When it comes to difficulty with engaging students in learning experiences, many educators may think of the saying “You can lead a horse to the water, but you can’t make it drink” in reference to the sometimes intimidating task of student motivation with reading. While old-school teaching methods often follow the behavioristic approach described in this mantra, social collaboration to achieve multiple meanings and the perception of future personal benefits are important keys to motivate students so they will fully engage in reading literature.

**Teaching vs. training**

Students are obviously not horses, and motivating students as you would an animal (through training) is not the most effective technique in education, especially when the learning objective could be attained through collaboration. This is especially true with scholarly tasks that involve uncovering the many meanings that may be found in literature. John Dewey describes the difference between training an animal to perform a task and teaching within a learning community in *Democracy and Education*:

A clew may be found in the fact that the horse does not really share in the social use to which his action is put... But the horse, presumably, does not get any new interest. He remains interested in food, not in the service he is rendering. He is not a partner in a shared activity. Were he to become a copartner, he would, in engaging in the conjoint activity, have the same interest in its accomplishment which others have. He would share their ideas and emotions. (2-3)
Dewey asserts that the major difference in training animals and properly teaching students lies in the social interactions of those involved, and without “shared activity,” the learning becomes a mere instinctual response to stimulus.

While training is appropriate in certain learning situations, such as when teaching the multiplication table, it is less successful than organic learning, especially if the learning task could tap into higher-level critical thinking skills. Organic learning, or “live” learning, is interactional and dynamic. It occurs when students’ individual thought processes are vital to the overall learning of the group. This kind of learning is crucial in literature studies. When a student presents his or her own ideas and interpretations instead of being trained to acknowledge the “only right interpretation,” students will get more from the learning experience. Sheridan Blau contends in his book *The Literature Workshop* that “as long as teachers are teaching, students are not going to learn” and he qualifies this statement by adding that it is the teacher’s own *learning experience* in preparation for teaching a lesson that actually needs to be taught, not the final product the teacher learned (2-3). Blau argues further that this teaching of the teacher’s own conclusions, that occurs in most classrooms, is “merely an experience of [students] witnessing and possibly recording the teacher’s learning, and not an experience of learning for oneself” (3). By learning the thought processes necessary to arrive at a conclusion in literature, students will be able to learn more than just the text currently being discussed, and they will be able to apply their thought process to other areas that require critical thinking. It is important to note that these “other areas” not only encompass other subjects in school, but they also influence the ability for students to think critically in their lives as well.

**Teaching for future benefit**

Why do students need to “drink the water?” Of course I am referring to why students need to engage with their texts, and how to convey the importance of this need. First of all, students must perceive that they *need* to read the text in question, and this is especially true for boys according to Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael W. Smith in their book *Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys*, where they focus on the learning gap between boys and girls in literature classes. Wilhelm and Smith note that “boys’ performances do tend to improve… when they read to do or accomplish something beyond the reading” (2). If we show students how their reading will benefit their future, they will be more inclined to “drink the water,” and drink more satisfying draughts of the water.

Educators can establish the future benefits of reading a piece of literature by making the learning real to students in the present. By helping students make connections to their current lives, teachers set up the legitimacy of the text being discussed. Can students connect with a story written over four centuries ago, such as *Macbeth*? If the themes that students uncover during their reading of this text have meaning in their own lives, then absolutely. Can
Taking the Intimidation out of Interpretation
By Amanda Kissman

Approaching a piece of literature with the hopes of comprehending it entirely can be a daunting task for any individual. Even those who enjoy reading are sometimes given a text that they feel intimidated by. Often, this intimidation leaves our students feeling as though they must provide the right interpretations when asked otherwise they will fail. One of the first steps to facilitating classroom discussion about literature involves eliminating this fear.

Relinquish control to see better results
In order to create an environment that encourages all students to participate, teachers must first invite all ideas and interpretations welcomingly before even mentioning his or her own interpretation. According to Sheridan Blau, author of The Literature Workshop, there is no authoritative reading that can prove opposite interpretations wrong. He writes, “The discourse of interpretation proceeds according to rules of evidentiary reasoning and the adequacy and persuasiveness of such reasoning serves as the standard by which all interpretations are evaluated,” (75). Essentially, so long as the student can provide justification for his/her interpretation, the interpretation itself is perfectly acceptable. However, if teachers, who hold the authoritative position in a classroom, were to give their interpretation first, students may simply go along with the teacher’s ideas rather than develop their own because they are not aware that they have the power to develop and share their interpretation freely.

What if my students won’t talk?
Once an environment that encourages open participation is established, teachers should incorporate activities in which discussion is inevitable. The National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement suggests in their article titled “Effective Literature Instruction Develops Thinking Skills” that students jot down a few notes and thoughts after reading a piece of literature. This helps students to feel better prepared to share their thoughts if called upon. The teacher
may choose to give a handout that has guided questions to avoid students writing down summaries of what they read. For example, rather than asking questions that can be answered with one word, teachers should inquire about student’s personal feelings to the text or inferences as to why the author may have included certain details. These questions will encourage deeper thought and result in a wider range of contributions. The article then suggests that students share their ideas with the class while the teacher guides the discussion. An easy way to guide this discussion, as a teacher is to simply ask students about their ideas and encouraging other students to build upon all the ideas that are suggested. Aside from drawing more details out from students’ responses, teachers should remain in the background. The goal is that the discussion be largely student-based.

Classroom Discussion vs. Authentic Classroom Discussion: What’s the Difference?

It would seem that incorporating classroom discussion about literature would be relatively easy for the teacher. The task is merely having students read a piece of literature and then talk about what they read, right? The answer is yes and no. Teachers must make themselves aware of the difference between classroom discussion and authentic classroom discussion. Authentic classroom discussion involves so much more than just participation from students. It includes critical thinking, analyzing and questioning other students’ contributions. It also encompasses relating themes and characters to real-life as well as making connections with the text. According to an article titled “Bringing the Background to the Foreground: What do Classroom Environments that Support Authentic Classroom Discussion Look Like?” author, Xenia Hadjioannou, writes “The exploratory nature of authentic discussion renders it a socially demanding speech genre, as participants are expected to share a lot of who they are, to offer ideas that can be negotiated or questioned and to query others’ contributions without offending them,” (371).

Hadjioannou also notes that successfully participating in this kind of discussion takes practice, both from the students as well as the teachers who are meant to facilitate it.

Bringing it all together

Facilitating authentic discussion when reading a piece of literature can be one of the most effective forms of instruction a teacher can do. Authentic the text by inspiring them to make connections both with personal experiences and the experiences and ideas of fellow classmates. When done correctly, students should feel as if they can share any idea and interpretation, so long as they can justify its relevance, without being told they are wrong. While these discussions should be largely student-based, teachers must still play a huge role in the preparation of facilitating this kind of discussion. It may involve planning questions to guide the discussion, planning days in which students discuss in smaller groups, as well as creating a classroom environment in which all students feel as though their offerings are not only valid but also respected. Participating in authentic discussion as well as facilitating it can be difficult at first, however with practice, authentic discussion can soon be the norm of any English classroom.

Works Cited


“Successfully participating in [authentic] discussion takes practice, both from the students as well as the teachers who are meant to facilitate it”
Finding Right Ways to Write Away
By Andrew Seburg

Creating writing assignments that fully engage your students can be an arduous task. Teachers must battle against distractions in the classroom while creating lessons that are relevant and beneficial to the future of their students’ education. Due to an emphasis on grades, students in the secondary education setting often become bored and disconnected from literature because they are led to believe that they must interpret the text in a manner that satisfies the teacher. This belief among students results in bland discussion and cookie cutter-like response essays. For those teachers who wish to help students connect to a piece of literature, keeping students actively involved and interested throughout the unit is a must. Creating engaging writing assignments about literature provides students with the opportunity to change their role in the classroom from the consumers to producers.

Reading Logs
One method of keeping students engaged in a text is to have students keep a reading log. Reading logs are much like a journal in the sense that they allow students to frequently write their thoughts and ideas. Reading logs can be used in a variety of ways. Students can use reading logs to respond to a question assigned by the teacher from an assigned portion of the reading. This provides an alternative method for students to voice their thoughts and opinions about the reading without having to participate in class discussion. Students who are reluctant to share their thoughts with their peers may be more comfortable completing a reading log to supplement or replace verbal participation. Students can use the reading log to express their praises for the text, as well as their frustrations. The reading log will also help students keep up with the class, as it is necessary to keep up on the reading in order to complete the reading log assignments. Reading logs are also versatile in the sense that they serve as a medium for note taking. For example, students can use their reading log entries as a basis for discussion, as well as a reference when writing an interpretation paper.

Reading logs also serve as a tool for teachers. Teachers can collect and read the logs at various points as the class reads through the book to ensure that all students understand the text. Reading logs allow teachers to ask read and respond questions, which are then answered by students in the reading log. By assigning reading log entries, teachers are also ensuring that students will keep up with the reading. Periodic reading log checks will demonstrate to the teacher which students understand the text, those who may need help with comprehension, and those who are falling behind in reading.

Writing an Alternate Ending
Another writing assignment that will keep students engaged in writing about literature is the alternate ending paper. While reading the book, students will pay close attention to the elements of the story as they strive to comprehend the book in order to decide which elements to modify for the alternate conclusion. Students will remain engaged during the reading process, and will be more willing to participate in class discussion, as their own creative ideas will be refined by discussion with classmates. The alternate ending paper can serve as a final assessment for the unit as well. Teachers can gauge comprehension based on the creative writing of the students. This assignment does not provide the black and white, right or wrong type of assessment, but rational compositions will demonstrate that students read and comprehend the piece of literature. Students are more likely to remain engaged throughout the unit, as they will be able to express their creativity while refining their writing, reading
comprehension, and literature interpretation skills.

**Literary Analysis**

The literary analysis paper is another writing assignment that has potential to keep students engaged throughout the unit, and will allow them to freely express their opinions through writing. The literary analysis paper is a formal paper in which students demonstrate their reading comprehension by analyzing and evaluating the piece of literature as a whole. While reading the text, students will take note of elements in the work that strike a personal interest. The possibilities are nearly endless, as one student may choose to write about how they feel the author effectively or ineffectively portrayed the story through text, while another student may write about how they despised a character from the book. The idea behind the literary analysis paper is to allow students to choose their topic and freely express their opinions, while supporting their points using evidence from the piece of literature.

Creating engaging writing assignments about literature helps capture and retain the interest of students throughout the duration of the unit. Allowing students to assume the role of the producer, rather than the consumer, allows them to actively pursue their own interpretation of a specific piece of literature by utilizing their critical thinking skills and creative writing abilities.

Works Cited

