the classroom, some groups seemed to get sidetracked easily and were not maximizing their class time. He did not give feedback on the norms the students created and gave just one expectation for the literature discussion groups on the first day of the unit. Barnes (2008) and Mercer and Dawes (2008) suggest teachers should take the time to establish their expectations for a successful collaborative community. Students must be taught how to engage in productive discussions; otherwise, the discussions may not result in the teacher's desired outcome.

### **The students' relationship with Lewis.**

In my follow-up interviews with both Lewis and his students, I asked if they thought the literature discussion unit could be defined as a success. All of them said yes. Lewis ultimately felt his students' overall accomplishments were "good," and he believed they understood things better as the discussions went on. Although Lewis told me he felt his students were more distracted than he would have liked, I noted in my field journal

that the students generally stayed on topic and were able to return to their discussion within three to five minutes if they got distracted. On average, the students were not discussing the text eight to 10 minutes of their 35 to 40 minutes of allotted discussion time. When I asked students to discuss why they believed the literature discussion unit succeeded, they noted Lewis's involvement in the group. Walter, Mary, and Katy mentioned Lewis's questions (those they had to answer on paper as well as those he asked during their discussions) were good guidelines and prompts for them. Mary and Michael appreciated Lewis's occasional "check-ins" to see if the group was on topic. Lewis usually checked in on each group at least twice and talked with them anywhere from four to eight minutes. However, Carl felt sometimes the group relied on Lewis too much.

The students' reflections of Lewis's role in the group aligned with the role they predicted he would play before the discussions began. I asked the students if they felt there would ever be a time when they would prefer not to have Lewis participate in the discussion. None of them could envision a situation where this would be the case. The students said they felt comfortable with Lewis and knew what he was like as a teacher. Katy said, "He knows what to ask to put you on the right track." This comment reflected the other students' descriptions of Lewis as well. On two separate occasions during the unit, Lewis asked his students to provide feedback about how the discussions were going. His students did not hesitate to share their opinions and offer suggestions for how to make the discussions more beneficial to them. I noted in my field journal that the students referred to Lewis by his last name. They rarely said mister before Blazer, and Lewis seemed comfortable with this address. Lewis often joked around with his students

in class, and the day after he got engaged, he took some class time to tell his students the story. Short (1990) and Wells and Ball's (2008) research addresses the importance of the community in successful literature discussions. The more comfortable students feel with each other and their teacher, the more likely they'll share thoughts and ideas.

### **Summary.**

In order to answer the question about what type of environment was needed for students to maximize the meaning they constructed from the text, I looked at Lewis's "in the moment" participation as well as his role as instructor before and after the literature discussion unit. I found Lewis's strategy to establish successful literature discussion practices influenced the group's communicative environment. Lewis did not spend much time communicating his expectations about successful group practices. He claimed his students knew how to participate in small group discussions based on their performance in Socratic Seminars earlier in the school year. Lewis gave his students ownership to write their own group norms. Although the group I studied was mostly successful in staying focused and discussing the text, some of the norms resulted in distracted and stifled conversation.

Another theme that emerged about the type of environment needed for a successful literature discussion group unit was the students' relationship with Lewis. The environment of trust and comfort had been established earlier in the year, and the students knew what to expect of Lewis. None of them ever expressed the need to hold back what they wanted to say, and they knew they could seek his assistance during discussion time if they had questions or were confused. Furthermore, on the two

occasions when Lewis asked for his students to offer him feedback about the literature discussions, they were honest and open.

### **Lewis's Initial Thoughts about His Role in the Literature Discussion Group**

Lewis's thoughts about what role he would play in the literature discussion groups stemmed from his perception of his students' abilities. His World Studies classes were comprised of Advanced Placement students. During our first interview, I asked Lewis to "describe his students as readers." He began by saying that his students had "learned how to play the school game" and that it was difficult to get them to "take risks academically." Lewis believed most of his students could comprehend a text well literally but struggled getting deeper. Lewis and his partner teacher Jeremy strived to "move away from grades as motivation." Lewis and Jeremy found their students liked to "play it safe" and "pad their grade with fifty percent of points that are just givens," so they took some of those opportunities for points away from them. Lewis and Jeremy challenged their students to think instead of giving them assignments where the students could simply write the answer they thought the teacher was looking for. Many questions asked students to analyze a quote from the book or offer a group opinion.

So, Lewis viewed his role as "teaching as coaching." He wanted to encourage, to give his students guidance, to support their attempts at meaning making, to increase their interest in the text, and to establish the text's relevancy to the bigger picture. Lewis said, "I can see or diagnose the situation kind of intuitively and get them to the right place. And I feel like I'm cautious about it because I don't want kids to start looking at me. I don't want them to look at me for affirmation. I want them to look at each other and be confident in themselves." Consequently, Lewis decided his main strategy to help his

students accomplish his vision for a meaningful literature discussion was to ask lots of questions and provide guidance when his students seemed stuck. But, he also counted on his students to work together when he wasn't present to make meaning of the text.

Lewis's description of the kinds of questions he modeled for his students aligned with his thoughts about getting his students to think deeper about the text. He said:

I think I'll never ask them a question that's surfacey. I don't care about plot. I don't care about what happens. I don't care as much about the details of the novel as I do about what the kid interprets. And so almost all of the questions I ask them, any kind of discussion question that's going to prompt what they're thinking about, I'm always going to want them to get to that second level of author intent.

Lewis assumed his students would have a good literal comprehension of the text but would need help getting deeper. So, Lewis envisioned scaffolding his students' learning. Vygotsky's (1978) explanation of the Zone of Proximal Development helped teachers learn that in order to build students' knowledge, teachers had to recognize what students could do on their own and then provide assistance to move them to the next level of understanding. Langer (1992) described this type of scaffolding as shaping—encouraging students to explain their thinking and offer textual support for their conclusions. Lewis believed his students would be able to understand the plot of their text with little problem. Therefore, he made it his goal to ask students more critical questions when he checked in with them during their group meetings. With a good understanding of Lewis as a teacher and his perceived involvement in the literature discussions, I began my observations of one literature discussion group.

### **Roles Lewis Played in the Literature Discussion Group**

Lewis's decision to have all four literature discussion groups meet at the same time resulted in his movement from group to group during the 35 to 40 minutes the

groups had for discussion. In my field notes, I recorded how often Lewis moved and how much time he spent with each group. On average, Lewis moved eight times and visited each discussion group twice. The time he spent with each group varied from four to eight minutes. Occasionally, Lewis simply listened in on a group's conversation or stood between two groups. Other times, he pulled up a chair and joined the discussion. My observations and digital recordings of the literature discussions resulted in the emergence of themes; these themes were supported by an email conversation and follow-up interviews with Lewis as well as interviews with students.

**Lewis: Nudger, manager, and facilitator in a literature discussion group.**

Lewis assumed a variety of roles when he participated in the literature discussions. After listening to all of the literature discussions, I purposefully transcribed the portions of the conversations where Lewis was a participant. These transcripts were representative of the roles Lewis played throughout the unit. My coding of Lewis's contributions to the group discussions resulted in nudger, manager, and facilitator. I created the names of the roles as well as the definitions. My definitions were informed by previous research on teacher roles in the elementary and secondary classroom.

I defined the role of nudger as the teacher asking students to defend their ideas and offering various ideas for them to consider. Langer (1992) calls this form of instruction *shaping*, a type of scaffolding that encourages students to explain their thinking and offer examples to support their conclusions. O'Flahavan (1994/1995) describes this teacher support using the terms elicitor and framer. The elicitor helps his or her students extend and explain their thinking, and the framer asks how students arrived at a conclusion or why they thought a certain way.

I defined the role of manager as briefly checking in on the groups to see if all members were using their time wisely to talk about the text. The professional literature does not address the teacher role of manager directly, but both Short et al. (1999) and Freedman's (1993) studies acknowledge that when teachers do choose to participate in the group discussions as a member, sometimes it is to refocus their students' attention to the conversation.

My definition of the facilitator role aligns with how Short et al. (1999) characterize it. The teacher as facilitator, according to Short et al. (1999), "involved teachers encouraging student interaction and talk and monitoring social interactions which interfered with discussion" (p. 378). I defined this role as one that kept the group on track or provided an opportunity for students to seek the teacher's assistance. The facilitator role emerged when the teacher participated in the groups for an extended amount of time to promote good discussion rather than redirecting behavior, as the manager role suggests.

I will address the roles in order of the frequency with which Lewis played them. Lewis assumed the role of nudger approximately 80 percent of the time, manager 10 percent, and facilitator 10 percent. I calculated these percentages for Lewis, as well as the other teachers in this study, using the data briefs I created for each literature discussion (Gilles, 1991). I made detailed notes about Lewis's participation in the conversations, and these notes resulted in my coding of the roles he played during the discussions. After I coded the data briefs based on the roles that emerged for Lewis, I counted the number of times each role appeared over the course of the literature discussion unit and figured percentages based on these numbers.

*Lewis as nudger.*

I defined the nudger role as the teacher asking students to defend their ideas and offering various ideas for them to consider. The following transcript from the first day of discussion exemplifies Lewis’s role as nudger. I coded Lewis’s comments in regular typeface and the students’ comments in italics.

Transcript	My Coding	Barnes and Todd
<p>Walter: He calls himself like an apostle.            Lewis: Yeah, he calls himself an apostle, but I think there’s one part earlier where he says he that he feels like an idol too, so you’ve got to wrestle with that type of imagery. I’m not saying that he’s supporting Christianity at all, but he definitely is supporting the idea that there’s something they’ve set up as an idea that they all bow down to and worship as if it is religious, right? And so what is that concept, like what is the idea that justifies imperialism in his mind? What makes it okay? I don’t think he’s saying Christianity, like the religion itself, but whatever the idea is, it’s kind of like a religion. Like we worship it like we worship a religion. What is that idea that we use to justify the exploitation of mankind?            Suzy: That we’re like actually giving the Africans like a chance of progress and letting them like further develop, I think.            Lewis: Is it progress? Is that the idea? That we worship and bow down for?            Walter: Or is just that they like think that they’re better than...            Lewis: So wrestle with it right? And the whole point of this is like to wrestle together as a group and come to a consensus and write it down. Right? So spend two, three, four minutes wrestling with it, and then you can vote like you guys were talking about.</p>	<p>Nudging            Offers own interpretation</p> <p>Nudging            Scaffolding questions</p> <p>Nudging            Scaffolding question  <i>Provides answer</i></p> <p>Nudging            Challenging Qs  <i>Begins offering an alternative answer</i></p> <p>Nudging            Giving directive</p>	<p>Accepting</p> <p>Expanding            Bringing in</p> <p>Requesting information</p> <p>Expanding            Bringing in</p> <p>Requesting information</p> <p>Expanding</p> <p>Expanding</p>

In this discussion, Lewis asked his students to “wrestle” with the text. Lewis offered his own interpretation of the text when he stated his opinion that the main character does not support Christianity but rather a different idea to worship. Perhaps Lewis suggested this idea as an authoritative teacher figure to lead his students into entertaining the thought further. He attempted to nudge his students into thinking deeper about the text by asking lots of questions. He did not tell his students what it is he thought the main character worshiped. Instead, Lewis pushed them to think about the idea and come to a consensus as a group after they had heard every member’s viewpoint. So, he scaffolded their learning by asking questions about what the main character worshipped. But, the number of questions Lewis asked his students in an effort to nudge their thinking may have limited the deep thought for which Lewis aimed. Lewis challenged Suzy’s answer, so she did not have the opportunity to explain her comment. His questions prompted Walter to offer a different idea, but Lewis interrupted Walter before he had the chance to expand on his thought by suggesting the students talk about all possible answers to the question so they could complete their in-class assignment. Gallimore and Tharp (1990) call the type of questions Lewis asked “assistance questions” designed to “produce a mental operation that the pupil cannot or would not produce alone” (p. 182). Rather than simply asking questions to find out what his students already knew, Lewis posed questions that furthered his students’ learning. Although Lewis’s intentions were most likely an attempt to get his students to think carefully about what the main character worshipped, his over-reliance on questions to nudge his students’ thinking may have distracted them from

addressing their peers' ideas, thereby minimizing what they were able to learn from each other.

Barnes and Todd's (1995) research on discourse moves provided additional insight into this transcript. They list four types of discourse moves: initiating, extending, eliciting, and responding. When a group member elicits information, he or she may "continue, expand, bring in, support, or request information" (p. 79). With the exception of Lewis's agreement with Walter's response, every discourse move he made fell into the eliciting category. Lewis's goal of wanting his students to think more deeply about the text was evident in his comments.

Lewis's explanation of why he used literature discussion in his classroom fit his role of nudger. Adamant about not giving students the answers and looking to him for approval, Lewis acknowledged his students' statements not with answers, but with more questions. When I initially interviewed the six members of the literature discussion group I studied, they predicted this would be his main role in their discussion. Katy remembered a previous literature unit when Lewis "helped us along the process of thinking." Suzy mentioned that he knew "how to guide us but not hold our hands." Carl expected him to "light the fire," and Michael felt that after Lewis helped them start the discussion, they should take over. Mary noted that in the past, Lewis would bring something up about the text if the conversation seemed to be dragging, and Walter said that Lewis often added in an extra thought for his students to consider.

Lewis played the role of nudger often, and occasionally his efforts at nudging his students did not result in the deep thinking Lewis expected.

Transcript	My Coding	Mehan	Barnes and Todd
Lewis: We who are about to die salute you, right, which is a reference to?	Question	Initiate	Initiating
Katy: Caesar!	<i>Answer</i>	Response	Qualifying
Lewis: No.	Evaluating	Evaluate	
Katy: Dang it!	<i>Disappointment</i>	Response	
Suzy: Oh, Roman gladiators who face their matches...	<i>Alternative answer</i>	Response	Accepting Initiating
Lewis: Exactly, when the Roman gladiators go into the gladiatorial arena, what are they facing?	Question	Evaluate Initiate	
Suzy and Michael: Death.	<i>Answer</i>	Response	Accepting Support
Lewis: Pretty much for sure, right? Which ties together with what Michael was saying earlier about how like those that go into Africa usually don't come back, right? So what are these two women weaving or knitting?	Evaluating Connecting	Evaluate	
Suzy: Death?	Question	Initiate	Initiating
Lewis: Not death necessarily, but...	<i>Guess</i>	Response	Expanding
Michael: The lives of people that go into Africa?	<i>Guess</i>	Evaluate Response	
Lewis: Yeah, like the future right? Their lives, what's going to happen to them. It's like fate and destiny. Those of you who've read <i>The Tale of Two Cities</i> ought to see that connection, for sure, right?	Evaluating	Evaluate	Accepting
Walter: Write it, write it, write it.	Connecting	Initiate Response	Expanding

My coding resulted in Lewis's attempts to nudge by asking questions appearing often, but I noticed the types of questions he asked were different from the ones he asked in the previous transcript. In contrast to the transcript above, during this conversation, the questions Lewis asked had a right or wrong answer. So, I coded this conversation using Mehan's (1979) research on how teachers question and receive responses from their students. In the IRE pattern Mehan describes, the teacher *initiates* a question, a student

*responds*, and the teacher offers an *evaluation* of the students' response. I discovered Lewis's questions followed this pattern, thereby limiting the students' opportunity to engage in deeper thinking. The students seemed more interested in offering the "right" answer than interpreting the text. My application of Barnes and Todd's (1995) discourse moves to this transcript further clarified my understanding of how this conversation differed from the discussion transcribed above. Lewis's initiating and expanding moves led to qualifying or accepting the students' answers rather than sparking further discussion.

As Hynds (1992) and Hardman's (2008) research found, asking questions with one answer in mind does not encourage students to explore the text's meaning. As a result, the students played a guessing game with Lewis, searching for the correct answer. Lewis's questions did not propel the conversation to a different level. Instead, Lewis directed his students to an answer on a worksheet of questions he asked them to complete during their discussion. Additionally, I noted in my field journal that when Lewis talked with the group for an extended amount of time, they turned their attention from each other to him. Lewis became the focal point of the discussion. Walter noticed Lewis led them to the answer about what the two women were weaving or knitting, and he turned to the group's recorder, Mary, and told her to write it down. At this point, the conversation's focus became completing the worksheet rather than discussing the idea further.

During a different discussion, Lewis's intentions as nudger were not followed through by his students. When Lewis checked in on the group, he told them he purposefully left out a part of the sequence of an attack on a boat to see if they would

mention it on their own. After the students tossed out a few ideas rejected by Lewis, Suzy finally came up with the correct answer. One of the main characters blows a whistle and the attack stops. Lewis responded:

Yeah. Like maybe it's desperation, maybe it's smart, maybe he knows that this thing is what scares them. I think it's interesting to think about what that means. Why it stops the attack. What could it represent or symbolize or stand for about society or civilization? Maybe the importance of sound. I don't know. It's just something else for us to wrestle with. Why don't you try to figure it out? How much more time do you need?

Lewis encouraged his students to figure out the whistle's significance to the story line, but they never responded. The students did not discuss the whistle for the remainder of their conversation, and it was never addressed again. Although Lewis viewed the whistle's presence in the story as significant, the students did not accept the nudge.

### *Lewis as manager.*

Lewis believed the literature discussions would help his students gain a greater understanding of the text. My observation notes and digital recordings of the literature discussions revealed his desire for the students to use their time wisely. One role Lewis exhibited regularly was that of manager. I defined the role of manager as briefly checking in on the groups to see if all members were using their time wisely to talk about the text. Several times during the literature discussions, Lewis gave the groups time reminders or asked what questions the students were answering on the handout presented to them. The following conversation occurred during the first day of discussion:

Lewis: Answer the second question while she's writing. You guys should already be to part two instead of wasting time, right?

Mary: That's a lot of responsibility.

Lewis: You should rotate who writes, too, so that Mary doesn't end up writing every single time.

Mary: No, I don't mind writing.

Lewis: I know, but if you're writing, you can't listen as well as if you're not writing. Because we really can't multitask as well as we think we can.

Lewis felt his students were not maximizing the time he gave them to complete their assignment. On this day and others, Lewis often announced to the class a number of minutes left to finish their work before he called time. In an email conversation dated February 27, Lewis wrote, "They are not as efficient as I'd like them to be, and I think they let themselves get sidetracked too easily. They don't feel the same urgency [another group] feels, for example." I wrote in my field notes that Lewis felt the group I studied was "squirrely" and had a hard time focusing on the task at hand. Lewis mentioned the group's lack of time management again in my follow-up interview with him. He said, "It was harder for me to let them just talk about stuff because I felt like they would waste like ten of the 30 minutes, and that was frustrating I think as a teacher to see or to feel like that time was wasted in some kind of way." Lewis's solution to this problem was to assume the manager role at least once during every discussion in an attempt to get his students to stay focused.

Barnes and Todd (1995) wrote about the tension teachers experience between control and trust. Teachers usually control their students' attention, and sometimes it is difficult to relinquish this behavior and trust the students to complete the task. Because Lewis believed his students were not using all of their discussion time to their advantage, he managed the group regularly to direct them to stay focused on talking about the text.

### *Lewis as facilitator.*

The third role I observed Lewis assume was facilitator. I defined this role as one that kept the group on track or provided an opportunity for students to seek Lewis's

assistance. Sometimes Lewis would simply ask, “What question are you guys on?” Other times he would ask “Do you have any questions?” or “Where are we at in this process?” Lewis’s role as facilitator reminded the students he was there to offer guidance and support if they needed it. Previous studies about the teacher’s roles in literature discussion groups (Freedman, 1993; Langer, 1992; Maloch, 2002; Short et al., 1999) point to the importance of playing the role of facilitator. These studies found that when teachers facilitated the discussions rather than led them, students explore their interests and a meaningful discussion occurred.

**Lewis’s roles were determined by his perception of students’ needs.**

Even though Lewis demonstrated a variety of roles in the literature discussion group, he played that of nudger most frequently. After the first day of discussion, I emailed Lewis and asked him how he decided when to join the group I observed. He wrote:

I jumped in when I thought that they weren’t getting to the level that I wanted them to get to in their discussions. I had hoped that the questions I asked were thought-provoking enough to get them to a deeper level of interpretation, but as I listened to their answer to their first question about the quote, I felt like they were settling for the obvious answer, rather than really wrestling with a variety of interpretations. In all of those instances, I jumped in when I thought that they were settling with their analysis.

Lewis’s answer to my question aligned with what he perceived his Advanced Placement students needed from him as an instructor. His answer also echoes what his students thought his role would be in their discussions. Lewis felt getting to the “second level of author intent” would be most difficult for his students, and the fact that he played the role of nudger so often confirms this concern. Additionally, his role as facilitator provided the

structure and reminders necessary for his students to use his expertise to help them take their understanding of the text to a new level.

Interestingly, Lewis also played a role he did not envision for himself before the discussions began. Although the role of manager did not occur as frequently as that of nudger, Lewis played it at least once during each day of discussion. As Lewis stated in his initial interview, he desired for his students “to establish their own meaning, to interpret things, to learn how to think, to learn how to analyze and then whatever they decide, right, to validate their opinions and their arguments as a teacher by not telling them they’re wrong about their interpretation but by helping them learn how to support their ideas with actual textual understanding.” In order to address all of these goals, Lewis felt he needed to keep his students focused.

### **Summary.**

Lewis played a variety of roles in the literature discussion group, and the roles he chose to play were determined by what he thought his Advanced Placement students needed. As Lewis indicated in his initial interview, he played the role of nudger most frequently. Lewis wanted to push his students to think deeper about the text, and he regularly asked them questions to move their thoughts in a new or different direction. However, in his quest to fulfill this role, the manager role appeared. The tension of balancing these two roles was reflected not only in his participation in the group’s discussion but also in the decisions he made to help his students construct meaning from the text.

## **Instructional Decisions Lewis Made**

### **Lewis's decisions and his perception of his students' reading abilities.**

Lewis believed his Advanced Placement students had a good comprehension of the text but struggled getting deeper. So, he thought they could discuss the basic plot of the novel with little or no assistance but might need some guidance to get to the next level, to interpret, to learn how to think and analyze. Lewis decided to have all of his literature discussion groups meet at one time so they could discuss on their own. But, he regularly listened in and participated in each group's discussion every time they met to ask questions and help them with confusing sections of the text.

This decision was supported by Lewis's students. They liked his involvement but were glad he was not around the entire time. Lewis was there when his students needed him, and they felt less pressure (and therefore more freedom) to discuss the text without Lewis looming over them. All of his students felt he helped them figure out the text, and Michael mentioned that Lewis "backed off" when he needed to. Katy liked when Lewis "bounced ideas" off of them. My follow-up interview with Walter and Mary provided additional insight into Lewis's decision to move around the classroom as the groups met.

Mary: I also liked how he didn't just have a class discussion. I liked how it was more personal within our groups and less intimidating almost without having a teacher there so that we could all feel comfortable to give a suggestion if we weren't really sure, cause a lot of people won't raise their hands in class if they're not positive they know the answer, and here was an opportunity for everyone to share and say what they thought without feeling too pressured by the teacher to think like they're stupid or something cause we all probably had the same views.

Walter: I think it was important that he gave us time to figure stuff out on our own.

Lewis's perception of his students seemed accurate. He knew them well enough to know that many of them would likely look to him to see if the answered they provided was "right." Lewis's desire to have his students think for themselves rather than looking to him to provide the answer influenced his decision to rotate his involvement in the groups. Mary confirmed Lewis's understanding of his Advanced Placement readers when she said, "We were able to try and test our wings without him being right there." They needed the freedom to explore without Lewis's presence. The current research on gifted education (Reis et al., 2004; Woods, 2008) indicates talented readers are ready to accept the challenge of reading difficult texts and participating in student-led discussions. These conversations lead them to a greater understanding of the text because they have the opportunity to push each other to think more deeply.

#### **Lewis's trust in his students.**

Lewis trusted his students to read *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1994) and understand it on a literal level. He mentioned in his initial interview there was no way for him and his partner teacher to quiz their students on everything they read, so they trusted them to read the materials. However, to ensure his students remained engaged in the discussion and focused on interpreting the novel, Lewis assigned his students some sort of task to complete every time they met as a group. Sometimes they answered questions; other times they looked for themes or analyzed characters (see Appendix G). On the first day of discussion, Lewis gave each group 11 questions to consider during their 45 minute discussion time. Of these 11 questions, Lewis bolded five that had to be answered. Of the six remaining questions, the students had to decide as a group which three they wanted to answer. Lewis instructed his students to select one member from the group to

record their answer. The group I studied nominated Mary, and she willingly accepted the task.

After the 45 minute time period expired for group discussions, Lewis realized he assigned too many questions. The group I observed answered the five bolded questions briefly but did not have time to look at the other six. I noted in my observation journal that Lewis admitted he had given them too many questions to consider. He asked for students' feedback on how many questions they thought they could handle. One student responded three, and a few others said they could answer five. Lewis then asked them if they wanted to write their own questions, but he received a lukewarm response. The students reported they had written their own questions before during previous units. So, Lewis told his students he would think about what he would ask them to accomplish during group meetings and asked them to mark quotes in the text that reflected one of the major themes of the novel for the next literature discussion group meeting.

On the next day of discussion, Lewis asked his students to share the quotes they had marked in the text, select as a group three to five quotes to write down, and then use these quotes to analyze the author's message concerning the theme. Additionally, Lewis asked his students to make one connection between the theme of the text and the time period 1750-1914 and agree or disagree with the author's message about the theme. The group did have an easier time managing this task as opposed to 11 questions, but the students were not able to complete the questions about the connection and whether or not they agreed with the author's message.

For the final four days of literature discussion, Lewis gave his groups two to four questions to answer. Each question had multiple parts, and the students often rushed to

finish. Mary recorded the group's answers for every discussion. In my field notes, I observed Mary did not contribute to the group discussion as frequently because she was writing. Additionally, the group often talked about things unrelated to the text as they waited for Mary to finish writing. On the last day of discussion, a few students shared their thoughts about answering questions during discussion time:

Walter: We need just like 20 minutes to just talk about it instead of doing the questions.

Michael: I would understand it much more.

Walter: Yeah. [in response to one of Lewis's questions, jokingly] I don't see secrecy at all in the novel, honestly, in the entire thing. [everyone laughs]

Carl: [continuing Walter's joke] Yeah, I thought it was pretty straight forward.

Katy: Moving on.

Suzy: I really do wish we could just talk about it.

Walter needed time to talk about the novel. In my follow-up interviews with the students, they told me they liked having Lewis's questions but felt pressured to answer them in the allotted time. They believed the questions served as a good guide to help them generate ideas, but also felt they should not have been required to write their answers down. Walter and Michael thought Lewis could have assessed their knowledge of the book by listening in on the conversations rather than requiring written answers.

#### **Lewis's decision to reflect.**

On two separate occasions, Lewis took class time to reflect with his students about the literature discussions. The first time he asked for students' input was after the first day of discussion when he realized 11 questions may have been too many for his students to answer during one conversation. The responses Lewis received from his students were honest and open. They liked the guided questions but knew they couldn't

complete the assignment. Lewis took his students' comments seriously and adjusted the tasks he asked them to complete for the rest of the unit.

On the last day of discussion, Lewis asked his students to tell him their thoughts about the literature circle unit. Several students mentioned they felt pressured to answer the questions; they could talk more than they could write. The questions should have served as a guide rather than a written requirement. Lewis responded by admitting that teachers sometimes feel that when they're not in control, their students may not be learning. He told them he didn't know if he could hold them accountable. In my follow-up interview with Lewis, he returned to this struggle. I asked him to talk about the groups he felt were successful during the unit.

Lewis: Success might have been determined by how much I trusted them to construct their own meaning versus me trying to take control.

Interviewer: And how do you feel you did with that?

Lewis: I mean, I think by asking them questions, that's limiting their construction of meaning. Maybe in a different scenario or a, in a perfect world I would trust them to talk about it without needing me to prompt them. But, I don't trust them enough right now to do that, so I have to give them some structure because I don't think that, maybe I just don't think that a 15 year old kid can read *Heart of Darkness* and understand the nuances of the different characters and what Conrad's trying to say through different examples of symbolism and so I feel like if I don't bring it out then they're not going to notice it, and so this kind of balance of asking the right kind of question so that I lead them, at least I point them towards like a destination but then I ask them to walk the rest of the way as opposed to holding their hand the entire journey. And so, it's trying to find the right question to ask and then letting them wrestle with it. And it's the wrestling process that I think is really important...

Lewis's reflection revealed his wariness to trust his students to manage a difficult text on their own. Furthermore, he wondered what type of questions he needed to ask as a

teacher to get his students to think deeply about the novel. During the interview, Lewis mentioned he felt all of the groups accomplished his goal of thinking about the book beyond the surface level. However, he also noted he got nervous they were not going to notice things he felt were important to their overall understanding of the text. So, Lewis trusted his students would complete the tasks he assigned, but he did not necessarily believe they would “get” the full meaning of the text. His comments raise questions about the kind of text that works well in literature discussions. If the students had been offered additional choices of books to read during the revolution unit, their conversations might have included more comments regarding their personal and cultural backgrounds. Instead, the book’s context narrowed the students’ talk to the academic knowledge they learned from their History teacher.

### **Summary.**

The decisions Lewis made were based on his perceptions of his Advanced Placement students’ reading abilities as well as the amount of trust he had in his students to manage the text successfully. Lewis’s decision to have all of the literature discussion groups meet at one time showed his confidence in his students’ ability to understand the text on a literal level. However, he questioned whether or not they could remain engaged and push themselves to think more deeply about the novel. Therefore, he created a series of questions for the students to answer during every discussion group meeting. Lewis reflected about the number of questions he asked his students to answer after the first day of discussion and asked for his students’ feedback about the literature discussion unit. The questions his students answered after the first day were fewer in number, and he admitted to the class that he had a difficult time knowing if they were learning if he was

not in control. Ultimately, Lewis struggled with allowing his students to just talk about the text because he was concerned they would not take away everything he felt was important for them to know.

### **Summary of Lewis Blazer**

“Literature circles are like stalagmites. After a long period of gradual contributions, an unpredictable and unique structure is formed. The formation is unpredictable and unique, and no matter what it looks like, it is beautiful.”

The day after the groups’ last literature discussion, I asked Lewis to create a simile once again. Like his first answer, Lewis referred to literature circles as a building process. Each member of the group contributes to the final structure, and the end product is unique. However, Lewis’s use of the word “unpredictable” showed a change in Lewis’s understanding of literature circles. Several times during the unit, the students’ actions did not align with Lewis’s expectations. These outcomes proved to be both positive and negative. Lewis was happy with his students’ ability to understand and discuss a difficult text, but he felt more could have been accomplished if they had maintained focus. Lewis’s students appreciated the support he gave them in understanding the novel when he provided guiding questions, but they rarely finished their assigned task.

But as Lewis noted, although everything he might have planned did not go as he expected, he believed the result was beautiful. Ultimately, Lewis’s reason for using literature discussion fulfilled the goals he set for his students. They felt comfortable to share their ideas and ask questions of their group members. At the conclusion of the unit, all of the students felt they had a better understanding of *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1994) than they would have had they read it by themselves. Lewis’s students were able to

move beyond the basic plot of the novel and begin the process of interpretation. The environment he created, the roles he played as a participant in the discussions, and the decisions he made as an instructor influenced his students' overall success.

## **Chapter Five – Findings and Discussion: Molly Adams**

Having met Lewis Blazer and his Advanced Placement students at Valley Oak High School, we now turn to Molly Adams and her work with struggling readers at Roosevelt High School.

### **Molly Adams's Classes**

Molly taught three sections of Literacy Seminar and one section of Literacy Block at Roosevelt High School (65.9% white, 24.9% African-American, 4.3% Hispanic, 0.4% Indian, 4.5% Asian, free and reduced lunch rate 28.3%). All classes at Roosevelt High School are 50 minutes long, and they meet the entire school year. Students enrolled in Molly's Literacy Seminar classes received one Language Arts credit. The Literacy Block class met two 50 minute periods of the seven hour school day. Students who enroll in Literacy Block are taught the eleventh grade English curriculum and receive extra instruction in reading strategies. Students receive one English credit and one Language Arts credit after completing the Literacy Block course.

Molly's Literacy Seminar classes are reading courses designed to assist students who struggle reading high school texts. Many students take this class in addition to an English class. Others are special education students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) who are not enrolled in another English class. Because a variety of students can take Literacy Seminar, Molly's class was comprised of tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students. Tenth grade students are enrolled in the course based on the recommendation of their ninth grade Language Arts teachers. Tenth graders who were in Molly's Literacy Seminar meet with her at the end of the school year to decide if they

should take the class again their junior year. Additionally, students who were enrolled in special education reading courses as sophomores or juniors often receive recommendations from their special education teachers to take Literacy Seminar. Teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs) may recommend their students for Molly's class, and students may also self-select the course if they feel they need extra support in reading. There are a variety of paths to enrollment in the seminar course, and Molly said she and the high school counselors look at the reading assessments of all students before final decisions are made to ensure Literacy Seminar is a good fit for the student.

Molly's Literacy Seminar class focused on improving her students' reading comprehension and fluency skills. The main reading instructional strategy Molly uses in her classroom was Reading Workshop. Her students chose a book to read, and much class time was given for students to read independently. Molly taught a variety of reading strategies through mini-lessons, and students were expected to practice these strategies as they read their novels. She conferenced with students everyday about their reading. In addition to reading during class, students were expected to read a minimum of 50 pages outside of class a week and document their thinking two to three times a day as they read. Molly also required each student to submit a weekly letter to her about their book (see Appendix H).

I chose to study one of Molly's Literacy Seminar classes because literature discussion is part of the curriculum. The class I observed was the fifth in a seven hour day and met from 12:05—12:55 p.m. Molly's class had 18 students, 10 boys and 8 girls. Half of the class was African-American; the other half was Caucasian.

## Literature Discussion in Molly's Classroom

Molly's students participated in literature discussion twice during the academic year, once during the fall and again during the spring. I observed the spring literature discussion unit. Molly presented five books for her students to choose from: *Rooftop* (2007), *The Wave* (1991), *Sold* (2006), *Imani All Mine* (2000), and *Whale Talk* (2002). All of the books were young adult literature award winners, and Molly believed her students would be engaged and respond well to the issues presented in the books. Each student selected his or her top three choices, and after Molly tabulated the results, the students were split into four literature discussion groups: *Rooftop* (2007), *The Wave* (1991), *Sold* (2006), and *Imani All Mine* (2000). *Whale Talk* (2002) did not receive enough votes from any of Molly's students to form a group. Each group met once a week for four weeks for an average of 35 minutes, and Molly was present for each discussion. The other students in the class read their literature discussion book and worked on written assignments related to the book in preparation for their next group meeting if it was not their group's day to discuss their book with Molly.

All students received their first or second book choice, and I chose the *Rooftop* (2007) group to study because all students in the group had submitted both student assent and parent consent forms (see Appendix I for a synopsis of the book). The group met every Wednesday and was comprised of five males; four were African-American and one was Caucasian.

I conducted the initial interviews with the boys in pairs with one exception. I interviewed Hector separately. He was absent the day I was scheduled to interview the other boys because his girlfriend had delivered their baby a few days before. I met Alex

and Steven first. Alex, an African-American senior, enjoyed reading mystery and drama books. He felt he connected most with stories about the streets and when I asked him to describe himself as a reader, he said, “I ain’t the best reader, but I get it done.” Steven, an African-American sophomore, said he liked reading best when he could read what he liked. He preferred sports books to other genres. The next pair I interviewed was Savion and Walker. Savion, an African-American sophomore, described himself as an “artsy type” and enjoyed reading books about sports and mechanics. He also mentioned his interest the science fiction genre and African history. Savion believed he could comprehend books well but struggled reading at a good pace and with expression. Walker, a Caucasian sophomore, liked medical mysteries and learning about science. He told me he needed to work on slowing down his reading so he could remember more of what he read. On the day I interviewed Hector, an African-American senior, he told me he didn’t like to read, but if he had to, he would pick up a book about sports. He felt that he was a good reader only when he read something that interested him. Both Alex and Hector took Literacy Seminar to fulfill their Language Arts graduation requirements. Both boys also attended Roosevelt High School half-time and worked at local restaurants in the afternoons part-time.

### **Getting to Know Molly Adams**

“Literature discussion is like a dentist—pulling teeth!”

The simile Molly used to describe literature discussion after all of her groups had met the first week reminded me of the types of students she had in her classes. In general, these were students who had not been successful in reading and were taking the class because they needed extra support. The students had a variety of successes and

failures as readers, and Molly's job was to help them improve their reading strategies.

This task was not always easy and sometimes required much work on Molly's part. As I learned more about Molly, who she was as a teacher became clearer.

The spring of 2009 was the second time I observed one of Molly's classes participate in a literature discussion unit. The previous spring, Molly had invited me into her classroom to conduct a pilot study for my dissertation. Molly has been a teacher for seven years, and all of those years have been at Roosevelt High School. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Secondary Education, her Bachelor of Arts degree in English, and her Masters in Literacy Education at the local university.

Molly's passion for reading was evident the moment I stepped into her classroom. Unlike the typical high school English classroom, Molly's room contained tables and chairs as well as two recliners and three oversized chairs. Her students were free to sit wherever they liked as long as they worked. Students could choose books from any of the three bookshelves or magazines from the rack in the corner of Molly's room. Table lamps were the main source of light, and classical music played quietly as students read or wrote independently. Fluency checklist, literacy classroom daily routine, and classroom behavior expectation posters hung on Molly's walls. She also had a Lemony Snicket poster and a picture of basketball player Shaquille O'Neal reading hanging on her bulletin board. Molly posted a sign above her classroom door that read "97,958 = Total pages read in 07-08 Literacy Classes. 20 students read more than 2,000 pages last school year!" Finally, various student art projects completed the classroom's decorations.

### **Molly's reasons for using literature discussion.**

I discovered in the spring of 2008 that Molly had learned about literature discussion in her undergraduate and graduate courses. She had read the work of Harvey Daniels and a few chapters in Pierce and Gilles's (1993) book *Cycles of Meaning*. I knew other local teachers had taken the same classes as Molly and did not incorporate literature discussion into their curriculum, so I asked Molly why she decided to use it in her classroom. She replied:

I think that the discussion provides a different opportunity for students to interact and take their thinking deeper about a book than if they read on their own. And in some cases it's just their comprehension is deeper, they understand it better because they've had a chance to talk about it, to clarify confusion, not just in a written document to the teacher or seeking out the teacher, but throughout the week and then in a discussion interacting with students. So it's both like literal comprehension but also more inferential comprehension, seeing what other people think. Often because some students are more sophisticated in their thinking than others, the discussion can help them think in new ways, and as a teacher, I try to push their thinking deeper too with certain questions. Um, I think it holds them accountable for the work in ways that just working individually in independent reading doesn't do because in that assignment, if you don't do your work, then you just got a zero for your assignment, but with literature groups, if you didn't do your assignment, then you have to sit with nothing to say to the group, and there's a little bit of social stigma attached to it. And I think clarifying confusion by helping others, having other students explain what they understood from the book is pretty powerful.

Molly found literature discussion was beneficial for her students for two reasons. One, her students' overall comprehension of the book was better because students could clarify confusing parts for one another. Two, her students' interpretation of the events in the book was expanded because each student could offer his or her own opinion of the text. Molly said she did not do literature discussion in her class more than twice a year because her students valued book choice, and literature discussion narrowed their options down to five.

To learn more about Molly's plans for literature discussions in the spring, I asked her how the unit had gone in the fall. She told me some of her students complained about the literature discussions. She felt the reason why they weren't well received by some of her students was the uncertainty, the unknown, and the new expectations of participating in this kind of group. Most of Molly's students had never been a part of a literature discussion group before, and she felt many of them were unsure of what to do in the group. Molly also explained that the students who enjoyed their book selection last semester loved the experience, while those who didn't thought the discussions were a waste of time. But Molly felt her students learned a lot from the experience, and if the students knew what to expect, the groups would likely flow more smoothly the second time around.

As the research on literature discussion (Casey, 2008/2009; Daniels, 2002; Faust et al., 2005; Pierce & Gilles, 2008) indicates, students who are given authentic texts from which to choose as well as an environment in which to have group discussions may make more meaning from the text than if they were to read it in isolation. Additionally, as Peterson and Eeds (2007) suggest, students who feel they can interpret the text in their own way based on personal experiences maintain a sense of ownership in the literature discussion group. Therefore, they may be more likely to contribute to the group's overall understanding of the text if they can offer their own opinions.

### **Environment Created**

#### **Molly's strategy to establish successful literature discussion practices.**

Molly recognized and understood the needs of her students well. Most of Molly's students had not participated in a literature discussion before they enrolled in her class,

and she realized they needed extra instruction on how to participate in a productive discussion. During my initial interview with Molly, she mentioned the deep thinking she expected from her students could not be achieved unless they knew her expectations for small group discussion. Molly believed that helping her students become aware of their own thinking, teaching them how to participate in the discussion, and modeling how to ask questions of the group were key components to the group's overall success. Therefore, one of the four categories in which the students could earn points was discussion participation.

According to the handout Molly gave each of her students before the literature discussion unit began, each student could earn up to 20 points for each group meeting for participation. Molly wrote, "You must participate positively and productively in the discussion in order to earn these points." Molly recorded notes during the meeting of the students' participation on an observational checklist and then filled out a discussion participation scoring guide for each student after the meeting. Molly included five criteria on the scoring guide: overall participation, knowledge of book, discussion and response, preparation, and conduct. A student could earn a score of one to four for each criterion. Molly spent 20 minutes of one class period before the discussions began explaining each criterion and what she expected of her students. She also gave her students their scoring guide from the previous discussion before they began the next discussion so they could understand where they excelled and where they needed to improve.

In addition to the discussion participation scoring guide, Molly made a new rule for the groups in the spring she had not required in the fall. She told her students the

discussion would not be over until each member of the group contributed two good comments. Molly defined a good comment as a question or statement that advanced the group's understanding of the text. For example, a good comment might begin "I wonder...", and a bad comment would be a statement such as "This character is stupid."

Molly's focus on creating an environment and expectations where productive discussions could occur is supported by the research. According to Barnes (2008), "Successful group work requires preparation, guidance and supervision, and needs to be embedded in an extended sequence of work that includes other patterns of communication" (p. 7). Teachers must take time to carefully prepare and instruct their students on the components of working together as a collaborative community. Mercer and Dawes (2008) write, "there must not only be a sense of trust and a common endeavor, but also a shared understanding of how to engage in productive discussion" (p. 66). Setting ground rules and expectations before small group discussions begin ensures all students understand the characteristics of a constructive discussion.

### **The students' relationship with Molly.**

Because Molly decided to participate in each literature discussion, the students' relationship with her played a factor in how the group functioned. I asked the students in their initial interviews if there was ever a time in their previous literature discussion unit or any time they could think of when they wished Molly was not an active member of the group. None of the boys could think of a situation where they wanted this to be the case. They described Molly's presence as important to understanding the book and felt they could discuss anything they needed to in order to make meaning. The boys were not hesitant about saying they would discuss real life issues like drugs and alcoholism if it

was necessary in order to talk about the book's characters and plot. Steven said Molly was "one of us" and that "she lets us be ourselves." They trusted her to guide them through the text and did not feel they were prohibited from speaking their minds simply because she was their teacher.

Although the boys believed Molly was integral to their overall success in understanding the book, one student mentioned he felt she sometimes offered too much assistance. Walker, in his follow-up interview with me and two other group members, commented:

She explains way too much, like people who have a lower take of levels, and everything, but really, I kind of zone her out because sometimes she talks too much, and I know what to expect and everything, so sometimes what I need is what I need, and sometimes extra help, but why not just have people ask more than just explain it. She explains, like, in great detail everything. It gets a little boring sometimes.

The other boys, Steven and Savion, disagreed with Walker's comment. They discussed specific instances during the group conversations when some people were confused and Molly helped them clarify the text. However, Walker's statement may help teachers think about how much they should be involved in the discussion, especially if students feel they may have a good understanding of the text or would prefer to ask questions of their group members to make meaning.

Ultimately, Molly's relationship with her students gave them the confidence they needed to discuss the text freely. For example, the boys were not hesitant to share their thoughts and opinions about drugs and life on the street. Literature discussions are more likely to be successful in classrooms where a community and environment has been created for students to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas (Short, 1990;

Wells & Ball, 2008). My conversations with the boys about Molly's participation in the group discussions showed this culture had been created and fostered, thus providing the opportunity for productive meaning making to occur.

### **Summary.**

Molly made a concerted effort to create a classroom environment for her students that would lead to successful literature discussions. First, she established clear expectations for her students as discussion participants and tied their contributions in the group to their overall grade for the unit. Molly recognized her struggling readers did not have much small group discussion experience, so she strived to communicate her desires for successful conversation. Additionally, she modeled her expectations as a regular group member. Secondly, Molly built relationships with her students so they would feel comfortable talking about the text and sharing their ideas and opinions with the group. My initial and follow-up interviews with her students indicated Molly was someone they could trust to help them navigate the text without feeling unsure or inhibited. As Molly's students practiced become better readers, she was there to help them along the way.

### **Molly's Initial Thoughts about Her Role in the Literature Discussion Group**

Molly's thoughts about the roles she would play in the literature discussion group stemmed from her previous experience with literature discussion and her perception of her students' reading abilities. I asked Molly if she had made any changes to the literature discussion unit based on the pilot study research I conducted in her classroom in the spring of 2008. She discussed both a change in format as well as her participation in the group. In 2008, each literature discussion group met twice a week for 20 to 25 minutes to discuss their book. Molly felt the students did not have enough time between

meetings to read the assigned pages, so she decided to change the group meetings to once a week for 40 minutes and required her students to read more pages. She implemented this change in the fall of 2009 and felt the weekly meetings led to richer conversations because the students had more to discuss.

Molly also explained that she changed her participation in the group discussion. In the spring of 2008, Molly prepared discussion questions she wanted to make sure her students addressed and wrote down general notes about her students' contributions to the group. Molly participated in the group discussions often. In the fall of 2009, she decided to alter how she took notes and made a commitment to be more of an observer in the group than an active participant. Although Molly still brought notes to the group discussion of points she wanted to make sure her students addressed, her detailed observation checklist of her students' comments switched her focus from participant to recorder. With these changes in mind, I asked Molly to explain what she perceived her role to be in the literature discussions. She said:

Well, I think if students can't provide support for understanding of a text and questions aren't answered, then I do believe it's my responsibility to help them either arrive at the answer or provide information. Or if there's a misinterpretation of a literal fact, not like an opinion fact but a literal fact, so helping with that. I benefit from having read these books, most of them four or five times, over the years, so I usually know them better, and I also benefit from being a proficient reader and an adult and a teacher, so helping them if they can't get to that place on their own. I think also if their discussion is not taking their thinking deep enough, like thinking thematically or inferentially about a text, then I would like to add some points to help them take that thinking deeper and discussion deeper. And then I think my job is to facilitate the discussion, so hopefully they're doing that on their own, but if not, then I need to sort of guide and navigate that in as least intrusive way possible.

Molly thought of her role in the group as threefold. First, Molly recognized that her struggling readers may need help with the plot of the text. Having read all the book

selections numerous times, Molly could play the role of expert if her students had trouble understanding the story. Secondly, Molly wanted to push her students' thinking beyond literal comprehension and into a deeper understanding of the text. Finally, Molly realized her students could have trouble facilitating the group discussion on their own. Although all of her students had participated in literature discussion groups before, she thought that sometimes she would need to help them get back on track.

Molly's desire to scaffold her students' learning aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. She understood her students may need extra support understanding the text as they discussed it, and as a member of the group, she was prepared to offer her knowledge to help her students make meaning. Additionally, Molly's conscious decision to act more as an observer than an active participant fits with the recent research on the teacher's role in literature discussion groups. Freedman (1993), Langer (1992), Maloch (2002), and Short et al. (1999) all agree teachers should try to balance facilitator and leadership roles. The teachers they studied did offer their own interpretation of the text as a member of the group; however, they did not control the conversation. Rather, they stepped back from the discussion and gave their students the opportunity to explore their interests. This decision allowed their students to maintain control of their learning.

### **Roles Molly Played in the Literature Discussion Group**

Molly's decision to have each literature discussion group meet on a different day of the week enabled her to be present for every conversation. The students gathered around one of the tables in Molly's room, and she sat slightly outside the circle. Molly came to each group meeting with her own ideas for discussion based on the reading and

an observation checklist to record each member's contributions to the group. My observations and digital recordings of the discussions resulted in the emergence of themes; these themes were supported by follow-up interviews with Molly as well as interviews with students.

**Molly: Clarifier, nudger, and facilitator in a literature discussion group.**

Molly assumed a variety of roles as a literature discussion participant. I listened to all four of the literature discussions multiple times and created data briefs for each conversation. First designed by Gilles (1991) to organize data, data briefs are “a summary of the [literature circle] discussion and the researcher's perceptions of the themes and behaviors of the participants” (p. 120). Creating the data briefs corroborated the initial themes that emerged in my reflexive journal. I purposefully transcribed the portions of the conversations where Molly was most active as a participant.

My coding of Molly's contributions to the group discussions resulted in clarifier, nudger, and facilitator. The nudger and facilitator roles are defined the same way for Molly as they were for Lewis. I created and defined the role of clarifier, one similar to what Freedman (1993) calls a guide. According to Freedman (1993), when the teacher plays the guide role, he or she “gives specific information about the...context of the novel” (p. 225). I defined the clarifier role as asking questions or providing information as a way of helping students navigate the text. I will address the roles in order of the frequency with which Molly played them. Molly assumed the role of clarifier approximately 70 percent of the time, nudger 20 percent, and facilitator 10 percent.

*Molly as clarifier.*

As Molly predicted in her initial interview, there were several times during the group discussions when she felt she needed to clarify a student’s comment to ensure the group members’ understanding of the plot. I defined clarifying as asking questions or providing information as a way of helping students navigate the text. The following transcript from the second day of discussion exemplifies Molly’s role as clarifier. During this conversation, Molly attempted to help the boys figure out a scene that serves as a turning point in the novel. I coded Molly’s comments in regular typeface and the students’ comments in italics.

Transcript	My Coding	Barnes and Todd
Molly: Well, right before Addison is shot and killed on the rooftop, Clay’s there too. He like hits the ground when the bullets start. So, where do you think he would be at the beginning of Chapter 5?	Summarizing	Bring in
Hector: On top of the roof.	Question	Request information
Molly: At the top of the roof, but now it says he’s in a hallway with a glass window, so he’s not on the rooftop anymore. Where would he go next?	<i>Answer</i> Clarifying statement	Continue
Steven: Downstairs.	Question	Bring in
Molly: Downstairs inside? Or...	<i>Answer</i>	Request information
Steven: He’s leaving.	Clarifying question	
Hector: It could be the police station.	<i>Answer</i>	Request information
Molly: It could be. Why would it be at the police station?	<i>Answer</i> Asking for evidence	
Walker: Well, they told you they took him to a little base station.	<i>Provides textual evidence</i>	Accepting
Hector: Yeah.	<i>Agreement</i>	Expanding
Molly: So, they take him to the police station. And then, but then look the dad says, “Thank god you’re all right. Thank god.”	Summarizing	
Hector: Yeah, so he’s at the police station. No, it could have been at the hospital cause like you said, thank god you’re all right. It could have been him that got shot.	Introduces new topic <i>Agrees but then offers textual evidence for inference</i>	Accepting
		Initiating

Savion: It was at the police station cause he hugged him or whatever and then kept asking him questions...	<i>Clarifies plot with textual evidence</i>	
Hector: And he was like, we don't want to be here or something like that.	<i>Provides textual evidence</i>	
Molly: Yeah.	Agrees	
Savion: Like ask your questions later or something. And then Henry, Officer Henry, said he could answer them tomorrow.	<i>Provides textual evidence</i>	Accepting

Molly's main role in this discussion was to clarify her students' understanding of the plot. She asked leading questions and offered reminders to help her students put the pieces together and understand the text. Molly did not tell her students the location of one of the main characters in chapter five; rather, she assumed the role of clarifier so the students could work as a team to make meaning. Molly offered summary statements, referred to the text, and asked students to clarify their comments. As a result, the students used the text to support and expand their thinking. Interestingly, halfway through the conversation, Molly believed her students understood the main character was at the police station, and she attempted to bring their attention to the dialogue. Molly's statement caused Hector to rethink the character's location, but Savion offered additional textual evidence to remind Hector that the police station was the correct location.

Barnes and Todd's (1995) discourse moves provided additional insight into Molly's role as a clarifier. Molly's clarifier role was achieved using many different methods. In addition to requesting information, Molly also brought in specific examples from the text and continued with Hector's first answer to aid her students' understanding of the plot. On two separate occasions, Molly validated her students' comments by accepting their answer. She also asked Hector to defend his answer of police station.

As a result, all of the group members understood a key scene in the book and were able to move on to a question that took them deeper into their overall understanding of the text.

My initial interviews with Molly's students revealed this was a role she was likely to play. When I asked them about her contributions to the group discussions in the past, Alex said, "She helped us figure it out." Savion replied, "She gives us information about stuff that we didn't understand so we can understand a lot more and actually be like more connected to the book with our own experiences and stuff." My findings concurred with Alex and Savion's perceptions of Molly's participation. As she attempted to help her students clarify what was happening in the story, she sometimes provided additional information or reminded her students of another part in the book to help them answer their questions. As Molly stated in her initial interview, she had the benefit of reading the literature discussion books multiple times and prepared the assigned reading for all of the groups each week before she met with them. So, her thorough knowledge of the book's plot helped her offer questions and statements at the right time to clarify her students' understanding.

Probst (1992) states literature discussions are a good format for students to have the opportunity to create their own meaning. However, he also reminds teachers that if students make simple errors when they read, their overall comprehension of the text can be affected. Therefore, the teacher's role is important in clarifying possible misunderstandings. Because Molly's students often struggled comprehending a text, her role as clarifier was paramount in aiding them with a literal understanding so they could make meaning on a deeper level.

*Molly as nudger.*

One of Molly’s goals for her Literacy Seminar students was to improve their reading comprehension by teaching them various reading strategies and offering support. She believed her students could think more deeply about a text if they were given the opportunity to discuss it with their peers, and her students agreed. All of the boys said in their initial interviews that talking about a book with others helped them understand it more. Molly’s attempts to move her students’ thinking beyond a literal understanding resulted in her role as nudger. Characteristics of the nudger role included asking students to defend their ideas and offering various ideas for students to consider. In this conversation, the students and Molly discussed possible reasons for one of the main character’s actions.

Transcript	My Coding	Barnes and Todd
<p>Molly: Okay, yeah, 102. Savion, didn’t you say Andre brings him in? “Sorry to disrupt the discussion but I got one more family member’ said Andre, letting in Clorox” [reading from the text]. So, why do you think Clorox came late that day?</p> <p>Hector: Um, he could have been at home thinking about what happened, making a choice should he go to Daytop or should he stay home and show him that he didn’t mean for Addison to get killed. Or, like if I was at Daytop and he didn’t show up I would have been thinking that he meant for Addison to get killed, but since he showed up at Daytop it kind of changes the story that he didn’t mean to get Addison killed.</p> <p>Molly: That’s a good inference. Cause it doesn’t say why he’s late.</p> <p>Alex: Yeah. It just showed that he had respect for him and he didn’t mean for him to get killed.</p> <p>Molly: You think coming late shows respect?</p>	<p>Summarizing</p> <p>Nudging (question) <i>Offers possible reason</i></p> <p><i>Makes personal connection</i></p> <p>Praising, naming strategy <i>Agreeing</i></p> <p>Challenging</p>	<p>Request information</p> <p>Expanding</p> <p>Accepting</p> <p>Contradicting</p>

<p>Hector: Like not showing up at all means he didn't care Addison got killed or not.</p> <p>Alex: Right, you know what I'm saying, it's about showing respect, you know what I'm saying. He came in late just by thinking should I go, should I not, he just went on and made up his mind about going, so that's what I said about being late, he couldn't have come at all.</p> <p>Walker: Sometimes it's hard making a choice though. Making the right and the wrong choice, cause sometimes the wrong choice is the right choice whether anybody wants to think about it or not.</p> <p>Molly: How could you look at that in this book? Like, what would be what some people would see as a wrong choice for Clay actually be a right choice?</p>	<p><i>Clarifies answer</i></p> <p><i>Supports Hector's answer</i></p> <p><i>Applies character's actions to people in general</i></p> <p>Nudging Asking for textual evidence</p>	<p>Expanding Expanding</p>
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Molly asked “why” questions to nudge her students into interpreting one of the main character’s actions. After Hector offered an answer and made a personal connection to the character, Molly praised his comment. She used the term “inference,” one of the reading strategies her students had worked on during the year, and stated specifically why the inference Hector made was a good one. Molly’s encouragement propelled the conversation forward. Alex expressed his agreement with Hector’s comment, and Molly’s nudging resulted in a deeper explanation of the text from both Alex and Hector. Interestingly, the conversation led to Walker’s statement about choice, and Molly nudged once again to explore his statement. Walker applied the main character’s actions to the nature of human beings, and Molly asked him to support his general conclusion with specific evidence from the text.

When I applied Barnes and Todd’s (1995) discourse moves to this transcript, Molly’s role as nudger was confirmed. Additionally, a new way of thinking about

nudging questions was revealed. Barnes and Todd (1995) offer two possibilities of the “extending” discourse move, qualifying and contradicting. Molly questioned Alex’s statement that the character’s late arrival showed respect. She challenged him to explain his thinking. Although Hector answered first, Alex defended his reasoning when he responded to Molly’s nudge.

Molly’s attempts to move her students’ thinking to a deeper level showed her ability to scaffold their learning. Langer (1992) calls this type of scaffolding *shaping*, encouraging students to explain their thinking and offer examples to support their conclusions. O’Flahavan (1994/1995) identifies one of a teacher’s scaffolding roles as elicitor. Elicitors help their students extend and explain their thinking. As a nudger, Molly was able to take her students’ thinking beyond the literal level so they could begin interpreting the text.

***Molly as facilitator.***

The third role I observed Molly assume was facilitator. I defined this role as one that kept the group on track or provided an opportunity for students to seek Molly’s assistance. As Molly mentioned in her initial interview, she thought she might have to “guide and navigate” the discussion. Even though the students had participated in literature discussions before, she recognized they might need some help keeping the conversation going. The following is a typical example of how Molly facilitated the group’s discussion:

But we can look it up. Let’s clear up your guys’ two questions first and then go on to this other stuff because it’s a really good discussion. So you said where are they at when his dad sees them in the hallway?

Molly's students often asked questions they had about the text, and occasionally a new question was asked before the first was answered. In order to ensure each student's question was addressed, Molly facilitated the discussion. She wanted to make sure no student's question was left unanswered.

Although Molly's attempts to facilitate the discussion were usually well received, a couple of times Molly tried to move the conversation in another direction when the boys were not ready. I transcribed a portion of one of these discussions using a conversational analysis approach. By specifically transcribing overlaps and latches, I was able to take a closer look at turn-taking.

Molly: He's killed now, so what's going to be the rest of the book is another question too.

Steven: They'll talk about him.

Hector: Talk about him at Daytop and

Walker: I think it's just going to go into the investigation.

Molly: No, Addison's killed.

Hector: No, I'm saying they'll talk about him.

Molly: Oh, I understand. At Daytop, they're going to talk about him. Okay, let's [talk about

Alex: Probably try to tell kids see what happens whenever [you=

Steven: don't listen

Alex: =like, this is what happens.

Molly: Do you think that's how their response will be?

Hector: Yeah, that's how their response will be cause they was like, wasn't they really trying to get Addison to change and Addison was going to do what he was going to do?

Alex: Bits and pieces of him was changing.

Molly: Why were bits and pieces of him changing?

Alex: I mean cause for one, I mean he wanted to keep the money but then like I said he was thinking about his little brother too, so you know what I'm saying, you got to give up on your little brother or keep doing what he's doing. But instead of doing that he gave up his life.

Molly: Okay, [let's

Steven: Didn't he say something about his income? Like, do you want me to stop because I'm getting income? Or something like that?

Molly tried to steer the direction of the conversation two times to a different topic, and both times the boys ignored her facilitating and continued to talk about one of the characters who dies about halfway through the book. Molly did respond to the boys' comments, but this conversation raises the question as to whether or not a teacher's facilitation of the group may stifle discussion.

Molly addressed this concern in my initial interview with her. She said, "It's a balancing act one, because I like all these books, and I want to talk about books, and I want kids to think about them, and I like talking to kids about them. But I also want them to learn through discussion." Later, Molly commented, "It's really hard when you're the teacher to not want to be the task master....It's hard to give up that idea that oh, this is wasted time or it's off task. It's really hard to challenge that notion in your own mind." Molly admitted she struggled with the decision of when to participate in the group discussion. She enjoyed the books and was eager to share her own ideas. I did observe Molly play the role of member on occasion. Sometimes she contributed her ideas as a reader, rather than a teacher, to the group. However, the role of facilitator appeared with more regularity, resulting in the tension Molly felt between being a teacher and a member.

The group members saw Molly's role as facilitator important to the group's dynamics. During my follow-up interview with Hector, he said, "If we wouldn't have been with Mrs. Adams, I don't think we would have got that book done." Alex agreed: "She like pushed us to get it done. If people was stuck, she would bring a piece of the book in and help us get on topic." My follow-up interview with Savion revealed the same thoughts about Molly's role. He commented, "She puts everything together. Like,

if someone has a question and someone else has a question, there's like multiple questions, and we tried to answer one question, and once we answered that, she brings up the other question that we asked so we can answer all our questions, and she helps us put them all together." I asked the boys if they thought they could have managed the group on their own, and they all felt Molly was necessary to helping them get through the book. I wrote in my field notes that they did not appear confident in successfully reading the entire book without Molly's guidance.

Molly's role as a facilitator helped her students focus and provided them the opportunity to seek her assistance. Previous studies about literature discussion (Freedman, 1993; Langer, 1992; Maloch, 2002; Short et al., 1999) indicate teachers who facilitate discussions rather than control them create an environment where students are free to explore their interests. This exploration often results in meaningful discussion, thereby improving each group member's overall understanding of the text.

**Molly's roles were determined by her perception of students' needs.**

Molly demonstrated a variety of roles in the literature discussion group and played that of clarifier most frequently. In my follow-up interview with Molly, I asked her to talk about the roles she thought her students played in the discussions. She replied:

I think probably they didn't play the role of facilitator as much. But definitely they got to play the role of expert and the role of member. And sometimes they do a really good job of playing the role of facilitator with their own like nonverbal body language, changing their eye contact around, turning their heads, acknowledging the next member of the group, things like that, but that's not something that we worked a lot on the skills for.

Molly felt her struggling readers needed her presence in the group to help them facilitate the discussion. Although she acknowledged their ability to facilitate at times, she told me

that as a teacher, she would put teaching her students how to facilitate a discussion “as a lower priority than comprehending, discussing, supporting your opinion.” Molly determined that in the time constraints she had to work with her students, improving their reading skills and ability to understand the text on both a literal and interpretive level were paramount. Therefore, Molly’s perception of her students’ needs resulted in the roles of clarifier and nudger appearing most often.

Interestingly, Molly did say she felt both her and her students’ roles changed over the course of the unit. Molly believed what her students brought to the discussion varied day-to-day based on their preparedness and/or understanding of the text. She explained that she felt her students were more prepared to discuss the text on the first two days of the discussion, and as the unit went on, a few of the group members did not read the assigned pages. Molly then had to adapt her role based on her students’ contributions to the group. Molly’s understanding of her students as group members and what they needed from her as a teacher determined the roles she played.

### **Summary.**

Molly played a variety of roles in the literature discussion group, and the roles she chose to play were determined by what her struggling readers needed. Molly often clarified her students’ comments and provided additional information to help them understand the text’s plot. She also asked probing questions to develop her students’ ability to interpret the text. Finally, Molly facilitated the discussion as necessary to ensure her students’ conversations were productive.

## **Instructional Decisions Molly Made**

### **Molly's decisions and her perception of her students' reading abilities.**

Molly's major goal in her Literacy Seminar classes was to improve the reading skills of her struggling readers. Throughout the school year, Molly focused on teaching her students various reading comprehension strategies and how to monitor their thinking. The assignments Molly gave her students to complete during the literature discussion unit aligned with her perceptions of her students' needs.

Molly's students were required to submit several assignments during the course of the unit. Each time the group met, each student brought a discussion planning sheet with questions or comments for the group to consider. In addition to writing down points for the other members to consider, the students were asked to write down the page number of the text and the reason they stopped to write down the idea. Molly gave her students several examples of invitations for discussion to consider as they prepared their discussion planning sheet. The following is a list of Molly's suggestions:

- This reminds me of...
- What do you think this work might mean?
- I wonder... or Why...?
- I predict...
- Why might the character...?
- What do you think the author really wants us to think about?
- How else can we look at this?
- Where does this lead us next?
- What larger "lessons" might this teach?
- What inferences can be made?

Molly asked her students to bring at least five points for the group to discuss at each group meeting, and Molly prepared her own discussion sheet as well. The discussion sheets were collected after each discussion, and the students were given points for

completion. When I asked Molly why she required this assignment, she told me it helped the students stop and think about what they were reading. The groups read an average of 40 pages of text for each meeting, and she felt the students would have a hard time remembering what they wanted to talk about if they didn't stop to write down their ideas. In addition, Molly felt the suggestions she offered her students for ideas encouraged them to practice some of the reading strategies she taught during the year.

I asked the students to talk about the discussion planning sheets, and the group was split on how they felt about filling them out. Hector and Alex told me they didn't mind filling out the sheets because it was an easy way to get points, and they needed to keep their grades up in order to pass the class and graduate. However, Walker said, "I'm not a very big discussion question because I keep it all mentally instead of writing it out. This is because I'm one of those lazy people who don't like to write things." Savion and Steven agreed with Walker. Steven said, "I don't like doin' it. I just want to read the book." Savion added, "I don't do it because whenever I read, I don't like write down what I'm thinking, I just think about it and just keep on reading cause I don't want to stop. Once I stop I lose my place or whatever." Walker admitted he didn't like preparing the discussion sheet because he felt he could remember the book and did not want to make the effort to record his ideas. But Savion and Steven felt writing down points for discussion interrupted their reading. Molly told me during our follow-up interview 75 percent of the discussion planning sheets were turned in and that the discussions were better when the boys came to the group meeting with the sheets prepared. Molly may have realized her students did not enjoy filling out the sheets but understood they needed

the practice of monitoring their thinking and practicing the reading skills they discussed in class to create productive and meaningful conversations.

Interestingly, although the group was split on how they felt about the discussion sheets, all of them agreed the literature discussion unit was a success. The boys told me they felt they understood the text better because they discussed it with their peers. They enjoyed hearing how members of the group connected to characters in the story as well as different opinions about the characters' actions. Hector and Alex admitted they probably wouldn't have finished the book if Molly hadn't been there to motivate them and if their peers hadn't been there to provide pressure to keep up with the reading and contribute to the group discussions. Walker, Steven, and Savion agreed that Molly's presence encouraged them to stay on topic and their peers' questions helped them think about the text. So, even though the discussion planning sheet may not have been well received, the boys felt the discussion was necessary to making meaning.

In addition to the discussion planning sheets, Molly assigned her students a weekly letter and three special assignments to complete over the course of the unit. The main purpose of the weekly letter was to practice summarizing the book. However, Molly also asked her students to analyze the section of the book they summarized and write about a strategy they used to further their understanding of the text. One of the three special assignments was to write down two to three significant quotes from the book and explain their importance to the text. The second special assignment required the students to be researchers. Molly asked them to research any topic related to the book (e.g. author's background, an issue presented in the book, the time period in which the book took place) and write about how that knowledge helped them understand the book.

Molly purposefully selected the texts for this unit because she believed her students would be able to relate to their context. By allowing them to research any topic related to the book they chose, she further enhanced their engagement and understanding of the text. The students were required to write a summary of the entire book for their third special assignment. Molly wanted her students to practice extracting the main and meaningful events from the book to write a detailed and thoughtful summary.

Finally, a small, but important, instructional decision Molly made was to use the content of the literature discussion books as a way to begin each class period. Every day of the school year, Molly asked her students to complete an entrance slip. Her students wrote as she took attendance and answered individual questions. During the literature discussion unit, all of the entrance slip prompts asked the students to think about their literature discussion books. For example, one day Molly told her students to make a prediction about their book and write down clues in the story that supported their prediction. Another day, Molly requested her students write down the best and worst things about their books. After the students completed their slips, Molly asked them to share what they had written with the class. Students heard about books other than the one they were reading for the unit, and on occasion, they found connections between the books they might not have realized without the class discussion.

All of the assignments Molly gave her students during the literature discussion unit were based on the strategies she felt her students needed to practice to become better readers. According to the research on struggling readers, one reason why many of our students have difficulty reading is because they have not had enough time in school to practice their reading skills. A position statement from NCTE's Commission on Reading

(2004) cited current research to inform educators about how adolescents read. The research showed teachers that “the majority of inexperienced adolescent readers need opportunities and instructional support to read many and diverse types of texts in order to gain experience, build fluency, and develop a range as readers” (p. 2). Molly’s understanding of her students’ needs led her to developing assignments designed to give them an opportunity to build the skills they needed to have more successful reading experiences.

**Molly’s decisions and her students’ perception of themselves as readers.**

One theme that emerged from the instructional decisions Molly made was her students’ ability to talk about themselves and their peers as readers. Molly’s assignments were geared towards helping her struggling readers comprehend text better, and an additional outcome of the literature discussion unit was her students’ ability to verbalize their reading process. I asked the boys to talk generally about any roles their group members assumed during the discussion. Savion said, “Me and Hector were pretty much the clarifiers. If someone was mixed up, we’d pretty much tell the whole story again to clear it up.” Walker agreed. He said, “Hector did a very good job because Hector was always ready, always on the ball.” Later Walker commented that he liked to clarify information for his group members but that Savion and Hector were better clarifiers than he was. I asked Savion, Steven, and Walker to talk a bit about Alex. Savion said, “His questions were more like, we answer a question, but he has questions for the question.” Steven added, “He’ll question a question, so it will deepen your thinking basically to think like other bigger picture of what happened.”

When I interviewed Hector and Alex, they offered their own perspectives of each group member's role. Alex said Hector and Savion were "the most interactive with the book." Hector echoed the other boys' thoughts and agreed Alex asked a lot of questions to help them think about the text. Both Alex and Hector mentioned that Walker connected the book to his own life and other texts often. Interestingly, the boys were able to name the roles of clarifier, questioner, and connector without any prompting from me.

During my follow-up interview with Molly, I asked her to discuss the roles she thought the boys played during the discussions. She felt her students' roles shifted as time went on. Molly explained:

Hector became much more confident as time went on and gave more answers that showed good, solid comprehension of the text where earlier on, the overall comprehension wasn't there, so he was focused on little details that didn't make as much sense. And then he had taken his thinking farther too, like predicting out about characterization and things like that. And Savion had great understanding of the text early on but then he hadn't done his written work as much so he didn't participate as much.

As Molly discussed her students' roles, she mentioned their roles were fluid and changed as the boys' confidence level or quality of written work changed. Molly paralleled her own shift in roles with those of her students as they talked about the book over a four week period.

### **Summary.**

The instructional decisions Molly made during the literature discussion unit were based on her perception of her students' needs. The assignments Molly asked them to complete were designed to improve their reading comprehension skills. Although some of the boys did not like the assignments or failed to turn them in, Molly recognized the group's conversations were better when they practiced reading strategies and wrote about

them. Molly's unit plan integrated each group's literature discussion book into the classroom lesson every day. Her students were asked to think about their text as they wrote entrance slips, completed discussion planning sheets or weekly letters, and formulated their three special assignments. The students were invested in their books and the reading process, and as a result, they were able to talk about their own roles as readers as well as those of their peers.

### **Summary of Molly Adams**

“Literature circles are like a buffet. Everybody brings something different. You don't know what the food is like until you taste it. Sometimes it's great; sometimes it's so-so. Other times you have to dig to the bottom to see if you like it. Sometimes you put it back or try something new. But in the end, you usually end up satisfied.”

During my follow-up interview with Molly, I asked her to create a simile once again that described literature discussion. Molly's answer this time did not reflect the frustration she felt earlier in the unit when she felt like a dentist pulling teeth. Instead, she presented a more holistic view of participating in literature discussion with her struggling readers.

Molly's comparison to a buffet reflected her overall thoughts about how her literature discussion groups performed during the spring. Molly told me the unit had been more of a struggle in the fall because the students were not familiar with literature discussion or her expectations of them as students and participants. Perhaps Molly went into the spring literature discussion unit with a bit of trepidation about whether or not the students would be successful. When I asked Molly to reflect on the spring literature discussion unit, she said:

I'm pleased with it. I think that they all genuinely liked the book. I asked them if they would recommend the book for next year's students, and they all said yes. They were enthusiastic about it, they had a lot of things to say, it wasn't that they

were just sitting there going, is this almost over, and they had relevant things to say. I think that through our discussion we explored deeper ideas than they would have on their own, which is one of the goals of literature groups, that if you read in isolation, would you have thought as deeply about this novel, and I don't think they would have, and I don't think they would have gotten as clear of an understanding. I don't think their general comprehension literally and inferentially would have been as strong. So, I'm pleased with it....I wouldn't give it 100 percent, but I'd probably give it a 90 percent. I think this work benefitted the students.

Molly felt her students were successful overall because they were able to think more deeply about the novel as a group than they would have if they had read it in isolation. The group members contributed meaningful comments that advanced the group's understanding of the text, and Molly felt they were engaged and eager to share their ideas.

Molly also mentioned in her follow-up interview that while she felt the unit succeeded, she thought she talked more in the third and fourth meetings than she did in the first two. Molly believed the students weren't as prepared for two reasons. One, several boys did not turn in their discussion planning sheets, and two, they did not contribute as much to the discussion. So, even though Molly didn't know what each boy would bring to the discussion table on any given day, the end result was satisfying.

The environment Molly worked hard to create, the various roles she played during the literature discussions, and the instructional decisions she made were all geared towards helping her struggling readers develop reading strategies and become more successful at understanding and comprehending text. Both Molly and her students believed the literature discussions helped the boys make meaning and come to a greater understanding of the book. In Literacy Seminar, that's the goal Molly strives to achieve, and the literature discussion unit helped her accomplish it.

## **Chapter Six – Findings and Discussion: Stella Thompson**

Back at Valley Oak High School, we now address literature discussion in Stella Thompson's Honors World Studies class.

### **Stella Thompson's Classes**

Stella Thompson taught two sections of sophomore World Studies (one regular and one Honors class) and one section of Creative Writing at Valley Oak High School (81.1% white, 11.9% African-American, 2.1% Hispanic, 0.5% Indian, 4.5% Asian, 12.1% free and reduced lunch). At Valley Oak High School, all World Studies Classes are team taught by an English and History teacher. The class periods are 90 minutes long, and the class meets the entire year. At the conclusion of the class, the students receive two credits, one in English and the other in History.

The students at Valley Oak High School select their English courses and choose between regular, Honors, and Advanced Placement World Studies. Most of the students in Stella's Honors World Studies class enrolled in Honors English classes in junior high and chose to continue this path upon entering high school. However, the students whom I studied in Stella's class offered an additional explanation for self-selecting an Honors class. Wendy said, "I didn't want to be in stupid people World Studies." Caitlin added, "Honestly, at Valley Oak, the Honors class is the average class. AP is obviously advanced, and then regular is those who don't want homework, don't care about the class at all, and like don't care about their grades and stuff, and so Honors is just a little above what average or above students would be in." I asked three other girls if they agreed with Wendy and Caitlin's assessment, and they did. Katrina said, "Honors is just a label." She also felt the instruction wasn't that different in the regular and Honors classes and

stated the regular students sometimes received extra help she wished she had in the Honors class. Although the word “honors” suggests an advanced course, the girls believed the World Studies class in which they were enrolled was better defined as a course for students who cared about their grades and would keep them engaged. However, in my interviews with Stella, she described her Honors students as “above average,” capable of completing assignments thoroughly and thinking beyond the literal level of a text. She felt they would be able to manage literature discussions successfully and productively with little guidance from her.

I chose to study Stella’s Honors World Studies class because the time of the class fit best with her schedule and mine. Stella’s Creative Writing class was not an option because literature discussion is not part of the curriculum. The class I observed had 52 students and met from 9:30—11:00 a.m. The class number was large because it was co-taught by Stella and her History partner teacher, Andy.

### **Literature Discussion in Stella’s Classroom**

During our first interview, Stella explained her 52 students would be split into 10 literature discussion groups. All literature discussion groups met at the same time and were spread out in the large classroom and the hallway to minimize the noise level. Stella’s students had five books from which to choose: *Brave New World* (1932/2006), *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961/1991), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), *Jennifer Government* (2003), and *1984* (1949/1984). One of Valley Oak High School’s media literacy specialists gave a book talk for each book, and the students ranked the books in order of preference with one being the top choice. Stella reviewed the students’ preferences and formed 10 groups, two groups per book. All of the books were chosen

by Stella and her partner teacher Andy because they fit well into the History Cold War unit and were good examples of dystopian literature. The students read the book and completed three literature discussions in three consecutive days during the first week of May. Each discussion averaged 20 minutes in length. On the days during the unit the students were not discussing their texts, they were either learning the History curriculum presented by Stella's partner teacher or preparing for the presentation of their literature discussion book.

Most students received their first book choice, and I chose one of the *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) groups to study because all students in the group had submitted both student assent and parent consent forms (see Appendix J for a synopsis of the book). All of the literature discussion groups met at the same time, so I could only choose one on which to focus my digital recordings and observation notes. Because I could not sit in on all groups' discussions, there may have been interactions between Stella and her students I missed. The literature discussion group I studied was comprised of five girls; all were Caucasian, and one was a Russian who immigrated to the United States nine years ago.

I wanted to interview the girls in focus groups to make them feel more comfortable, so I met with Natalie and Darcy first, followed by Wendy, Katrina, and Caitlin. Natalie, a Russian, enjoyed hanging out with friends and liked reading adventure books. She was fluent in English and seemed comfortable around the other girls, but was shy. Darcy, a Caucasian, played softball for Valley Oak High School as well as a competitive team. She preferred the romance genre. Both Natalie and Darcy felt they were better readers when they chose their reading material. Wendy, a Caucasian,

admitted she hated to read. She especially detested being forced to read books for school and could only name one book she enjoyed that held her interest, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2004). Caitlin and Katrina, both Caucasian, agreed they did not like reading books for school and rarely read for pleasure. Caitlin did say she would read a book if it interested her, but she could not name a book she had read recently or a genre she liked. Katrina stated she felt she was a good reader, but only if she could choose her book. Katrina preferred the mystery genre.

### **Getting to Know Stella**

“Literature discussion is like a large box of sweetened breakfast cereal: Each time you open the box, you put your face in the yummy confection...and once in awhile you get a prize!”

Stella’s simile to describe literature discussion reflected how she felt about sharing books. In my interviews with Stella, she described the fun and joy she remembered being a member of literature discussion groups in junior high and high school as well as a member of book clubs as an adult. Stella’s passion and enthusiasm for reading was evident as she reminisced about talking about books and learning from others’ perspectives. Conversations about books were “yummy,” and she looked forward to the discussions that caused her to think a different way or entertain a new idea. Stella’s love for language and reading became more apparent as I learned about her teaching journey.

Although Stella truly wanted to be an actress and pursue theatre, she realized the difficult lifestyle was not for her. Stella chose to study education so she could share her love for speech and drama with high school students. Stella graduated from a local university with her Bachelor of Science degree in Education. She was certified to teach

Speech and Drama as well as English and later earned her Masters in Curriculum and Instruction from the same university. After earning both her undergraduate and graduate degrees, Stella continued to educate herself by taking classes at a different local university. Most of those classes centered on teaching at-risk students, and Stella has now accumulated 75 hours beyond her Masters degree.

Stella has been a faculty member at Valley Oak High School for 25 years. She was pulled from her student teaching assignment early because Valley Oak needed a speech and theatre teacher. Stella readily accepted the job and taught those subjects, as well as a few English classes, for 18 years. Stella began a new teaching assignment her nineteenth year of teaching because she got married and had children. The life of a speech and theatre teacher was a busy one with tournaments and performances almost every month of the school year. Stella wanted to focus more on her family, so she stopped teaching speech and theatre and began teaching English classes full-time. Stella has been teaching World Studies for seven years as well as classes such as Creative Writing, Contemporary Fiction, and AP Literature. Stella admitted it was difficult transitioning into a class like World Studies from her previous teaching assignment because the class was “seventy to eighty percent History.” Although Stella enjoyed History, she was challenged to fit English into a mostly History curriculum, especially since theatre, not English, was her background.

**Stella’s reasons for using literature discussion.**

Because Stella did not come from an English background, I was curious to discover how she learned about literature discussion. Stella commented, “I guess what happened is that we broke up into lit. set groups, which I remembered from high school

and junior high, and I wanted them instead of writing a paper to do a group presentation. But in order to do a group presentation, they had to get together and talk about it.” Stella wanted her students to practice public speaking, and she felt that a common book would provide them the substance they needed to prepare a formal presentation. Stella expressed her desire for her students to work as a team rather than five individuals presenting information about a topic, and a book selection could bring them together. So, Stella pulled from her experience as a speech and theatre teacher and her memories of lit. sets as a youth and decided to implement literature discussion into her curriculum when she began teaching World Studies.

Since Stella’s understanding of literature discussion may have differed from those teachers who received their Bachelor of Science degree in English Education, I asked her to define literature discussion and why she used it in her classroom. Stella replied:

To me, the first thing you do is you’re exposing them to a book that they should have in their head. Trying to broaden their horizons just first knowing the book. And then trying to train them because I think our kids, so many of our kids, our world is getting so far from reading, they’re in all this instant messaging and all of that, just that time to stop and absorb a book....And then looking beyond just the basic plot line and maybe looking for relationships. Learning how to either in writing format or speaking format share this with other people who are reading the same book. I think when it’s really juicy is when people are coming from different walks of life and different levels of skills and intellect, so maybe you’re getting a variety of different perspectives. I think the more that we can do this, then you’re going to tap into a knowledge and an understanding and a love for wanting to read that book or another book and looking at it more in-depth.

Stella wanted her students to be knowledgeable about a variety of books as literate members of society. She shared her concerns about today’s students who live in a technology-rich world and often no longer choose to read, a point confirmed by her students in their initial interviews. Stella enthusiastically communicated her desire to promote a lifelong love for books. But beyond sharing her love for the written word,

Stella recognized literature discussion could offer more than a life of enjoying text.

Stella's previous experiences showed her that talking about a book could offer additional and perhaps alternative perspectives of the text. Literature discussion could take students' thinking and understanding deeper.

Even though Stella's background was rooted more in speech and theatre than English, her reasons for using literature discussion are supported by the research. Bakhtin (1981), Barnes (1992), Dewey (1924), and Edwards and Mercer (1987) were all advocates of social learning environments. When students have time to interact socially about a text, they are likely to form a more complete understanding of it than if they would have read it individually. Additionally, the initial and current research about literature discussion (Daniels, 2002; Gilles, 1993; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Short & Pierce, 1990) indicate students who are members of small, supportive discussion groups learn from one another by offering various perspectives of the text and listening to the ideas of others. So, Stella recognized the benefits of a social learning environment but did not address the "how" of literature discussion implementation.

### **Environment Created**

#### **Stella's strategy to establish successful literature discussion practices.**

Stella's main strategy to establish successful literature discussion practices was to remind her students of good small group discussion behavior. In my initial interview with Stella, she told me she believed her Honors students would learn from one another and be successful in their literature discussion groups because they had opportunities to work in small groups the entire year. She said literature discussion groups were "their

[her students'] chance to practice what they've been taught all year long." Stella explained that she asked her students to think deeply about the books they read as a class and had provided study questions for them to take their understanding of those books to the next level. Stella and her partner teacher Andy modeled how to ask good, thoughtful questions through the packets they prepared and their class discussions. Now, it was the students' turn to ask these kinds of questions of themselves and their peers.

Two days before the literature discussions began, Stella posted her expectations on the SmartBoard and shared them with the entire class. The following is a list of what Stella discussed:

- Sit in a circle, everyone participates and listens.
- You must have your book read by May 7.
- If a group member is not keeping up, invite him or her to participate. Then talk to Mrs. Thompson if there is still a problem.
- The test over your book is to weed out those who can do the presentation and those who must do the paper.

Stella was upfront about what her students needed to do during the unit to be successful. She focused on when the book should be read and how she would assess. Stella offered two guidelines for discussion. However, she did not share strategies for successful and productive conversation practices to help her students get deeper into the book, even though she saw collaboration as the main benefit of literature discussion.

### **Summary.**

Stella shared her expectations with her students to establish successful literature discussion practices. Additionally, she counted on them to apply what they had learned during the school year about discussing books to their small group setting. Stella gave her students a lot of independence during their discussion time to help each other make

meaning and trusted them to work on conflicts within the group before seeking her assistance.

### **Stella's Initial Thoughts about Her Role in the Literature Discussion Group**

During my initial interview with Stella, I learned that she gave her students lots of ownership in deciding how time for discussion could be used. Stella permitted her students to create their own reading schedules and expected them to have read the pages they agreed on in time for their literature discussion meetings. She also stated the group members could choose what to do during their group time as long as it applied to the book. So, her students could discuss the book, talk for five or ten minutes and then spend the rest of the time reading, or begin preparing for their group presentation about the book. Stella told me that all year long she had given them study guides and had modeled the kinds of questions that would get her students thinking deeply about a novel. Now, she said, it was their turn to ask these questions of themselves and their peers.

Since Stella's students had the freedom to manage their time as they saw fit, I asked her to explain the role she envisioned herself playing as her students met to discuss their novels. Stella said:

Facilitator. Making sure that everybody's involved, that everybody's on task, no coat-tail riders, that's my main function, making sure that everybody's engaged and that they're meeting their deadlines. ...First off the thing that seems most elementary is the one that usually doesn't happen, and I think you've got to physically make sure they're in a group setting. Cause when you say get into groups, you and I will be talking, we're in a group of four, and the other two are over there. I have to say "I want you all pointing to each other and looking at each other, and I want to see three to five feet from one group to the other." You actually have to do that. You have to physically tell them how to set up a group. Because what happens is you get a disconnect if a kid is sitting over here like this or talking to another group.

Stella did not see herself in any other role but facilitating the group discussions. Because all 10 literature discussion groups met at the same time, Stella told me she would be walking the entire class period. She perceived her job to be observing her students and making sure they were all discussing the text. Stella did not want any “coat-tail riders” to take advantage of the group, especially since she expected all group members to share equally in the final presentation of their book.

### **Roles Stella Played in the Literature Discussion Group**

Stella’s decision to have all literature discussion groups meet concurrently resulted in her constant movement during the 30 minutes of classroom time the students had to discuss their book. I recorded in my field notes that Stella did not spend much time with any of the groups; rather, she checked in briefly to make sure her students were talking about the text and to see if they had any questions. The average time Stella spent with any one group was two minutes. My observations and digital recordings of the literature discussions as well as interviews with Stella and her students resulted in the emergence of a theme.

#### **Stella: Manager and facilitator in a literature discussion group.**

Stella assumed two roles when she participated in the literature discussions. Over the course of the three days groups met to discuss their books, Stella participated in the group I observed a total of five times in two days. She was absent from school the third day of discussion. I transcribed every conversation in which Stella participated. My coding of Stella’s contributions to the group discussions resulted in manager and facilitator. The role definitions are the same for Stella as they were for Lewis and Molly.

I will address the roles in order of the frequency with which Stella played them. Stella assumed the manager role 80 percent of the time and facilitator 20 percent.

*Stella as manager.*

Stella's decision to spend an average of two minutes per group resulted in her mostly playing the role of manager. Of the five times Stella interacted with the group I observed, she assumed the manager role four times. As Stella stated in her initial interview, it was important to her that all groups have equal participation from all group members. I defined the role of manager as briefly checking in on the groups to see if all members were using their time wisely to talk about the text. During the second day of discussion, Stella managed the group I was observing twice. Eleven minutes and forty-seven minutes into the girls' conversation, Stella checked in with the group:

Stella: Ya'll doin' okay?

Girls: Yeah.

Stella: Just keep an eye on the time.

Wendy: Kind of.

Wendy's response of "kind of" may have indicated the girls were not mindful of the class time they had or were not worried about having enough time to complete their discussion.

Stella did not address Wendy's comment, and after Stella left the group, the girls discussed a variety of topics for the next nine minutes. They talked about the book for three minutes and 10 seconds. The other six minutes and 50 seconds was spent discussing a History test they were taking that day, how much of the book they needed to read by tomorrow, how cold they were, and their History projects due the next week. Nine minutes later, Caitlin called Stella over to her group to ask a question. However, Caitlin did not have a question about the book. Instead, she asked about the History

projects the girls had been discussing. Stella answered Caitlin’s specific questions about the details of the project and then turned to her role as manager:

Stella: Are you all talking about your book?  
 Wendy: Yeah.  
 Stella: Really? Caitlin, are you talking about your book? Talk about your book.  
 [Caitlin laughs.]

Stella may have been suspicious of the group’s behavior when she realized the question she had been called over to answer did not pertain to the girls’ discussion of the literature. So, she decided to ask the group if they had been discussing the book. Wendy replied, but Stella questioned her, resulting in the second query. Stella then decided to direct them to discuss their book, and Caitlin responded by laughing. I recorded in my field notes that the girls had not spent much time discussing their book when Caitlin requested answers about the History project from Stella. However, after Stella’s redirection, the girls did get back on track and returned to their conversation about the book for a few minutes.

***Stella as facilitator.***

In addition to managing the groups, I also observed Stella facilitating the group once during the first day of discussion. I defined this role as one that kept the group on track or provided an opportunity for the students to seek Stella’s assistance. The following conversation occurred near the end of the girls’ first discussion of the book:

Transcript	My Coding	Barnes and Todd
Stella: How are ya’ll doin? Wendy: Good. Caitlin: Fine. Darcy: Good. Stella: Are you stumbling on anything? Caitlin: No. We got stumbled once, twice maybe. Got distracted once.	Checking in (question)     Offering assistance (question)	Request Information     Request Information

Stella: But I'm saying that you're all on the same page as understanding where you are in the book?	Facilitating (question)	Continuing
Caitlin: We're all confused.		
Darcy: Yeah, we're all confused. [girls laugh]		
Stella: Yeah, cause it bounces so, time-wise and all of that you've got to figure out who they are and why they're there...	Providing information	Bringing in
Wendy: And there's so many like characters...		
Stella: Yeah.		Accepting
Natalie: With almost the same name.		
Wendy: And they're so weird.		
Stella: Have you noticed? Have you figured out the name? Of. Of red. So whoever they're with, whatever man they're with, that becomes their name. So you just have to keep track, and their names change.	Providing information Expert Facilitating (question)	Bringing in Expanding Continuing

Stella offered questions and statements to facilitate the girls' discussion. The first question asked the girls how they were doing in general, and then Stella asked another question to gather more information from her students than one word answers. Stella's second question invited the girls to ask a more specific question about the text, but Caitlin provided a short summary of the discussion thus far instead. Stella returned to the facilitating role by asking if they appeared to be "on the same page" in terms of their understanding of the text. Caitlin and Darcy admitted their confusion, and Stella acknowledged why the text can be difficult to understand. She suggested they begin with the characters as a starting point. Wendy and Natalie responded to Stella's comment, and she was given the chance to offer more specific information about how the characters are named. Stella concluded her participation in this conversation by once again suggesting that the text would become clearer if the girls were able to "keep track" of the characters.

Applying Barnes and Todd's (1995) discourse moves to the transcript further clarified how Stella facilitated her students' discussion. At the beginning of the

discussion, Stella requested information. She continued her quest for answers from the girls to see if they were moving through the text together. Stella then brought in information and expanded on it to help her students understand the characters, an element of the book that had resulted in some confusion. She gave the girls a piece of advice about characterization, and the discussion concluded. Stella's perception of the girls' abilities as readers indicated that her brief facilitation of the group would provide enough information for them to continue their discussion successfully.

**Stella's roles were determined by her perception of students' needs.**

During my initial interview with Stella, she explained how her Honors students in second hour differed from her regular fourth hour students. She told me her Honors students were used to balancing a lot of different assignments at the same time and usually came to class prepared. Stella mentioned that all of the girls in the group I chose to study had turned in their student assent and parent consent forms the day after I had given them out, so she felt they were "on top of things" and would come to each group discussion ready to talk about the book. Stella trusted her students to use their classroom time wisely and rely on one another to understand the text. The following conversation occurred at the beginning of the first day of discussion when Stella checked in on the group I observed to see how they were doing:

Stella: Every group has just begun with that sentence.

Caitlin: It's confusing?

Wendy: Cause it really is.

Stella: And so that's why this first meeting is so important, that everybody be in the same spot in the book so that you can say okay, what do you think is going on, and slowly but surely with all of you working at it that you can figure it out. Okay?

Stella believed her students could work together as a team to construct meaning from the text. She counted on them to come to the group discussions prepared with the reading and grapple with difficulties in the text together. After Stella's last comment in the above conversation, she walked away from the group so they could have time to discuss the book.

Interestingly, Stella's perception of her students' needs did not match what the girls believed her role should be in their discussions. During my initial interview with Natalie and Darcy, they told me Stella's role should be to help them understand the book. They expected her to stop by to help them "stay on track" and answer questions. Katrina echoed Natalie and Darcy's comments when I interviewed her. She said, "I feel like she needs to help us understand the book and help us dig deeper into the book, like, and I don't feel like that could happen, especially right now because we had to read 200 pages over the weekend." For Katrina, balancing her English and History reading load was a lot to manage without teacher guidance. Caitlin agreed with Katrina's statement when she said she believed Stella was trying to "push them" so they wouldn't get sidetracked with summer vacation fast approaching. But she noted that sometimes when the students were pushed too hard, they started slacking. Both girls were concerned the literature discussion schedule would not permit them to completely dedicate themselves to the unit.

### **Summary.**

Stella played two main roles in the literature discussion group, and the roles she chose to play were determined by what she thought her Honors students needed. Stella mentioned in her initial interview that she thought she would mostly facilitate the discussions. Although I did observe her assuming that role once, the role Stella played

most frequently was that of manager. Stella believed her students had the drive and capability of working together to create meaning and understand the text. However, her students thought she would take a more active role in their discussions and wondered how that would be possible with just three days to discuss the entire text while managing History coursework as well. The girls' thoughts about Stella's role tied in directly with the instructional decisions she made.

### **Instructional Decisions Stella Made**

#### **Stella's decisions and her perception of her students' reading abilities.**

The roles Stella played in the literature discussion group were reflective of how she perceived her students' reading abilities. The same can be said of the instructional decisions she made for the literature discussion unit. I asked Stella to explain what she hoped her students would get out of literature discussion. She replied:

I think the idea since you're doing a lit. set, they have this responsibility of a group presentation, they need to have those discussions to get them prepared for the presentation. Also, once you have a good literature discussion, you get hooked and then you want to talk books with people. Then maybe you'll be in book clubs for the rest of your life.

Stella viewed the discussions as a way to hold students accountable for presenting the book to the class. Additionally, she mentioned several times her belief that literature discussion could get kids "hooked" on books and develop a lifelong love for reading. Stella's background in speech and theatre influenced how she set up the literature discussion unit.

Because Stella wanted her students to practice their public speaking skills and share their knowledge of the text they had chosen, the final project was a group presentation (see Appendix K). All members of the group were responsible for

presenting a different element of the book: author biography, book synopsis, characters, real world connection, or spin-offs/recommendations. In addition to these criteria, the students were graded on their visual presentation, individual preparedness, and group balance/cohesiveness/overall quality. Stella believed literature discussions were the best way for students to successfully accomplish the goal of preparing the quality of material required for a good grade on the final project. However, before the students could participate in the group presentation, Stella wanted to make sure no one had taken advantage of the group discussions without assuming personal responsibility. So, after the three days of discussion concluded, she gave her students an objective test about the novel they read. If a student did not pass the assessment he/she was required to write a paper about the book instead of participating in the final project. Additionally, Stella had her students fill out peer evaluations forms at the end of the unit to give her a better picture of how the group performed as a whole. The students evaluated each other on contributions to workdays, presentation planning, the presentation itself, and an overall view of the process.

As I talked with Stella about her literature discussion unit design, she mentioned her belief that Honors students should have no problem passing the novel test as well as preparing the final project. Stella told me her Honors students were used to juggling lots of assignments and that they should be able to complete several projects for their World Studies class at the same time. She thought they were motivated and willing to do the work to be successful and needed practice putting together a presentation and speaking in front of their peers. Literature discussions were a way for her Honors students to meet the goals Stella had set for them, and the responsibility they assumed for themselves as

well as the group to accomplish these goals motivated them to come to each literature discussion prepared and ready to contribute.

**Stella's trust in her students.**

Stella trusted her students to do what was necessary to complete the literature discussion unit successfully. They chose how many pages to read each night and what to do with the time Stella gave them in class to discuss their text. Stella's students had to pass the novel test to participate in the final project, and they were given complete control over their group presentation. Stella's decision to have all 10 literature discussion groups meet at the same time manifested her belief that students would use their time wisely and discuss what they needed to in order to make meaning of the text and understand it well so they could present it to the class. Because Stella chose to spend little time in the literature discussions, the students were responsible for leading their conversations. Stella did not ask her students to complete any written work for the discussions; all they needed to do was come to the group prepared to discuss the reading.

The following conversation occurred on the first day of discussion. In my field notes, I wrote down a checklist of ideas Stella presented on the SmartBoard and told all of her students to talk about in their groups that day:

- the main characters and how they are related
- conflict
- questions about what's going on in the book
- plot line
- predictions
- examples of dystopia
- real world connections

Stella suggested they continue to talk about these items for the next two days as well because they were related to the final presentation. Nine minutes into their discussion, Wendy decided to address the idea of dystopia.

Transcript	My Coding	Barnes and Todd
<p>Wendy: Is there examples of dystopia?            Caitlin: What is dystopia?            Katrina: Like, not a perfect world.            Darcy: Basically, it's her life.            Caitlin: Her life sucks. I'm just going to be flat out honest.            Darcy: And no one likes her. Like it seems like no one...            Caitlin: Well, she has [this            Wendy: they just use her.            Caitlin: Yeah, she has that one like [friend            Wendy: friend that they can kind of talk to sometimes.            Caitlin: Yeah, but really she's just like leading her into like bad stuff.            Darcy: Yeah, and what I kind of picked up is like everyone else just kind of looks down on her, [like            Caitlin: cause she's like the newest one.            Katrina: So, it's like you're not supposed to be here, but really they should never ever be there anyway.            Darcy: But you have to ask what her job is too.            Katrina: What are they trying to do, like why did they make that society? Is it just to make more babies?            Wendy: We don't really know. They're telling us what's happening, but they don't tell us why. I think.            Katrina: Cause they took away the money of the women, so it was like a process...            Wendy: Taking away all that they own so they're, they're pretty much, they don't have any value, so they'll just keep having babies because that's the only thing they have, I guess. I don't know.</p>	<p>Establishing Topic            Requesting Info.            Providing Info.            Textual Example            Continuing Textual Example            Agreeing              Textual Example            Agreeing              Alternative viewpoint            Returns to previous Point            Agreeing              Continuing            Summarizing            Offers new idea              New Topic            Requesting Info.              Requesting Info.              Suggests an answer              Building on previous answer</p>	<p>Initiating            Request Info.            Responding            Bringing in            Expanding              Continuing              Expanding            Accepting              Bringing in            Contradicting              Accepting            Continuing              Expanding            Extending            Eliciting              Initiating            Request Info.              Qualifying              Expanding              Support</p>

Katrina: But then like the men, they don't have any of the stuff like the sexual stuff that they had before.	New Topic	Bringing in
Caitlin: And then like when a girl does get pregnant and stuff she's not supposed to work and stuff so the baby can be healthy and then that makes all the other girls really upset and then it ends up like being damage on, they start going after the girl that is actually pregnant and [then	Returns to previous topic	Continuing Previous point
Wendy: then they're also like jealous [like=	Continuing Agreeing Continuing	Expanding Agreeing Continuing
Caitlin: yeah		
Wendy: =if the girl's pregnant she comes [in=		
Caitlin: cause they all want to have kids, but...	Textual Support Concludes idea Summarizing New Topic	Bringing in Expanding Qualifying Initiating
Wendy: =and she's like showing off.		
Caitlin: It's just a bad situation.		
Wendy: How long are we in here for?		

This transcript is representative of the kind of talk that occurred during the three days the girls discussed their book. Because Stella trusted her students to figure out the meaning of the text on their own, it is interesting to look at a portion of their conversation to better understand how they functioned as a group. My coding, in addition to applying Barnes and Todd's (1995) discourse moves and a conversational analysis lens, offered insight into the girls' attempts at making sense of the text.

My coding indicated the girls were willing to cooperate with each other so they could piece their knowledge of the novel together to come to a better overall understanding of the text. However, the girls also missed a few opportunities to expand on a peer's comment that might have led to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex characters in the book. From a teacher's point of view, I noticed the girls were not capitalizing on one another's knowledge to deepen their understanding of the text. After Katrina offered an acceptable definition of the word "dystopia," Darcy, Caitlin, and

Wendy offered comments and textual support to explain why they thought the main character in the novel did not live in a “perfect world.” Wendy suggested the main character did have a friend she could talk to, but Caitlin reminded her that the friendship was not one of support, but of destruction. Katrina offered a summary of why the main character is treated so poorly when she said, “you’re not supposed to be here.” However, when she commented that “really they should never ever be there anyway,” no one asked her to explain her idea. Instead, Darcy returned to thinking about why the characters “looked down on” the main character by suggesting her job may be a factor. Katrina and Wendy picked up on Darcy’s comment by asking questions and offering ideas of their own. But when Katrina tried to add the additional layer of the men’s sexuality as a way of understanding why the society functioned the way it did, Caitlin and Wendy ignored her comment and returned to Wendy’s idea about a woman’s sole purpose of having babies.

Interestingly, although the girls did not expand on the comments that may have furthered their understanding of the text, they were interested in talking about the role of women in the book. The context of the novel sparked discussion about how women were treated, and because every member of the group was female, they could all contribute their opinions about what it might have been like to live in the society described in the book. The personal connection the girls had to the main character may not have been present if they had decided to read a different text.

Applying Barnes and Todd’s (1995) discourse moves to this transcript showed how the social conversation affected the girls’ cognitive understanding of the text. The girls often continued and expanded on one another’s answers. One girl would have an

idea, and the others voiced their agreement by providing examples from the text.

However, both times Katrina attempted to elicit an answer from her peers or bring in an example from the text to support the conversation, the girls either initiated a new topic or continued talking about a previous idea. Interestingly, two times during the conversation a comment was made that appeared to summarize the girls' discussion of the topic. In the first case, Katrina attempted to move on from the idea that the main character was not treated well. She tried to elicit comments from her peers that might explain why the main character (and others) should not "be there," but they were not willing to entertain the idea. In the second case, Caitlin said, "It's just a bad situation" when she summarized the life of a pregnant woman in the novel. Wendy's response of "How long are we in here for?" shut down further consideration of the topic, and for the next few minutes, the girls talked about how much time they had left to discuss their book before class ended.

Adding the conversational analysis lens to this conversation provided further clarification into the group dynamics. By specifically transcribing overlaps and latches, I was able to take a closer look at turn-taking. Two interesting findings emerged. First, Wendy and Caitlin formed a sort of tag team during this conversation. They regularly latched onto each other's comments and supported ideas. I noted in my field observation journal that Wendy and Caitlin seemed to be friends, and during my initial interviews with the girls, they were in the same focus group. I listened to the initial interviews again after transcribing portions of the literature discussions and noticed Wendy and Caitlin often interrupted each other and completed each other's sentences. So, this discussion behavior was established before the literature discussions began. Wendy and Caitlin's relationship might have caused a shift in how the group functioned overall because the

other group members may not have known how or when to interject their thoughts. For example, although Natalie was present for this discussion, she never entered the conversation.

The second interesting finding that emerged after I applied the conversational analysis lens was how the other group members reacted to Katrina's comments. Although Wendy responded to Katrina's thought about taking away everything the women own, Katrina's big ideas were not addressed. Katrina wondered why the women are there and asked about the men's sexuality as it related to the female characters, but neither comment was pursued. Katrina was a shy young woman and may not have wanted to push her ideas on the group. However, I noted in my field journal that Katrina seemed to have the best understanding of the novel and was most interested in talking about it. The other girls did not exhibit the same desire to talk about the book in-depth. This could have been because they did not read the text, did not understand its complexity, and/or did not care to take the time to address Katrina's wonderings.

**Stella: Still learning.**

When I interviewed the girls after the literature discussion unit concluded, I asked them to talk a bit about how they felt their discussions went overall. All of the girls told me they had a better understanding of the book because they had time to discuss it with one another. However, they also reported they were confused many times and wished Stella had been able to offer more support to help them through the difficult sections of the text. The girls felt pressured to finish their novel in three days and acknowledged that Stella's continuous movement among the 10 literature discussion groups did not give her enough time to spend with any one group. Caitlin said, "We still ended with a lot of

confusion and stuff, so like it would have been nice to have that stuff cleared up.”

Katrina commented, “She didn’t seem to do much at all, which is probably what she intended.” I asked Katrina to explain her statement, and she said that Stella most likely believed they “were probably supposed to be able to do that themselves.” In other words, Katrina thought the reason why Stella may not have offered a lot of assistance was because she believed they were ready to tackle a difficult text on their own and work together to make meaning. Wendy added that Stella would likely clear up confusion during their presentation of the novel, but then it would be too late because their final project would already be complete.

In my final interview with Stella, the concerns the girls discussed in their follow-up interviews with me emerged in her reflection of the unit.

Stella: I think I could do more with it. But right now, because of time, because we haven’t done it before, I think my job is really administrative. But if I could do it more than once, and if there were more time for me to sit with each group, which I didn’t have that luxury of time.

Interviewer: Why is that do you think?

Stella: Oh, because we have crammed in something that doesn’t fit. I mean it does not fit into the time schedule. We have put it on top, at one point we were doing three things at the same time, and I think to do it well, it needs to be all by itself so that you have that time for breathing and reading and talking and reflecting and writing. Because I feel like too it would be great if you could, if you were working with the group, and say okay next time we get together I want you to be thinking about this part of the book so we can have discussion. And so that you’re guiding them more with more guiding questions, but we have just enough time to read the book, get ready for the presentation, and we’re done with it.

Stella expressed concern about the lack of time her students had to complete the unit as well as the difficulty of having an opportunity to visit with each group. Although Stella included a literature discussion unit in each of the seven years she taught World Studies,

it seemed she felt tension between the value of the literature discussion and presentation experiences. Stella recognized this was the only time her students had participated in literature discussion in her class, and for many of those students it was the first time they had been a member of a literature discussion group. If Stella's students had more time to read and discuss their novels, she would have had more time to offer guidance and support. However, Stella had not yet enacted the change she reflected on during her interview in order to achieve the results she envisioned.

### **Summary.**

The instructional decisions Stella made were based on her perception of her students' reading abilities as well as the trust she had in them as Honors students. Stella believed her Honors students were capable of generating thoughtful conversations because they would come to the group discussions prepared and ready to talk about the text. She thought her students were self-starters and would use their time wisely not only so they could pass the objective test, but also so they could stay together as a group and create the final project as a team. Although the girls did use some of their class time to converse about the book and make meaning, they did not appear to have a good enough understanding of the text to dig deeper. Interesting ideas were not addressed, and conversations moved quickly from one topic to the next. Stella recognized the unit would have to be altered in order for it to be more beneficial to her students, and she seemed willing to entertain the idea of incorporating more than one literature discussion unit into her curriculum as well as providing more time for her students to read and discuss texts. However, in my follow-up interview with Stella, it became clear she's still

learning about the “how” of literature discussion but has not modified the unit to incorporate this knowledge.

### **Summary of Stella Thompson**

“Literature discussion is like a large box of sweetened breakfast cereal: Each time you open the box, you put your face in the yummy confection...and once in awhile you get a prize!”

The day after the groups’ last literature discussion, I asked Stella to create a simile once again. She told me she liked the original simile she created and felt it was still representative of what she thought about literature discussion. I interpreted Stella’s comment to mean that this is what literature discussion had been like for her in the past and that this year’s unit reconfirmed her perception of what was possible during group discussions. Group conversations could be “yummy,” and given the right text and group dynamic, even a prize could be in store. Honors students were capable of preparing the material and coming to the table with interesting ideas and questions designed to propel the group’s understanding of the text forward. As I thought about everything Stella had told me about her teaching journey and her reasons for using literature discussion, I realized she was still in the process of learning how to fit literature discussion into a class integrating English and History. Stella’s background teaching speech, theatre, and English classes showed she understood the power of talking about books, but fitting an entire literature discussion unit into an already packed curriculum proved to be a challenge. Stella’s reflective comments during my follow-up interview with her displayed her passion and love for sharing books in a small group setting, and she seemed dedicated to making literature discussion work for her students. However, Stella did not reflect on any changes she made to the unit over the past seven years of including it in her

curriculum, thus raising the question of how the process will, if at all, differ for next year's students.

## **Chapter Seven – Findings and Discussion: Comparison and Contrast**

Lewis, Molly, and Stella embarked on their teaching journeys in various ways and emerged as three different educators. They shared the common goal of incorporating literature discussion into their curriculum. However, they differed in their approach and execution of the unit. Looking back on my experiences with all three teachers, I compare and contrast Lewis, Molly, and Stella's implementation of literature discussion by addressing each research question.

### **Question One: What Type of Environment is Needed for Students to Maximize the Meaning they Construct from a Text?**

#### **Finding 1: All teachers recognized the importance of establishing expectations and guidelines for the literature discussion group.**

Lewis, Molly, and Stella all recognized the importance of establishing expectations and guidelines for their students before the literature discussion unit began. Furthermore, how they perceived their students' social and reading abilities influenced their decision about how involved they would be in transitioning students from the typical classroom routine into literature discussion. Both Lewis and Stella taught advanced level World Studies and had used a small group discussion format to talk about various texts throughout the school year. Lewis mentioned his students' involvement in Socratic Seminars, and Stella felt the study guides she prepared for her students provided a good model of the types of questions the students should ask themselves and each other move beyond a literal understanding of the text. They felt their students were comfortable and capable of managing a conversation about a book with a few of their peers.

*The expectations and guidelines Lewis and Stella shared about how to engage in a successful and productive discussion were not thorough, and the literature discussion groups of both teachers suffered.*

Interestingly, both Lewis and Stella gave their students one specific guideline—sit in a circle. They addressed the importance of the students’ physical location as key to making sure everyone was involved in the conversation and could hear the comments of each group member. But after that suggestion, the students were left on their own to establish norms for the remainder of their discussions. Lewis and Stella’s students were never instructed in how to participate in productive literature discussions. Lewis gave his students class time to discuss and write down norms the group agreed to follow. The group I observed drafted many reasonable expectations and a few silly ones. However, neither the students nor Lewis returned to them at any time during the unit. Thus, the norms were not always enforced. In one case, the student generated norm of making “random animal impersonations (environmentally friendly)” if a member distracted the group often led to distracting behavior.

In a follow-up email to Lewis, I asked him what type of instruction he offered his students on how to engage in small group discussion outside of the literature discussion unit. He wrote, “We usually type out instructions for the groups on handouts, or we put them on the smartboards/overhead. We almost never put them in groups without giving them a task to perform - although often the task is creative and open-ended. The instructions are typically guidelines, but students have some freedom in how they complete the tasks.” So, although Lewis gave his students guidelines to follow in order to complete a task, they were not taught discussion behaviors that could lead to more productive and successful conversations.

Stella provided her students the additional suggestion of inviting a group member to share his or her ideas if participation seemed to be lacking before they came to her with a concern. The only other guidelines she offered her students were about due dates and assessment. Stella expected her students to use the time as they saw fit to make meaning and arrive at a better understanding of the novel. However, the students struggled to stay on one topic of discussion for longer than five minutes and often talked about issues unrelated to the book.

When I emailed Stella to ask her about the expectations and guidelines she gave her students before they engaged in small group conversations other than literature discussion, she sent me the same list she provided her students during the literature discussion unit, with one exception. She included, “Come to a consensus of some sort. Sometimes the group is asked to come up with a group answer that will be shared with the rest of the class or will choose a sample writing from one of the group members that will be read aloud by the writer or another member of the group.” I concluded that the reason this guideline was not included in the literature discussion expectations was because the students were not reading the same text. However, since the rest of the list was the same, I determined that Stella’s approach to communicating expectations that would lead to successful and productive discussions did not alter throughout the year.

Molly’s approach to establishing successful literature discussion practices greatly varied from Lewis and Stella’s methods. She too, expected her students to sit in a circle as they discussed the text but went beyond that initial guideline into specific behaviors she told her students she would look for. Molly told me that her struggling readers did not participate in small group discussions often, so she felt she needed to present them

with a scoring guide of good discussion practices to encourage them to be productive members of the group. Additionally, Molly believed her students needed suggestions of what they could say during the discussions to propel the conversation forward. Molly's scoring guide assessed five criteria: overall participation, knowledge of book, discussion and response, preparation, and conduct (see Appendix L). Each criterion was described in detail on a one to four scale so students understood what they needed to do during the discussion to receive the maximum amount of points. Molly kept a checklist of the students' comments during the discussions and transferred her notes to each student's scoring guide for every literature discussion. The fact Molly tied the students' discussion participation into their overall grade for the unit spoke to the importance she placed on this element. I asked Molly if she presented this information about good discussion practices during other units besides literature discussion. She told me she shared these expectations with her students from day one so they would know what to do when they were given class time to work in small groups.

The recent research about creating a successful collaborative social context is clear. According to Barnes (2008), "Successful group work requires preparation, guidance and supervision, and needs to be embedded in an extended sequence of work that includes other patterns of communication" (p. 7). Teachers must take time to carefully prepare and instruct their students on the components of working together as a collaborative community. Just because students are grouped together based on their text choice does not mean the discussions will be successful without guidance. Mercer and Dawes (2008) write, "there must not only be a sense of trust and a common endeavor, but also a shared understanding of how to engage in productive discussion" (p. 66). They

believe teachers should set ground rules before small group discussions begin to ensure all students understand the characteristics of a constructive discussion.

**Finding 2: The students' relationship with their teacher affected their overall success in making meaning of the text.**

Another key finding that emerged when I assessed the environment the teachers created was the students' relationship with their teacher. Both Lewis and Molly's students trusted them to provide the assistance they needed to navigate the text. In my interviews with both Lewis and Molly's students, they shared their comfort with discussing literature and asking questions. The students felt their teachers would guide them when necessary and did not seem hesitant about asking for help. Lewis often joked around with his students and challenged them to work together to arrive at answers to critical thinking questions. Molly's students said she was "one of them" and felt that any topic addressed in a book could be brought to the group for discussion. According to Lewis and Molly's students, their teachers had offered their expertise all year long, and they did not see a change during the literature discussion unit.

Stella's relationship with her students was not as clear. The girls I interviewed acknowledged Stella's role as an Honors English teacher to push them to reach their academic potential, but they did not believe she provided the assistance they needed to fully understand their text. Stella had given them a calendar of due dates and specific expectations for their final group presentation, but during the discussions, she spent no more than an average of two minutes with each group. When Stella gave the groups time to meet, she was businesslike and moved quickly from group to group.

## **Question Two: How do Selected Teachers Negotiate their Roles in a Literature Discussion Group?**

### **Finding 3: Lewis, Molly, and Stella all played the role of facilitator.**

One role all three teachers assumed during the literature discussions was that of facilitator. The initial and recent research about literature discussion (Freedman, 1993; Langer, 1992; Maloch, 2002; Short et al., 1999) reinforces the importance of teachers playing this role to the overall success of the group. According to the research, in order for students to stay on track, they occasionally need the teacher to check in with the group, see how things are going, and offer assistance. While Lewis and Molly had similar approaches to facilitation, Stella viewed the role differently. Lewis and Molly facilitated their students' discussion by guiding and navigating the conversation as necessary. They offered assistance if they perceived their students were struggling. Lewis helped his students answer specific questions, and Molly made sure each group member's comments were heard and addressed before changing topic. I observed Stella providing information to help her students through the text once. I was only able to study one group during the three discussion days, so my conclusions are a snapshot of Stella's approach. In my initial interview with Stella, she said she viewed her main role to be that of facilitator. However, I noted she managed her students' classroom behavior more than she facilitated their discussions.

### **Finding 4: The roles the teachers played were based on their perception of students' reading abilities.**

#### *Lewis and Stella assumed the manager role.*

Lewis and Stella taught advanced English classes, whereas Molly worked with struggling readers. The roles the teachers played emerged from what they thought their

students needed to be successful. Both Lewis and Stella decided to have all literature discussion groups meet at the same time because they were confident the students could engage in productive discussions about the text. Furthermore, they believed their students would be motivated to use class time wisely so they could complete their assignments. However, Lewis and Stella could not sit in on every group discussion, so they managed the students' classroom behavior in an attempt to thwart sidebar conversations unrelated to the text. I defined managing as briefly checking in on the groups to see if all members were using their time wisely to talk about the text. Lewis provided a list of questions each discussion day for his students to answer to keep them focused. He checked in at some point during each discussion to see what question the students were answering or to tell them how much class time remained for them to finish the assignment. Stella reminded her students about the final presentation each day so they would be sure to address the assessment's requirements in their groups. As Stella moved from group to group, she asked her students if they were talking about their book and thinking about the final project.

Molly, on the other hand, did not have to assume this role because she felt her presence was needed in every discussion to help her students comprehend the book. Unlike Lewis and Stella, Molly believed her students needed specific and regular guidance to navigate the text. She did not trust them to understand the book completely without her assistance. Because she was an active participant in each discussion, there was no need for her to manage her students' behavior.

*Lewis and Molly played the role of nudger.*

Interestingly, although Lewis and Molly taught readers of different abilities, they both played the role of nudger. Characteristics of the nudger role included asking students to defend their ideas and offering various ideas for students to consider. However, *how* they nudged was based on their perception of students' reading skills as well as their beliefs about how well their students could sustain a small group discussion. Lewis assumed the nudging role more often because he assumed his Advanced Placement students would have a good literal understanding of the text. His main goal was to push his tenth grade students to take their thinking to the next level. Lewis wanted his students to move away from finding a "right" answer to learning how to form and validate opinions. So, Lewis generally offered his own opinion or idea about the text and then asked a series of questions with which his students could "wrestle." He rarely told his students whether he believed their answers were correct because he wanted them to interpret the novel rather than counting on him for approval.

Molly had the same goal of thinking deeper about the text in mind for her students. For Molly, this meant she had to practice social norms and getting the hang of productive discussion a little more with her students before this deep thinking could occur. So, helping her students be aware of their own thinking, teaching them how to participate, and modeling how to ask questions of the group became very important. Molly offered hints and sometimes asked leading questions to get her students to consider the "why" of the characters' actions. She chose to scaffold her students' learning more than Lewis did. Even though Molly knew she would most likely need to help her

students understand the text's plot, this fact did not deter her from wanting to challenge her students to get beyond the surface level.

Gallimore and Tharp (1990) generated a theory of teaching as assisting students' performance and identified questioning as a means of providing support. Their work is based on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. According to Gallimore and Tharp (1990), "Questioning explicitly calls for an active linguistic and cognitive response: It provokes creations by the pupil" (p. 181). However, they point out not all questions teachers ask assist; some assess. Teachers ask assessment questions when they want to discover what their students know without assistance. "The assistance question, on the other hand, inquires in order to produce a mental operation that the pupil cannot or would not produce alone" (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990, p. 182). The guidance provided by the teacher's assistance, rather than assessment, questions in this situation furthers the student's learning. Lewis and Molly's efforts to ask "how" and "why" assistance questions helped their students think deeper about the text.

***Molly was the only teacher who displayed the role of clarifier.***

Molly was the only teacher who displayed the role of clarifier. Molly's perception of her students' reading abilities indicated she would need to play this role, and she did so often. In fact, clarifier was Molly's chief role. Molly's job as clarifier was to ask questions or provide additional information to help her students navigate the text. She often summarized, built off of a student's comment, or offered reminders to assist her students in figuring out the text themselves. This role was necessary for Molly because her students' reading abilities were not as strong as Lewis or Stella's students'. So, she felt they needed more assistance with the literal understanding of the text.

Molly's role as clarifier cleared up confusion about the storyline so the students had time to address the characters' actions. Her comments modeled what she wanted her students to say to one another. At times Molly's students were able to take her lead, expand on a comment, and engage in a conversation without her intervention. However, most of the time, they looked to her for guidance. Molly's actions raise the question of how active of a participant a teacher should be in literature discussion groups.

### **Question Three: What Instructional Decisions do Selected Teachers Make to Help their Students Construct Meaning from a Text?**

#### **Finding 5: All teachers recognized the importance of a social learning environment.**

The one thing Lewis, Molly, and Stella had in common when it came to making instructional decisions for the literature discussion unit was simply to give their students protected class time to talk about the text. All three teachers believed their students would make more meaning and come to a deeper understanding of the novel if they talked about their book with peers. Lewis, Molly, and Stella exhibited this belief not only by implementing literature discussion into their curriculum, but by using small group discussion throughout the year. In a follow-up email to all three teachers, I asked them how often they made time for students to work in small groups during class. Lewis, Molly, and Stella all reported that their students were in small groups at least twice a week. Lewis and Molly gave their students opportunities to discuss both novels and shorter texts in groups before engaging in a class discussion. Molly also arranged her students into small groups to work on skills such as predicting word meaning using contextual clues if they seemed to be struggling. Stella put her students into small groups

to peer-edit written work, compare answers to a study guide before a test or class discussion, and to rehearse speeches.

The idea of a social learning environment was embraced by Lewis, Molly, and Stella and is supported by decades of research. Bakhtin (1981), Barnes (1992), Dewey (1924), and Edwards and Mercer (1987) were all advocates of social learning environments. When students have time to interact socially about a text, they are likely to form a more complete understanding of it than if they would have read it individually. Additionally, the initial and current research about literature discussion (Casey, 2008/2009; Daniels, 2002; Faust et al., 2005; Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Pierce & Gilles, 2008; Short & Pierce, 1990) indicate students who are members of small, supportive discussion groups learn from one another by offering various perspectives of the text and listening to the ideas of others.

**Finding 6: The decisions the teachers made were influenced by their knowledge of literature discussion.**

Lewis, Molly, and Stella shared few commonalities when it came to the “how” of literature discussion. All three teachers offered their students book choices and assigned them groups based on these selections. Additionally, the students were given time in class to discuss the text. However, beyond these similarities, the literature discussion unit of these three teachers looked very different. As a result, the instructional decisions Lewis, Molly, and Stella made resulted in three different outcomes.

Molly was the most well-versed in how to implement literature discussion as a reading instructional strategy. She received both her Bachelor of Science degree in Secondary Education and her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the local university. Additionally, Molly recently earned her Masters in Literacy Education.

Molly had read the work of Harvey Daniels and a few chapters in Pierce and Gilles's (1993) book *Cycles of Meaning* during her courses, and she told me she felt she had a good foundation of what literature discussion should look like in her classroom.

Lewis and Stella, on the other hand, had not received any formal training about literature discussion. Lewis modeled his literature discussion unit after Socratic Seminar discussions he observed in his peers' classrooms as well as his understanding of "Vygotsky's collaborative learning model." Lewis strived to try instructional strategies that would improve his Advanced Placement students' academic achievement. Stella fondly remembered participating in "lit. sets" in junior high and high school as well as being a member of book clubs as an adult. She wished to share her love of talking about books with her students, especially since one of her main goals coming from a speech and theatre background was to have her students present their books in a final presentation to the entire class.

Lewis, Molly, and Stella's various understanding of how literature discussion worked led to different results for each teacher. Molly's case was unique because I conducted my pilot study for my dissertation in her classroom in the spring of 2008. Although the teacher's role in literature discussion was not the focus of that study, Molly told me she learned a lot about what and what not to do as a member of the group as a result of my research. She coupled her previous knowledge about literature discussion as an instructional strategy with my findings to alter her participation in the discussions. Molly told me she was making a concerted effort during the conversations to talk less and listen more. She wanted to give her students more ownership in their learning and tried to balance her roles as member and teacher. Consequently, Molly focused on scaffolding

her students' learning rather than regularly offering her own perspective. As a result of this effort, I found Molly's students working together to make meaning instead of often relying on her. However, Molly's decision to remain a constant member of the group raises the question of how much teachers should be involved, especially if group members feel they have a good understanding of the text or would rather ask questions of their peers to make meaning. Ultimately, the boys' social collaboration led to a team effort, and when I interviewed them after the unit concluded, they were able to discuss the book beyond the literal level. Additionally, they talked about themselves and their group members as readers, a skill Molly had been working on since the beginning of the year.

Another factor in the boys' success was the assignments Molly asked them to complete throughout the unit. Molly's students completed an entrance slip about their book each day before group discussions began, and they were required to bring a discussion sheet of questions and comments to each meeting. The discussion sheets were open-ended and designed to help students keep track of their thinking. In addition to these expectations, Molly required her students to write letters and complete special assignments about their book. The written work scaffolded the students' learning and was used to reinforce their knowledge about the book beyond the classroom conversations. They were encouraged to remain engaged with their text the entire unit, and Molly believed the boys' comprehension of the book was enhanced as a result of these assignments.

Lewis's literature discussion unit experience resulted in a different outcome. Lewis acknowledged he had not read any of the theory about literature discussion but

wanted to incorporate small group discussions about text into his curriculum because he felt they would be an asset to his students' understanding of complicated texts. Although both he and his students felt the unit was an overall success, Lewis continually reflected both during and after the unit. Lewis realized some of the instructional decisions he made did not work well for his students, and he was open and honest about receiving feedback so he could learn from his mistakes. Lewis's students told him they liked guiding questions but simply could not answer as many as he wanted them to in the short amount of time they had to talk about their text. The students in the group I observed expressed the need to talk about what interested them rather than having a set amount of teacher-designed questions to answer. Lewis's students spoke, and he listened. The reflective comments Lewis shared with me during his follow-up interview showed he had learned a lot from the experience and was considering changes for the future.

Like Lewis, Stella had not read any professional texts about literature discussion but thought small group discussions were a good way to work through a text. She trusted her students to come to the table prepared to talk and ask questions about the book. However, Stella did not require her students to keep track of their thinking as they read the book. Since the students only had three days to finish their text, the amount of information presented in the large amount of pages may have been overwhelming. I concluded Stella was still learning about literature discussion based on her approach to the unit. It seemed Stella experienced tension between the two things she loves: 1) helping her students develop a passion for reading and talking about books, and 2) sharing information publicly through a presentation to peers. Coming from a speech and theatre background, Stella made the final group presentation her priority, even though she

told me the main advantage of literature discussion was getting deeper into the book and building off one another's ideas. She recognized the students needed more guidance from her to fully understand their texts. However, after seven years of incorporating a literature discussion unit into her curriculum, she had not made the changes she knew would lead to her students' greater overall success. Stella continued to "cram" literature discussion into a very busy time of year without giving her students the time they needed to process difficult texts.

### **Viewing Lewis, Molly, and Stella through Watson's Model**

Dorothy Watson's (1996) article about how a teacher's beliefs and understanding of theory relates to his or her practice helps clarify the decisions of all three teachers. Sandra Wilde edited a book composed of Watson's selected writings. Watson's article "Whole Language: Why Bother?" appears in this compilation and includes her model of how teachers come to a whole language philosophy. Although Watson originally created this model to discuss whole language teaching, it may also be used to explore how teachers' practice, theory and beliefs affect classroom events.

Watson's (1996) article addresses three major categories that are entrances into the whole language philosophy: 1) practice, 2) theory making, and 3) belief formation (p. 208). She writes, "There is no hierarchical 'ability grouping' intended in the order of my list, nor is there a formula for mastering and moving from category to category" (p. 208). Rather, each of these categories provides insight into where teachers are on their teaching journey. According to Watson (1996), teachers' practices may be borrowed or owned, their beliefs unexamined or examined, and their theory inactive or active. Inquiry is essential to all three categories, and what happens in the classroom is the evidence used

to understand where a teacher is in developing his or her whole language philosophy (see Figure 2).

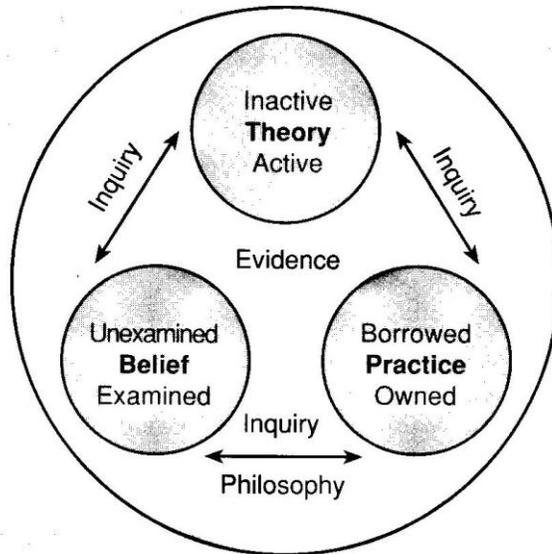


Figure 2. Watson's Model of Developing a Whole Language Philosophy.

Lewis, Molly, and Stella were at different stages in each category, thus resulting in a variance of how literature discussion played out in their classrooms.

### **Lewis.**

The reason Lewis incorporated literature discussion into his curriculum was because he observed successful Socratic Seminars in his peers' classrooms and believed he could modify the structure to benefit his students' learning. Lewis borrowed the practice of small group discussion and was working on owning it by regularly reflecting about the unit with his students and modifying its structure. But in order to own the practice, he needed to strengthen his beliefs and understand the theory (Watson, 1996).

Lewis's belief system was in place. He thought about what he wanted his Advanced Placement students to achieve by participating in literature discussion. Lewis

expressed his desire for his students to make meaning and think more deeply about a text by creating a small group social environment that would encourage them to discuss and ask questions about a book they had all chosen to read. However, according to Watson, Lewis's belief system had not yet been fully examined because "an examined belief system is set in theory and practice" (p. 213). Lewis integrated inquiry into his teaching to better his practice, but his understanding of theory was missing.

Watson (1996) states that in order for a teacher's theory to be active, he or she must bring "theories to life by researching them" (p. 212). Lewis took the first step to activating theory by trying out a classroom practice he believed would benefit his students. Additionally, Lewis studied what was happening in his classroom and made changes to the unit based on this evidence. However, for Lewis's students to be ultimately successful in literature discussion, he needed to understand more about the "how" behind the instructional strategy. Taking more time to establish expectations and guidelines for the discussions as well as rethinking how he assessed his students during group meetings may have resulted in a better experience for his students.

**Molly.**

Molly approached literature discussion differently than Lewis did. She began with theory and then integrated the knowledge into her practice. Molly's theory was active from the start because she researched why literature discussion worked for secondary students and how it could be implemented in her literacy classes at the local university. However, theory alone was not what made Molly's students successful. She had to couple her beliefs and practices with her understanding of the theory before literature discussion could be beneficial for her struggling readers.

Like Lewis, Molly's beliefs about the advantages of small group discussion were established. She believed her students would understand a text more deeply if they had the opportunity to discuss it with their peers. Additionally, Molly thought her students' social and comprehension skills would improve if expectations and guidelines for productive discussion were explained and modeled. These beliefs led to Molly's active participation in every discussion, a conscious decision made by Molly based on her knowledge of her students' reading abilities.

Molly's practice resulted from her understanding of theory and her beliefs. In addition, what she learned from her involvement in my pilot study paired with her inquiry of the process influenced how literature discussion worked in her classroom. My pilot study revealed Molly participated frequently in her students' discussions, resulting in few lengthy conversations without her intervention. When I shared this information with Molly, she expressed that this behavior did not match her beliefs or her understanding of literature discussion theory. Molly felt she needed to step back from the conversations and allow her students to assume more control, but she struggled with this balance. However, this knowledge caused Molly to ask questions about how the unit would be executed in her classroom, and she made several changes to its structure. Molly's active theory, examined beliefs, and owned practice made her the most successful of the three teachers in implementing literature discussion.

**Stella.**

Similar to Lewis, Stella decided to try literature discussion in her classroom based on her own experiences and borrowed practices. She fondly remembered participating in lit. sets as a youth and felt she could adapt the small group discussion structure to her

high school classroom. Additionally, Stella's explanation of her speech and theatre background during her initial interview revealed the importance of presenting information. So, Stella incorporated the performance practice she used into her literature discussion unit. Stella's practices tied into her beliefs.

Stella thought a social environment benefitted her students in two ways. First, the social environment would provide students the support they needed to create a thoughtful presentation of the text. They could help each other with the requirements to ensure that each student succeeded in the final project. Secondly, Stella believed if students had the chance to talk about a text with their peers, they would understand it better because they could work together to make meaning. Furthermore, these discussions would encourage students to share their different perspectives and possibly spark a lifelong passion of discussing books in a small group environment. However, Stella needed to develop both the theory and inquiry elements of her philosophy in order for her students to be most successful during the unit.

Like Lewis, Stella had not been formally trained in the "how" of literature discussion. However, the overall success of the literature discussion unit varied for Lewis and Stella for one main reason—inquiry. Stella had a basic understanding of why text choice and small group discussion could work better for her students than assigning books to be read in isolation, but the research foundation was not present. The main difference between Lewis and Stella is that he managed his inactive theory with consistent inquiry, and she did not. Although Stella was reflective in her follow-up interview, she had not made any of the changes she envisioned for the unit in the seven years she incorporated it into her curriculum. This may have been because she continued

to feel the tension between her two loves—books and performance. Or, perhaps a researcher’s different perspective offered an additional opportunity for reflection. In either case, it was clear Stella is still learning how literature discussion can best work for her students.

### **Summary**

Although Lewis, Molly, and Stella are three different teachers, we know a lot about how literature discussion can work in the high school classroom by comparing and contrasting their approaches to the unit. The establishment of expectations and guidelines for the literature discussion group affects how productive the in-class conversations about the text will be. Additionally, students who feel comfortable with their teacher may choose to seek more guidance and assistance to help them navigate through a text as opposed to students whose relationship with their teacher has not been well established. The roles Lewis, Molly, and Stella chose to play were mostly based on how they perceived their students’ reading abilities and the goals they wanted their students to accomplish during the discussions. Interestingly, the facilitator role emerged as important for all three teachers, regardless of the students’ skill level. Finally, the importance of a social learning environment emerged as crucial to reading instruction. In addition, each teacher’s knowledge and application of literature discussion resulted in three different outcomes at the conclusion of the unit. Applying Watson’s model to all three teachers helps us understand why. Studying three teachers implement literature discussion provides much insight into how the instructional strategy can best work in a high school classroom. Chapter Eight will discuss the implications this study has for the classroom, teacher education, and further research.

## **Chapter Eight: Summary, Implications, and Recommendations**

The following brief overview of this study includes the purpose, procedures, and a discussion of the findings. It also discusses major insights drawn from the study as well as implications for the classroom, teacher education, and further research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to examine how three high school teachers negotiated their roles as instructors and participants during a literature discussion unit.

The following three questions guided this study:

1. What type of environment is needed for students to maximize the meaning they construct from a text?
2. How do selected teachers negotiate their roles in a literature discussion group?
3. What instructional decisions do selected teachers make to help their students construct meaning from a text?

### **Procedures**

This research is a naturalistic, qualitative, descriptive case study of three high school English teachers. The study examines three types of data: student and teacher interviews; transcripts and observational notes of literature group discussions; and student and teacher artifacts including emails, curriculum materials, and student work. Two phases of data analysis occurred in order to better answer the above questions. During the first phase, I explored the information presented in the data and recorded memos and data briefs of my interpretations. I then transcribed select portions of my digital audio files that directly related to my research questions. I used content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) Barnes and Todd's (1995) discourse moves, and conversational analysis to

conduct a more in-depth analysis. Peer debriefings and participant member checks informed my study as well. See Appendices M, N, and O for the teachers' written response to the research.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The exploration of the three research questions led to themes that revealed insights into how literature discussion works in the high school classroom. Lewis, Molly, and Stella approached literature discussion differently, and studying their decisions as well as the students' conversations helps us better understand the reading instructional strategy. There is not a right way to "do" literature discussion at the high school level. However, taking a closer look at how it is done in three different settings with students of various reading abilities provides additional information and ideas for individuals interested in learning more about literature discussion.

### **Environment created.**

*All teachers recognized the importance of establishing expectations and guidelines for the literature discussion group; however, how they approached this instruction differed.*

One theme that emerged as critical to successful and productive literature discussions was the teachers' strategy for establishing expectations and guidelines for the group. Molly was the most purposeful in executing this strategy because she felt her students needed additional guidance with discussion practices in a small group setting. The scoring guide benefitted her students because she was specific in her descriptions of productive discussion behavior. Molly's students knew and understood her expectations; therefore, they were more mindful of their talk.

However, two other factors also influenced the students' conversations. First, Molly chose to remain a consistent member of the group. Her presence likely encouraged the boys to stay on track instead of getting off topic. This decision raises the question of whether or not the boys would have been able to maintain a productive discussion without her. Secondly, Molly graded the boys' discussion practices each week using the scoring guide she presented to them at the beginning of the unit. They could receive a possible 20 points for each discussion, totaling 80 points of their overall grade. If the boys were motivated by points, they may have simply said something to improve their discussion score. Although Molly felt her students needed both her and the discussion scoring guide to engage in successful and productive conversations, we don't know how effective these measures were because she never gave her students the opportunity to talk without them.

Lewis and Stella's approach to establishing expectations and guidelines for their literature discussion groups were brief and largely ineffective. Both teachers took the time to instruct their students to sit in a circle as they talked about their text, but beyond that guideline, the students did not receive any specific instruction on what a productive discussion looked like. Lewis and Stella assumed their students knew how to be successful in a small group setting because the students had participated in Socratic Seminars and cooperative learning groups throughout the school year. Additionally, they believed their advanced students would be motivated to discuss the text because they would want to do well on the in-class assignments.

Although Lewis did give his students the opportunity to create their own group norms, this strategy did not work well for his students. First, because the students could

create whatever norms they wanted to, some of them were silly and caused the students to get sidetracked during discussion time. Second, after the norms were created, Lewis did not offer the group any feedback on what they wrote, nor were they returned to at any point during the unit. So, Lewis's idea to give his students ownership in their discussions by allowing them to draft their own norms was good. But because he didn't follow up on this activity, the discussions were not as productive as they might have been if he had added more of his own expectations and/or helped his students revise their norms.

Stella's strategy for establishing her expectations and guidelines focused more on assessment and due dates than on actual discussion practices. She did give her students a tip on what to do if they had trouble getting a group member involved. However, how to engage in a productive discussion was never addressed. As a result, Stella's students had trouble talking about any topic for more than five minutes. If they had been given more specific direction on how to extend or build off another's ideas, they probably would have been much more successful in understanding their text.

Ultimately, in order for literature discussions to be productive and effective, teachers must take the time to explain and model how to engage in these kinds of conversations. "Sit in a circle" is a good start, but students need to know what successful discussion looks like. I characterize productive and effective classroom conversations as those that:

- require each group member's reading of the assigned pages and preparation of ideas and/or questions to bring to the group.
- ensure that every member feels like a part of the group.
- allow each member to voice his or her opinions and thoughts without fear of ridicule or embarrassment.
- include a teacher's facilitation as necessary to address students' confusion as well as model statements and questions to inspire critical thinking.
- return to discussing the text even if the group gets distracted.

- permit students to explore ideas in the text interesting and important to them as a way of making meaning together.

However, teachers cannot simply display these ideas on the SmartBoard, talk about them, and then expect students to automatically assume these behaviors. Instead, teachers should invite a few students to participate in a fishbowl discussion and have other members of the class evaluate the group's conversation. The goal is not to criticize, but to learn from watching others. Furthermore, like Molly, teachers can outline expectations for successful discussion practices and then show students what these behaviors look like by modeling them as a participant in the group. A teacher's scaffolding of students' discussion behaviors may lead them to do this for one another, resulting in more thoughts and questions posed by the group members than by the teacher. This would allow the students to have more ownership in the conversation, thus motivating students to remain engaged and contribute to the group's overall understanding of the text. As can be seen in the transcripts of Molly's students' discussions, they were learning to ask questions of their peers and contribute thoughtful comments. One can only assume with more small group discussion experience that these practices would continue to develop and improve, increasing both the students' social skills and ability to comprehend a text.

Additionally, teachers must be involved in the discussions of every group. Students need time to talk about the text and develop successful discussion practices without the teacher's intervention. However, this does not mean the teacher is hands-off. Rather, teachers who regularly check-in with groups and help facilitate the discussion have the opportunity to answer students' questions and push them to think more deeply about the text. Lewis's students were largely successful in understanding the book on a deeper level when he stopped by to offer a comment or ask a question they hadn't

considered. The transcripts show his nudging often propelled his students' thinking forward. When to step into the conversation or stay out may be a tough decision for teachers, but with practice, they can modify the balancing act to best fit their students' learning styles and abilities.

***The students' relationship with their teacher affected their overall success in making meaning of the text.***

The second theme related to the environment the teachers created focused on the interpersonal relationships between Lewis, Molly, Stella, and their students. I observed that Lewis and Molly's students had a more established and comfortable relationship with them than Stella did with her students. Lewis and Molly's students interacted with them before and after class. Their students joked around and shared personal stories. I never observed Stella's students engage in this type of relationship with her. I concluded that the trust Lewis and Molly's students had in them resulted in their willingness to ask questions and seek guidance during the discussions. No question seemed too dumb, and the students trusted their teachers to help them navigate the text. On the other hand, Stella's students never called her over to their group to ask a question about the text. Stella's students simply may not have cared enough about the book to ask for assistance, but my follow-up interviews with them suggested otherwise. They wanted her direction and guidance. Most of their discussions centered on how confused they were. But as Stella moved from group to group, they did not stop her. Perhaps if their relationship with Stella had been stronger, they would have been more willing to ask for help. Based on my observation of the teachers' relationships with their students, I concluded that the students' actions mirrored their teachers' approach to literature discussion. Lewis and Molly were eager to hear their students' comments and questions about the text and were

ready to provide assistance when necessary. Stella, on the other hand, was more businesslike in her approach to the discussions. She encouraged her students to use their conversation time to talk about the elements of the presentation. Therefore, her students' conversations appeared to be geared more towards accomplishing a task rather than discussing what interested them about the text.

**Roles the teachers played in the literature discussion group.**

*Lewis, Molly, and Stella all played the role of facilitator.*

One interesting theme that surfaced from my second research question was that all three teachers, regardless of their overall success during the unit, played the role of facilitator. This finding points to the importance of this role, regardless of the ability of students one teaches. Characteristics of the facilitator role included checking in with the group to see how things were going and offering assistance. However, how often Lewis, Molly, and Stella assumed this role, in addition to how they executed it, resulted in different outcomes for their students. Lewis and Molly viewed facilitating as guiding and navigating their students' conversations as necessary. They asked questions and made sure each group member's voice was heard. Furthermore, they facilitated at some point during each day of discussion. Stella, on the other hand, only offered this assistance one time. The rest of the time, she moved from group to group and left her students to figure out the text on their own. The time she did facilitate seemed to help her students with their confusion about the story, but most of the time what Stella referred to as facilitating was actually managing her students' behavior by reminding them to get their work done.

Facilitating proved to be important for the students of all three teachers. Lewis and Molly's students were largely successful because their teachers provided the

guidance they needed to help them understand the text. Lewis and Molly's regular involvement with their students ensured they were on the right track and making meaning. On the other hand, Stella's students forged through their book alone, resulting in much confusion and a spotty understanding of the story. Stella's attention to management, rather than facilitation, caused her students to be overall less successful than Lewis and Molly's students in understanding the text.

***The roles the teachers played were based on their perception of students' reading abilities.***

Lewis, Molly, and Stella's perception of their students' reading abilities resulted in the emergence of different roles for each teacher. This makes intuitive sense because we would expect teachers to know their students, especially having taught them for an entire semester. But as we think about the roles Lewis, Molly, and Stella played, we must continue to think about how teachers balance these roles to maximize the students' learning experience. Each teacher told me in his or her follow-up interview that finding this balance proved to be difficult. Lewis and Molly felt the tension of wanting their students to make meaning and come to a collective understanding of a book on their own and the desire to share their own interpretations for fear their students wouldn't understand everything about the book they felt was important. Stella felt the tension between instilling a lifelong desire of talking about books in her students and her love for performance and presentation.

These tensions influenced the things on which the teachers chose to focus and may have affected their students' overall success during literature discussion. In Lewis's case the role of manager may not have appeared as frequently if he had trusted his students to talk about things in the text that were important to them rather than the

questions he prepared. Instead, Lewis could have focused more on the facilitator role and provided assistance as the students needed it to tackle the book as they saw fit. For Molly, the clarifier role might have been assumed more by her students if she had given them the opportunity to play it. I observed their passion and connection to the story and believe they would have been capable of clarifying many situations in the book for each other without Molly's intervention. Stella's decision to limit the unit to three days and spend just a few minutes with each group resulted in the management role emerging frequently. However, if she modified how she did literature discussion based on her reflective comments, her students would have time to discuss the book and prepare the final project. Additionally, Stella would have time to facilitate more often, a role her students needed her to play to understand the text more completely.

#### **Instructional decisions the teachers made.**

*The decisions the teachers made were influenced by their knowledge of literature discussion.*

The instructional decisions Lewis, Molly, and Stella made were reflective of their understanding of the theory behind literature discussion. All of the teachers understood that a social learning environment and text choice were the basic components of literature discussion, but the assignments they chose to give their students differentiated their application of the reading instructional strategy. Molly, the most well-versed teacher in literature discussion, assigned her students work that helped them keep track of their thinking and scaffolded their learning. The discussion sheets the boys prepared for each meeting were open-ended. They could write down questions, confusing words, or quotes from the book they liked and wanted to discuss. The weekly letters and special assignments also provided choices for the boys to explore what was meaningful to them

as they read the text. Molly's assignments gave her students ownership in their reading of the book and permitted them to mold the unit to who they were as readers.

Lewis, on the other hand, did not permit his students the same freedom in discussing the text as they wished. Although the students did have the option of bringing questions and comments to the group of their own, most of their discussion time was spent answering the questions Lewis gave them. Lewis's students felt pressure to complete the in-class assignment and likely did not have the opportunity to talk about things in the book that interested them because they were intent on finishing his questions before time was up. Lewis's students did mention they appreciated the guidance the questions provided to help them think about the novel in a different way, but mandating them to submit written answers by the end of the discussion time proved to be difficult.

Stella's decision to give an objective novel test as well as the final presentation as her only forms of assessment was not beneficial to her students during their discussions. Both of these assignments were "after the fact" and did not help students navigate the text. Stella did not require her students to keep track of their thinking in any way, nor did she provide statements or questions to guide their discussions. The girls read large amounts of text for each meeting because they only had three days to get through the novel. They were often confused or did not complete the reading because they were overwhelmed. Since Stella's students knew all they needed to do was pass the test to participate in the final project, they often read for literal comprehension only. Unfortunately, this kind of reading did not spark much conversation about the novel beyond an understanding of the plot.

Dorothy Watson's (1996) model of developing a whole language philosophy can be applied to teaching in general. Teachers who have an active theory to guide their practice: 1.) research how the theory can be adapted to fit their students, 2.) continually ask questions, and 3.) examine how their beliefs are reflected in the practice they choose to pursue. All of these elements must be in place before the practice is owned by the teacher. Lewis, Molly, and Stella are in different stages of this three category process, especially in terms of inactive and active theory. Watson's model suggests that simply trying out an idea based on one's beliefs is a good beginning but not enough for it to completely be successful in the classroom. An understanding of theory, as well as reflection, must be in place for a teacher's borrowed practice to become owned. Therefore, in order for literature discussion to be most beneficial to students, teachers must be willing to look at themselves and their instruction wholly as opposed to simply grabbing onto an idea and hoping it works. Teachers who think about their practice using Dorothy Watson's model are more likely to be mindful of the "why" and "how" behind their curricular decisions, thus providing a richer learning environment for their students than those who do not.

### **Implications**

Although my study provides just a snapshot of three high school English teachers and literature discussion in their classrooms, it offers larger implications for the education field. I learned much from my experiences with Lewis, Molly, and Stella and offer suggestions for the classroom, teacher education, and further research based on my study.

## **The classroom.**

### ***Just do it.***

Perhaps the most important thing I learned from Lewis, Molly, and Stella can be summarized by Nike's motto: Just do it. Although the overall success of their literature discussion units varied, they tried it. All three teachers believed a social learning environment comprised of a small group of peers discussing a text of their choice would benefit their students. And they were right. In every single case, the students expressed their preference for talking about a book with peers as opposed to reading it by themselves. The students believed they had a better understanding of the text because they had a chance to discuss their questions and comments. They brought various perspectives to the table and learned from one another. The simple fact is that social collaboration is key to helping students make meaning of a text.

It is admirable that all three teachers value and use small group discussions. When I emailed teachers after the study, all of them indicated that they used small group discussions throughout the year. However, the problem is that they don't make time to do literature discussion units more often. Lewis and Stella only do a literature discussion unit once a year, and Molly does it twice. My research shows the numerous advantages of giving students time to talk about text, supporting the teachers' decision for their students to engage in a social learning environment on a regular basis. While I applaud this effort, I am still concerned that literature discussion as a form of reading instruction is rarely used. If our students are telling us how beneficial it is for them to talk about a self-selected text and learn in small groups, then why aren't we making literature discussion a regular component of reading instruction? Providing students the

opportunity to read and discuss text in literature discussion groups on a consistent basis is more likely to enhance their understanding of a variety of texts than if they study these texts on their own. The fact that literature discussion provides students the time to talk about issues from their own perspective as they relate to a book of their own choice is a valuable experience. High school students do not often get the chance to have so much ownership and voice into how they discuss texts in an English classroom.

Two additional important implications transpired as a result of observing teachers implement literature discussion into their curriculum. First, we see the possibility secondary students have to engage in critical conversation. All three groups were able to think beyond the surface level of their text during discussion time. Yes, Lewis and Molly's students did this more often because of the roles Lewis and Molly played, but on occasion, Stella's students were able to do this as well. All of the students were asking important "why" questions and thinking about character motivation. Generally, their conversations were not focused on items one might find on a multiple-choice test but rather on predictions, connections, and/or character development. When students are given the opportunity to bounce ideas off of one another, powerful discussions can emerge. Plot confusion can be cleared up in minutes, allowing students time to get deeper into interpreting the text. Regardless of students' reading ability, talking about books is essential in helping them think more critically.

Secondly, we see the potential of literature discussion to motivate students to read. In my initial interviews with the students, I asked them if they liked to read and if they thought they were good readers. While the Advanced Placement and Honors students had more confidence in their reading ability, in general, they did not enjoy

reading. On the other hand, the struggling readers admitted their difficulty with the reading process but talked about how much they liked to read and could identify many genres that interested them. It may seem surprising that the struggling readers surfaced as students who liked to read as opposed to their peers who were stronger readers.

However, I concluded that because so much was required of the Advanced Placement and Honors students, they had lost a bit of their love for reading over the years. They didn't have time to read what they wanted to, and when they did read, the text had been assigned. At the same time, Molly was selecting interesting and relevant books for her students. This conclusion speaks to the importance of literature discussion in the high school classroom so that students may have some choice in the text they read. In addition, the selection of texts from which they have to choose is equally important to motivate students to read and spark fruitful discussions.

***Text and context.***

The context of the novels Lewis, Molly, and Stella presented to their students affected the discussions. The students' choices were purposefully selected by their teachers to fulfill the goal the teachers had set for the unit. The students' text decision, as well as the make-up of their group, influenced how both they and their teachers responded during the discussions. Lewis's students' decision to read *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1994) as opposed to *Frankenstein* (1831/2003) resulted in a slow and careful reading of the text. Conrad's narrative is dense, and the students paused frequently to talk about theme and symbolism. They seemed to enjoy learning about the travels of Marlow in Africa and related them to the issues they had discussed in World Studies throughout the year. Unlike the *Frankenstein* (1831/2003) groups, the students had no

prior knowledge of the book's content. Therefore, Lewis had to spend additional time with students reading *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1994) to ensure they could make connections between the text and the revolution unit in the History curriculum.

Molly's selection of *Rooftop* (2007) appealed to many of the boys in her class. Both of the main characters are male and struggle with drug addiction. The boys who chose to read *Rooftop* were drawn to the "real life" aspect of the book, and during their discussions, some of the boys were able to make personal connections to the characters' decisions. Because the context of the novel fit the boys' interests, they were able to discuss much of the plot without assistance from Molly. Additionally, Molly's instructional decision to permit the boys to research any aspect of the book they chose as one of their special projects gave them the opportunity to complete an assignment that helped them understand the book in their own way.

Stella's decision to include *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as one of the choices for her students was well received by the girls in her class. Based on the book talk given by the media specialist, the girls knew the novel focused on women's issues such as freedom and equality. The context of the novel proved to be interesting to Stella's students, as they sometimes discussed how they would have felt in the position of the main characters. However, in order for the students to fully understand the major themes of the book, Stella would have needed to be more involved in their discussions and they would have needed more time for discussion.

In short, a variety of textual contexts proves to be interesting to students, and with a teacher's assistance, meaningful literature discussions can occur. Understanding this fact may encourage teachers to try literature discussion. In addition, a careful

consideration of text selection will more likely result in successful and productive conversations.

***Text selection.***

How much success students have during a literature discussion unit is based on the teacher's text selection. Molly's students were more passionate and engaged with their book, largely because of its content. *Rooftop* (2007) is a young adult award winner that addresses real issues. The story's main characters, Clay and Addison, are two teenage cousins trying to straighten up their lives in a drug treatment facility. They struggle to break their habit, and when Addison is shot by police, Clay must figure out what to do next on his own. Molly's students could relate to the characters in *Rooftop* (2007) in some cases personally, and in others through connections to books, movies, or television shows. They read fiction that mattered to them, and their enthusiasm for the book was apparent in every discussion.

Lewis and Stella, on the other hand, chose texts directly related to the History curriculum of World Studies. In a team taught class that addresses both history and literature, they did not have the luxury of selecting young adult books like Molly did for her Literacy Seminar class. Lewis presented his students with two choices, *Frankenstein* and *Heart of Darkness*, originally published in 1831 and 1902 respectively. While Stella offered her students five choices (*Brave New World* (1932/2006), *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961/1991), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Jennifer Government* (2003), and *1984* (1949/1984)) only one was published in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Lewis and Stella's book choices fit the historical time period the students were studying, and are considered

classics, but they are not necessarily interesting to 15 and 16 year old youth, nor are they easy to understand.

Some might suggest that this is the very reason these books should be incorporated into a literature discussion unit. The novels are difficult to understand, and discussing them with a small group increases the chance that students will come away with a better understanding of the text. However, I argue that complicated novels such as the ones Lewis and Stella presented are not ideal for literature discussion because the teacher does not have enough time to scaffold their students' learning and help them truly understand all of the nuances the text has to offer. This was certainly the case for both Lewis and Stella. Although Lewis's students were more successful in understanding *The Heart of Darkness* (1902/1994) than Stella's students were in understanding *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), both groups of students struggled. Lewis's students had the benefit of his guiding questions and regular communication with the group, but in the end, Lewis still questioned whether or not his students had gotten everything out of the novel he thought was important. However, even though these text selections may not be ideal for literature discussion, students can still engage in successful and productive conversations with appropriate support and scaffolding from their teacher and peers. Discussing a complicated text can be rewarding. Both Lewis and Stella's students had difficulty understanding their novels, but the journey of reading and figuring out the book as a team likely led to feelings of success and accomplishment.

So, does this mean teachers who have a set curriculum to follow abandon the idea of literature discussion? Absolutely not. Teachers have two choices. First, they can incorporate the unit into a more recent time period that provides a wider variety of

current texts. This may increase students' motivation to read and participate in the discussions. Second, if teachers choose to include literature discussion into a portion of their curriculum that covers earlier history, they can be more mindful about texts that might fit that era. For example, Stella was able to find *Jennifer Government* (2003) as a modern day example of dystopia. There are other novels published recently fitting the same theme that might be more interesting to today's high school students. *The Hunger Games* (2008) tells the story of a government choosing two young people to represent their territory in a game of survival. They are forced to kill their peers from other territories until one couple remains. *Armageddon's Children* (2006) takes place in a post apocalyptic world around 2100 and describes the conflict between the Demons and the healthy youth who survive. Both of these novels are alternatives to the classics and may serve as better text choices for literature discussion because they are written for today's young adults.

### ***Professional development.***

Professional development for teachers as it relates to reading instruction should be offered both for teachers who use literature discussion and those who don't. From my work with Molly, I learned how beneficial professional development can be for a teacher who already incorporates literature discussion into his or her curriculum. Although Molly understood the theory behind the instructional strategy, believed in it, and integrated it into her practice, she told me that my pilot study changed the way she thought about her roles both as an instructor and a participant in the discussions. It is likely she made adjustments to the unit over the years, but my perspective presented information in a new way. Molly admitted that she had a hard time balancing her roles as

a teacher and a member in the discussion groups during previous years. She loved the books so much that she wanted to share her thoughts and comments all of the time and talked more than she listened. But when Molly listened to the audio recordings of group discussions from my pilot study, she began to see just how often she interjected her opinions into the conversation. Molly realized that she wasn't giving her students the time they needed to process the text without her intervention, and she vowed to change how she participated in the discussions the next year. Having worked with Molly both in the spring of 2008 and 2009, I noticed her concerted effort to limit her comments as the boys discussed the text. Molly's own inquiry into her teaching, coupled with the professional development she received from a researcher on the outside looking in, changed the way literature discussion worked in her classroom for the better.

Professional development should also be available for teachers who have not yet incorporated literature discussion into their curriculum. The main complaint I hear from high school teachers who don't do it is that they feel pressured by their district's content requirements. They claim they have to cover a lot of material in a short amount of time and simply don't have room in their schedule to break away from the content and engage their students in literature discussion. This excuse makes it clear that a bit of professional development would be beneficial for these teachers. As those who use literature discussion as a reading instructional strategy know, a teacher does not have to abandon his or her content to work the unit into the curriculum. Furthermore, literature discussion doesn't have to replace a teacher's curricular routine. Simply doing it once or twice a semester would be valuable to students so they learn how to talk about text in a different way. Lewis and Stella tried it out in their classrooms and were able to connect English

and History content. It's not impossible to find a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts that are representative of much of the content teachers are required to cover at the secondary level. Teachers simply have to know more about the "how" of literature discussion, and professional development fulfills this need.

Finally, professional development helps those teachers who were not originally certified to teach English. In my study, both Lewis and Stella did not begin their teaching careers as English teachers. Therefore, they did not have an undergraduate reading method class to introduce them to literature discussion. Instead, they based their units on previous experiences and observations in peers' classrooms. While I admire their decision to "go for it," both teachers needed more understanding of the theory behind literature discussion to maximize its effectiveness for their students. One way a better knowledge of the theory could have helped Lewis and Stella was in how they presented their expectations and guidelines for the literature discussion groups. Both teachers' students were not as successful and productive during their discussions as they could have been. I believe this was largely due to the fact they had not been taught how to engage meaningful discussion practices during the literature discussion unit nor at any other point during the year. Perhaps if Lewis and Stella knew about the list of expectations Mercer and Dawes (2008) suggest students must meet to enable exploratory talk and promote a collaborative group discussion, their students would have been able to accomplish more during the time they had to discuss the text.

It's important to remember that a teacher's professional development, regardless of its form, should be deliberate and focused. One of the reasons Molly was able to make changes to her literature discussion unit after I completed my pilot study is that we had

the opportunity to talk about what was happening in her classroom on a regular basis. I was in her classroom at least twice a week for several weeks, and almost every time I was there, we debriefed what we noticed that day. Our quick, five minute conversations after class gave Molly the opportunity to think immediately about what worked (or didn't), and she was able to apply that knowledge to the next group of students filing through her door. Of course professional development does not only come from studies conducted in classrooms. Teachers may also learn by attending classes at the local university, reading professional literature, visiting other classrooms and discussing the practices, seeing webinars, or attending conferences or in-services. However, if the information teachers learn in these environments is simply read or listened to briefly and then mostly forgotten, change does not occur. Rather, teachers must be purposeful in communicating with one another about what they've learned, perhaps in study groups, and dedicate themselves to trying out good ideas in their classrooms.

### **Teacher education.**

The implications of this study for teacher education are twofold. First, teacher education programs that prepare secondary teachers must continue to include literature discussion as part of their reading methods class. If reading and writing methods are combined into one course for middle and high school pre-service teachers, reading instructional strategies may be addressed only briefly, so professors must remember to purposefully address literature discussion. My research shows that literature discussion not only benefits students' understanding of a text, but also provides the opportunity to develop social skills. A second step beyond presenting the information is to invite teachers to participate in a literature discussion group themselves. This activity can be

incorporated into the reading methods class curriculum as secondary teachers learn about the theory. Once teachers see how literature discussion can work, they're more likely to consider including it as an instructional strategy in their classroom.

Secondly, once the theory behind literature discussion has been presented, the specifics have to be addressed. Similar to professional development for in-service teachers, pre-service teachers are not likely to incorporate what they've learned about literature discussion into their practice unless they understand how it can work for students of all reading abilities. Beyond presenting the basics, teacher educators must talk to their pre-service teachers about the details. My study, in addition to other publications, speaks to the importance of establishing a collaborative, supportive community before diving into literature discussion. Trust must be built between the members of the class as well as with the teacher before students are willing to embark on a discussion journey with their peers. Students need to feel safe in their environment to have the courage to speak their ideas and ask questions. Successful discussion practices that lead to productive discussions have to be explained and modeled by teachers throughout the year before students are left on their own to explore a text. Expectations and guidelines must be carefully created by the teacher and explained to students before the first day of discussion. The set-up to a successful literature discussion unit takes time, energy, and patience. Pre-service teachers who do not understand the details may struggle when they attempt literature discussion in their classroom for the first time and abandon the strategy because of frustration.

Additionally, it's important for teacher educators to point out that literature discussion does not look the same in every secondary classroom. The instructional

decisions teachers make as well as the roles they play as participants in the discussion vary depending on the reading abilities of their students. Because Molly teaches struggling readers, a pre-service teacher who walks into her classroom to observe her work with students will likely see Molly assume the clarifier role during a discussion. Furthermore, this teacher will notice Molly's frequent presence in the group as she performs this role to help her students make meaning. However, the same pre-service teacher who walks into Lewis's classroom will see literature discussion in an entirely different light. Lewis's Advanced Placement students do not need his regular participation in the group, and although some ideas presented in the text may need clarification, the pre-service teacher is much more likely to see Lewis nudging his students to think deeper about the book. Lewis will bounce from group to group on a regular basis and will pose more questions than he offers answers. Literature discussion is not a "one size fits all" approach to reading instruction. Rather, the theory must first be understood, and then adapted and modified, to best fit the learning styles and abilities of students. Pre-service teachers who understand this fact will be more successful in their attempt at incorporating literature discussion into their curriculum than those who don't.

#### **Future research.**

Lastly, this study presents questions for future research. My research simply provides a snapshot of how three English teachers choose to do literature discussion. These teachers are all white, from the Midwest, and teach in suburban schools. More needs to be known about how literature discussion looks in other areas of the country with different populations. What similarities can be drawn between my study and others like it? What key differences help us understand how literature discussion can further be

modified and adapted to help all students, regardless of reading ability or background? What broad conclusions can be made, and which details are important to tease out and research individually to aid in the understanding of all secondary teachers who believe literature discussion has a place in their classroom?

Next, my study focused on the teacher, and we need to understand the secondary student as well. My interviews with the students provided insight into how literature discussion affected their understanding of the text, but it would be helpful to know more about the “how.” What literature discussion structure works best for high school students? Group meetings once or twice a week? For how long? Does the gender makeup of the group affect the discussions? What roles do students play in the group to either help or hinder their peers’ meaning making? The more we understand about how this strategy affects students’ learning, the better able teachers are to design literature discussion units that will maximize their effect.

Finally, researchers need to return to the “root” of literature discussion. Now called a variety of things, from book clubs to literature study to literature circles, what’s the bottom line? What are the key components of each approach, and what can we learn? The foundation of the reading instructional strategy is the same, but what do we know now that works better? How we teach reading is always changing, and as we know better, we should do better. Harvey Daniels (2002) realized assigning students “roles” to complete for each discussion limited their desire to read the text for anything but their assigned task. So, he revised his original book about literature circles and encouraged teachers to rethink student roles. What other findings like this one have emerged in classrooms that will help teachers make the most of literature discussion? And for

secondary teachers specifically, what is working, and how can we encourage those who don't do literature discussion to give it a try?

### **Final Thoughts**

Good research should raise as many questions and ideas for consideration as it offers. The fact is that secondary teachers cannot keep teaching the content using anthologies and whole-class reads forever. That's how it's always been done and usually considered the easiest way to cover a large amount of material in a short time. But when students of various reading abilities express their desire to talk about books instead of reading them in isolation, we should listen. A collaborative, social environment just makes sense when it comes to making meaning and learning from the perspectives of others. It's time to stop giving lip-service to the advantages of small group discussion and actually change the way we approach literature instruction at the secondary level to ensure we do it more regularly. Yes, it's hard, and yes, it takes trial and error (perhaps many times) to make it work best for any group of students. But the end result is worth it. Students talk, learn from one another, and have fun navigating their way through a text together. Isn't that the way every secondary English classroom should be?

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## Appendix A

### Teacher Informed Consent Letter

**Purpose of the Project.** The goal of this project is to understand how the classroom teacher affects students' learning in a literature discussion group.

**Nature of Participation.** You will be interviewed once at the beginning of the study and once at the end. I will ask you why you use literature discussion in your classroom and what your expectations are of literature discussion group participants. I will also ask you to tell me what you've noticed about the reading abilities of the literature discussion group participants. All interviews will be digitally recorded. *There are no right or wrong answers to these questions.* Additionally, I will observe your classroom in action for two weeks to get a feel for your routine. I will observe the literature discussions of two of the groups in your English class and will interview these students twice.

**Participation is Voluntary.** Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question(s). You may quit this project at any time. Permission to conduct this study is being obtained through the University of Missouri's Institutional Review Board and school administration. For more information or to ask questions regarding human participation in research, please feel free to contact the UMC campus IRB Office at (573) 882-9585.

**Confidentiality.** Every effort will be made to keep your information and identity confidential. I will use pseudonyms or assign numbers. I will not use names of real people and places.

**Risks.** This project does not involve any risks greater than those encountered in everyday life.

**Benefits.** This study provides a safe environment to talk about literature discussion and the role you play in how your students understand a text. It may also contribute findings to the field of literacy education and possibly affect teaching and learning.

**Questions.** If you have any questions about this research study, please contact me, Shannon Cuff. I can be reached at (417) 496-6795 or at slcxttd@mizzou.edu. The faculty advisor for this study is Dr. Carol Gilles. She may be reached at gillesc@missouri.edu or (573) 882-8498.

*I have read and understand the teacher consent form and agree to participate.*

---

Printed Name of Teacher

Date

---

Signature of Teacher

Date

## Appendix B

### Student Informed Assent Letter

Dear Student,

My name is Shannon Cuff, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri. I am interested in literacy education. I would like to know more about how your classroom teacher affects your learning in a literature discussion group. I'd also like to find out how your peers help you understand the reading. The goal of this project is to provide more knowledge about how literature discussion works in the high school classroom.

By agreeing to participate in this research project, I understand the following:

- I will be observed in my classroom twice a week for six weeks.
- I will be interviewed two times, at the beginning and at the end of the study.
- The interviews will last 20-30 minutes.
- All interviews will be digitally recorded.
- *There are no right or wrong answers to these questions.*
- Some writing related to the literature discussion will be collected and analyzed by Mrs. Cuff.
- Participation in this study is voluntary.
- I may refuse to answer any question(s). I may quit this project at any time. Refusal to participate will not affect my grade.
- Permission to conduct this study is being obtained through the University of Missouri's Institutional Review Board and school administration. For more information or to ask questions regarding human participation in research, please feel free to contact the UMC campus IRB Office. The phone number is (573) 882-9585.
- Every effort will be made to keep my information and identity confidential.
- Mrs. Cuff will use pseudonyms or assign numbers. Mrs. Cuff will not use names of real people and places.
- This project does not involve any risks greater than those encountered in everyday life.
- This study provides a safe environment to talk about how my classroom teacher affects my learning in a literature discussion. I will learn how talking with peers can help me understand books.

**Questions.** If you have any questions about this research study, please contact me. I can be reached at (417) 496-6795 or at slcxted@mizzou.edu. The faculty advisor for this study is Dr. Carol Gilles. She may be reached at gillesc@missouri.edu or (573) 882-8498.

*I have read and understand the Student Assent Form and agree to participate.*

---

Printed Name of Student

Date

---

Signature of Student

Date

Appendix C

Parent Informed Consent Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Shannon Cuff, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri. I am interested in literacy education. I would like to know more about how classroom teachers affect students' learning during literature discussion. I'd also like to find out how the students' peers help them understand the reading. The goal of this project is to provide more knowledge about how literature discussion works in the high school classroom.

By giving my child, \_\_\_\_\_, permission to participate in this research project, I understand the following:

- My child will be observed in his or her classroom twice a week for six weeks.
- He or she will be interviewed two times, at the beginning and at the end of the study. The interviews will last 20-30 minutes and will be digitally recorded.
- *There are no right or wrong answers to these questions.*
- Some writing related to the literature discussion will be collected and analyzed by Mrs. Cuff.
- Participation in this study is voluntary.
- My child may refuse to answer any question(s). He or she may quit this project at any time. Refusal to participate will not affect his or her grade.
- Permission to conduct this study is being obtained through the University of Missouri's Institutional Review Board and school administration. For more information or to ask questions regarding human participation in research, please feel free to contact the UMC campus IRB Office. The phone number is (573) 882-9585.
- Every effort will be made to keep my child's information and identity confidential.
- Mrs. Cuff will use pseudonyms or assign numbers. Mrs. Cuff will not use names of real people and places.
- This project does not involve any risks greater than those encountered in everyday life.
- This study provides a safe environment to talk about how the classroom teacher affects my child's learning in a literature discussion. My child will learn how talking with peers can help him or her understand books.

**Questions.** If you have any questions about this research study, please contact me. I can be reached at (417) 496-6795 or at slcxted@mizzou.edu. The faculty advisor for this study is Dr. Carol Gilles. She may be reached at gillesc@missouri.edu or (573) 882-8498.

*I have read and understand the Parent/Guardian consent form and agree to allow my child to participate.*

---

Printed Name of Parent/Guardian

Date

---

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

## Appendix D

### Student/Teacher Semi-Structured Interview Questions

#### Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Students

1. Do you think that you are a good reader? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that you understand a text better when you discuss it with other people? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever participated in a literature discussion group before?
  - a. If so, what did you like about the experience? What did you not like? Did any of your literature group members limit your learning? If so, how?
  - b. If not, what do you know about literature discussion? What are your expectations?
4. What do you think the teacher's role is when you're discussing a book with your group?
5. What makes a literature discussion successful?

#### Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Teachers

1. Why do you use literature discussion in your classroom?
2. What do you believe are the students' responsibilities in a literature discussion group?
3. What do you believe are your responsibilities in a literature discussion group?
4. Can you tell me a bit about the reading abilities of the literature discussion group participants I'll be observing?
5. Why do you encourage collaboration?
6. What makes a literature discussion successful?
7. What makes a literature discussion fail? What can you do to improve a literature discussion if it's not going well?

#### Semi-Structured Follow-up Interview Questions: Students

1. Now that you've had the opportunity to discuss a book with a group, do you think that you understood the book better because you discussed it with other people?
2. How would you describe the role your teacher played while you were in your literature discussion group?
3. What do you think makes a literature discussion group successful?
4. Did any of the members of your literature discussion group take on certain roles or responsibilities? If so, what were they and how did they affect your group's discussion?

#### Semi-Structured Follow-up Interview Questions: Teachers

1. How would you describe the role you played in the literature discussion groups?
2. Did your role change over time? Why or why not?
3. What are your thoughts about how the literature discussion groups functioned?
4. What made the literature discussion groups successful?
5. What made the literature discussion groups fail?
6. What surprised you during the literature discussion unit?

## Appendix E

### Synopsis of *Heart of Darkness*

“The story reflects the physical and psychological shock Conrad himself experienced in 1890, when he worked briefly in the Belgian Congo. The narrator, Marlow, describes a journey he took on an African river. Assigned by an ivory company to take command of a cargo boat stranded in the interior, Marlow makes his way through the treacherous forest, witnessing the brutalization of the natives by white traders and hearing tantalizing stories of a Mr. Kurtz, the company's most successful representative. He reaches Kurtz's compound in a remote outpost only to see a row of human heads mounted on poles. In this alien context, unbound by the strictures of his own culture, Kurtz has exchanged his soul for a bloody sovereignty, but a mortal illness is bringing his reign of terror to a close. As Marlow transports him downriver, Kurtz delivers an arrogant and empty explanation of his deeds as a visionary quest. To the narrator Kurtz's dying words, ‘The horror! The horror!’ represent despair at the encounter with human depravity--the heart of darkness” (*The Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, n.d.)

# Transcription Glossary

The transcription symbols used here are common to conversation analytic research, and were developed by Gail Jefferson. A more detailed discussion of the use of these symbols and others is provided in chapter 3.

- (0.5) The number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths of a second.
- (.) A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates a pause in the talk of less than two-tenths of a second.
- = The 'equals' sign indicates 'latching' between utterances. For example:  
 S1: yeah September seventy six=  
 S2: September  
 S1: =it would be  
 S2: yeah that's right
- [ ] Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent speech indicate the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk.
- .hh A dot before an 'h' indicates speaker in-breath. The more h's, the longer the in-breath.
- hh An 'h' indicates an out-breath. The more h's the longer the breath.
- (( )) A description enclosed in a double bracket indicates a non-verbal activity. For example ((banging sound)). Alternatively double brackets may enclose the transcriber's comments on contextual or other features.
- A dash indicates the sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound.
- : Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The more colons the greater the extent of the stretching.
- ! Exclamation marks are used to indicate an animated or emphatic tone.

- () Empty parentheses indicate the presence of an unclear fragment on the tape.
- (guess) The words within a single bracket indicate the transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance.
- . A full stop indicates a stopping fall in tone. It does not necessarily indicate the end of a sentence.
- ? A comma indicates a 'continuing' intonation.
- \* A question mark indicates a rising inflection. It does not necessarily indicate a question.
- ↑ An asterisk indicates a 'croaky' pronunciation of the immediately following section.
- ↓ A pointed arrow indicates a marked falling or rising intonational shift. They are placed immediately before the onset of the shift.
- : Less marked falls in pitch can be indicated by using underlining immediately preceding a colon:  
 S: we () really didn't have a lot 'v change
- : Less marked rises in pitch can be indicated using a colon which itself is underlined:  
 J: I have a red shirt.
- Underlined fragments indicate speaker emphasis.
- Words in capitals mark a section of speech noticeably louder than that surrounding it.
- Degree signs are used to indicate that the talk they encompass is spoken noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
- A 'gh' indicates that the word in which it is placed had a guttural pronunciation.
- 'More than' and 'less than' signs indicate that the talk they encompass was produced noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk.
- Arrows in the left margin point to specific parts of an extract discussed in the text.
- Extract headings refer to the transcript library source of the researcher who originally collected the data.

Under  
CAPITALS  
Thought  
[11.1.3.89.2]

## Appendix G

### Lewis Blazer's Instructional Materials

#### Literature Circle – Day 1

1. As Marlow reflects on the Romans first conquering of England, what type of connection is Conrad trying to make between England and Africa?
2. Group opinion: What drives men to conquer and subdue unexplored territory?
3. **Analyze how the following quote connects to the Western Worldviews:** “Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth?” (5).
4. When Marlow explains that the conquest of the earth is not very pretty when looked at closely, he says that “what redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...” **What in the world is this idea that he is talking about?**
5. How does Marlow refer to Africa when he sees it in a map, and what does that description reveal about Europeans' attitudes towards Africa?
6. Explain what happened to the captain who commanded the steamboat that Marlow is about to take over?
7. When Marlow visits the trading company building he meets two strange women, one fat and one slim, “knitting black wool fervently.” **Brainstorm what these two women might symbolize.**
8. Group Opinion: What is the most interesting thing that happens when Marlow is examined by the doctor to see if he is healthy enough to make the trip to Africa?
9. A “frame narrative” is a story within a story, sometimes within yet another story! Heart of Darkness is a superb example of a frame narrative: We begin as a sailor listening to Marlow, but once Marlow begins telling his story, the story shifts to his first person narrative perspective. **Why do you think Conrad would choose to construct a frame narrative and how might that technique help us understand his central message?**
10. On his journey down the African coast, Marlow sees a ship firing its cannons. What is the ship shooting at, and what is the deeper significance of this scene?
11. **Pick one or two quotes from the novel thus far (not already on this sheet) that you think are the most interesting so far, record those quotes, and explain why you thought they were the most interesting.**

### **Lit Circles Day 2**

For each theme your group has selected:

1. Share your quotes
2. Select 3-5 quotes to write down
3. Using these quotes, analyze the author's message concerning the theme.
4. Make one connection between this theme and the time period (1750-1914)
5. Do you agree with the author's message about that theme?

### **Lit Circles Day 3**

1. Turn in your individual quotes to Blazer
2. Pick the three most significant characters in the novel so far. Explain how each character is connected to the two themes your circle has been focused on. How does this character help us understand those themes?
3. Pick one of these three characters and imagine what this character would say about ONE of the following topics: our Latin American conference; the ideas Ishmael Beah discussed yesterday during 2nd hour; our current economic situation; *Lord of the Flies*.

### **Lit Circles Day 4**

Analyze the attack on the steamer in these pages:

1. How did the attack symbolize the relationship between the natives, the wild, and the white men? Analyze the scene as closely as you can, include reference to the natives, the arrows, the dead helmsmen, the blood, the shoes, the voice of Kurtz, and his cry of emotion at the thought that he would never hear Kurtz.
2. At this point in his narrative, Marlow stops telling his tale and speaks directly to the sailors that are listening. Explain what he is so upset about in this paragraph.

### **Lit Circles Day 5**

1. Why is Marlow's reaction to the dead helmsman interesting, and what might Conrad be saying through this emotion.
2. Analyze the Russian's symbolic role in the story and his relationship with Kurtz.
3. Pick 2 phrases that Marlow uses in these pages to describe Kurtz that you think are the most revealing and analyze their deeper meaning.

### **Lit Circles Day 6 – Final discussion**

1. As readers, we are obviously supposed to analyze the two main characters of the novel in conjunction. Based on this comparative analysis, **list and explain** the central messages that the author is trying to communicate through the novel.
2. Using ideas from the novel, what might the author be saying about the idea of secrecy and the effects that secrecy might have on an individual and also on society?
3. How would you defend each of these positions?
  - a. The novel is a celebration of humanity.
  - b. The novel is a condemnation of humanity.
  - c. Which do you agree with more and why?
4. If you were going to update this story for today's world, what would the story be about and what message would the story be trying to communicate?

# Appendix H

## Molly Adams's Instructional Materials

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Hour \_\_\_\_\_ Meeting Date \_\_\_\_\_

Book Title: \_\_\_\_\_

### Discussion Planning Sheet

- Write a minimum of 5 discussion points for each meeting.
- Be sure to write down the page number for your stopping place.
- Possible reasons/points for discussion: questions (both clarifying and probing), connections, predictions, visualizations, background knowledge, inferences, thoughts about characters' actions and motivations, vocabulary, and thoughts about theme and significance
- Example Questions/Discussion Invitations:
  - This reminds me of ....
  - What do you think this word might mean?
  - I wonder.... or Why....?
  - I predict....
  - Why might the character....?
  - What do you think the author really wants us to think about?
  - How else can we look at this?
  - Where does this lead us next?
  - What larger "lessons" might this teach?
  - What inferences can be made?

### Discussion Planning Sheet

Stopping  
Place

Reason for Stopping/Type  
of Thinking

Questions/Discussion  
Invitations

## How to Write a Weekly Letter for Literacy Seminar/Block

Your weekly letter is a place for you to share with me your thinking about your reading, books, authors, etc. I expect you to write a one-page, quality letter each week. A quality letter should take 20-30 minutes to write. Your letters are due on Friday. In your letter you should:

1. write the date at the top of your letter
2. address the letter to Ms. Lucas (Dear Ms. Lucas,)
3. give the title and author of your book
4. give the total number of pages you read for the week
5. complete the Summary, Analysis, and Strategy Discussion sections (See directions below).
6. sign your letter

### Summary Paragraph

Write a paragraph that gives a shortened version of the pages you read for the entire week. Focus on the gist (essence) of the week's reading and include the main points that are worth remembering and are important to the entire text. Begin with a clearly presented sentence that captures the central idea (essence) of the entire reading for the week (a gist statement). Include all key points/relevant details that support the central idea for the entire week's reading; focus on including only important information. Write in a logical, coherent order using complete sentences and transitions. **\*\*If you do not have enough room on the Weekly Letter form, use an additional piece of paper.\*\***

### Analysis Paragraph—Choose ONE to write about

Write a paragraph that takes one of the connections, predictions, questions, inferences, or visualizations you recorded on your Documenting Thinking Form and use your writing to explore your thinking more deeply OR choose another option at the end of the list. Focus on one option and be sure to provide details from the book to support and explain your thinking.

- *Make a connection:* Give background information and tell who in the book has a similar situation you're connecting with and WHY. Or compare something from your book to another text, event, author, character, movie, issue, etc. and tell what is similar and WHY it is similar.
- *Make a prediction* (=what is going to happen) and tell WHY you think this based on foreshadowing and clues in the text.
- *Ask a question:* Talk about something you notice the author or character doing in the novel and ask WHY.
- *Make an inference:* Write about an idea or conclusion you were able to piece together based on information given in the story but that the author did not actually state (use foreshadowing and logical textual evidence) and tell why you think this.
- *Share your visualization:* Describe a scene in the story or a character that you were able to see clearly, or visualize, in your mind. Describe the picture in your mind.
- *Character development:* Describe a particular character including his or her strengths and weaknesses and tell WHY you see him or her this way. Use information from the book to support your ideas.
- *Good Criticism:* Find something the author is doing well and tell WHY he or she does it well. You can refer to how the author writes (style), how the author creates characters, or the plot.
- *Bad Criticism:* Find something the author is not doing well (style, plot, or characterization) and tell WHY he or she is not doing it well. Offer advice to the author on how he or she could improve.

### Strategy Discussion

Write 2-3 sentences discussing how you used a strategy to further your understanding of this section of the book. Focus on a specific event or place in the text (you can include page numbers) and how the strategy relates specifically to your learning. For example:

- Talk about a place in the book where you didn't understand something and how you helped yourself by using a strategy (questioning, rereading, predicting, making an inference, etc.).
- Talk about a place in the book where you understand something more deeply by using and a strategy (questioning, rereading, predicting, making an inference, making a connection, etc.).

## Appendix I

### Synopsis of *Rooftop*

“Clay, 17, a pot abuser, and his cousin Addison, 18, a crack dealer, both attend Daytop, a day-treatment program in New York City. At one time close, then separated by a family feud, the teens are now working through their problems together. Their parents have just begun to put their dispute behind them when Clay sees Addison shot by the police on the rooftop of the projects where he lived and the incident becomes the focal point of a campaign for racial justice. The pace of the story slows a little just before the shooting, but quickly picks up as the community rallies around the perceived injustice. Delving into the psychological trauma of Clay and the comparison of how he and Addison's younger brother deal with the killing, the author gives readers a realistic look at individuals, family dynamics, and moral dilemmas. The raw language is in keeping with the story's events. Parallels can be drawn between this fast-paced novel and Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* (HarperCollins, 1999), and a classroom unit could easily be developed about the treatment of minorities within the U.S. justice system. The many facets of life in the projects are revealed through excellent character development, which enables this novel to shine” (Thomarie, n.d.).

## Appendix J

### Synopsis of *The Handmaid's Tale*

“In a startling departure from her previous novels (*Lady Oracle*, *Surfacing*), respected Canadian poet and novelist Atwood presents here a fable of the near future. In the Republic of Gilead, formerly the United States, far-right Schlafly/Falwell-type ideals have been carried to extremes in the monotheocratic government. The resulting society is a feminist's nightmare: women are strictly controlled, unable to have jobs or money and assigned to various classes: the chaste, childless Wives; the housekeeping Marthas; and the reproductive Handmaids, who turn their offspring over to the "morally fit" Wives. The tale is told by Offred (read: "of Fred"), a Handmaid who recalls the past and tells how the chilling society came to be” (Fisher, n.d.).

## Appendix K

### Stella Thompson's Instructional Material

#### World Studies

Lit Set

Group Presentation

Book:

Author Biography	____/10
Book Synopsis	____/10
Characters	____/10
Real World Connection	____/10
Spin-Offs/Recommendations	____/10
Visual Presentation	____/10
Group Balance/Cohesiveness/Overall Quality	____/20

Group Total \_\_\_\_\_/80

#### Individual Presentation

1.	____/20
2.	____/20
3.	____/20
4.	____/20
5.	____/20
6.	____/20

#### Individual Total

1.	____/100
2.	____/100
3.	____/100
4.	____/100
5.	____/100
6.	____/100

Comments:

## Appendix L

### Molly Adams’s Discussion Participation Scoring Guide

	<b>4-Advanced</b>	<b>3-Proficient</b>	<b>2-Developing</b>	<b>1-Needs Improvement</b>
<b>Overall Participation</b>	Actively participates in the group the entire discussion. Listens to and responds to other group members’ discussion points in a balanced way.	Noticeably participates in the group almost the entire discussion. Listens to and responds to other group members’ discussion points in a balanced way.	Participates in the group discussion at least half the time. Listens to and responds to other group members’ discussion points but needs to achieve more balance in listening and talking or awareness of behavior.	Participates in the group discussion less than half the time. Does not listen to or respond to group members.
<b>Knowledge of Book</b>	Shows insightful knowledge of book and has kept up with assigned reading.	Shows knowledge of readings and has kept up with assigned reading.	Shows some knowledge of readings and has kept up with most of the assigned reading.	Does not show knowledge of the readings and/or has not kept up with the assigned reading. Is generally “lost” in the book.
<b>Discussion and Response</b>	Gives opinions and comments about the book. Raises points about the book that pushes group members’ thinking to a deeper level. Refers to page numbers in the book for clarification of questions and for answers. Responds to most points from group members. Thinks deeply about discussion points.	Gives opinions and comments about the book. Asks questions about the book.  Refers to specific events or characters in the book for clarification of questions and answers. Responds to several questions from group members. Thinks about discussion points.	Gives a few opinions and comments about the text. Asks few or no questions about the text. Is vague when referring to events or characters in the book.  Is able to respond to a few discussion points from group members.	Does not give opinions and comments about the book. Does not ask questions about the book. Is able to respond to only 1 or 2 discussion points from group members mostly from background knowledge, not the text.
<b>Preparation</b>	Is prepared with discussion planning sheet and <i>willingly</i> contributes 2 or more points to group discussion.	Is prepared with discussion planning sheet and contributes at least 2 points to group discussion.	Is partially prepared with discussion planning sheet	Is unprepared with discussion planning sheet
<b>Conduct</b>	Shows courtesy and thoughtfulness. Talks and listens to all of the group members with inviting body language. Sincerely invites group members to comment.	Shows courtesy. Talks and listens to all of the group members.	Sometimes interrupts other students, or uses inappropriate body language or volume when addressing others in the group.	Frequently interrupts other students, and/or uses inappropriate body language or volume when addressing others in the group.

## Appendix M

### Lewis Blazer's Written Response to Research

I thought the chapter was accurate and fair. I was fascinated by what the students shared with you about their perceptions of me and lit circles. I was also interested in reading your transcriptions of my involvement in the groups, and seeing the way that you coded the discussion was awesome. It was a little like watching a video tape of yourself with an expert giving running commentary.

I'm actually getting ready to start that unit again this year, and plan on using lit circles. I'm excited to make some changes this year, in part based on reading this chapter. I bet that 1/2 of good teaching is the result of honest reflection.

## Appendix N

### Molly Adams's Written Response to Research

I really enjoyed working with you, and I feel like your questioning led me to some important reflection as a teacher. I appreciated reading the chapter and reflecting on the experience--thank you for including me. Good luck with the committee!

## Appendix O

### Stella Thompson's Written Response to Research

I found it quite interesting. I have never been dissected before. You did a nice job.

## VITA

Shannon C. Cuff grew up in Springfield, Missouri where she completed her elementary and secondary education. She received her Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Secondary Education and English and her Masters in Education from Drury University. Shannon graduated with her Ph.D. in Reading Education from the University of Missouri in May 2010. Before beginning her doctoral degree program, Shannon taught American Literature at Willard High School for six years. As a student at the University of Missouri, Shannon had the opportunity to serve as a Literacy Consultant as well as an instructor for the Teacher Development Program and MU Direct. She is currently teaching an online Classroom Research course. Shannon spends her time eagerly awaiting the arrival of her first child and visiting her family in Springfield as often as she can.