Under Discussion:
Teaching Speaking and Listening

Joyful Reading Is Our Goal

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The first year I taught English methods, I found myself reliving an experience I had not had since teaching high school: the moment when my carefully crafted discussion question was met with blank stares. I paused and backed up a bit, hoping the question was the culprit. I asked a lower-level question, a bit of recall just to get the conversation going. When eyes shifted away from mine to blank notebooks or “purposeful” flipping through the text, I knew I had to change course. My students had not done the reading.

When I visit classrooms, there are two clear signs that this challenge—ensuring that students read and prepare for discussion—has overwhelmed teachers. One is when much of the text is read aloud for students by a teacher or commercial audiobook. While this approach has its advantages, it leaves little time for instruction or discussion. The second compromise is for the teacher to assign reading but to conduct class as though students have not read. After a recap of the reading, the teacher poses questions that have only the barest connection to the text (“George feels pretty guilty for losing his temper with Lennie, right? Have you ever lost your temper and felt guilty afterwards?”). I am not throwing stones. I recognize these tactics for what they are because I have used them myself.

Flow, or the Nature of Things We Want to Do

For many students, the trouble is motivation. We often talk about motivation as something that some students have while others do not, but we teachers can and should design classroom experiences that motivate our students to read. We know from personal experience that motivation is dependent on the task. The same person who wakes before dawn to train for a marathon may drag her feet when writing thank-you notes. Psychology provides a handy concept to describe those experiences that draw us again and again: flow, or a state where an individual joyfully loses himself or herself in an activity (Smith and Wilhelm 26). Many readers of this journal experience a flow state when they read and discuss literature. Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm identify four characteristics that support flow experiences:

• A sense of control and competence
• A challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill
• Clear goals and feedback
• A focus on the immediate experience (28–30)

These characteristics provide a framework that teachers can use when crafting reading assignments and classroom activities to motivate students.

This approach is an alternative to typical methods of holding students accountable for reading that are likely to encourage an efferent—or instrumental—stance. Reading quizzes and packets of comprehension questions tend to require summary and recall of plot details, which implicitly invite students not to read the text at all. Louise M. Rosenblatt was wrong when she said that “[s]omeone else can read the newspaper or a scientific work for us and summarize it acceptably. No one, however, can read a poem for us” (33). When the main reason for reading the poem is to respond to a comprehension question, an online summary can be quite acceptable. If we wish for students to be ready to engage
in rich, literary discussion, we must ensure they engage with the text themselves, not through an intermediary like SparkNotes or Shmoop.com. In place of these accountability measures, it is necessary to design reading experiences that engender a flow state, thereby supporting an internal motivation to read.

**Frontload to Build Competence**

Voracious readers know what they are getting into when they crack open a new novel. They may have read the author before or have read a review that included a sketch of the premise, lending a sense of competence as they begin reading. On the other hand, a typical 15-year-old reading *Of Mice and Men* will not have this sort of foreknowledge. **Frontloading** is instruction that prepares students to read a text by developing schema around the text and introducing reading strategies that support a feeling of competence (Wilhelm, Baker, and Hackett 92).

One simple approach to frontloading is excerpting a few intriguing quotes and inviting students to make predictions and pose questions in response. Figure 1 is a slide used to help frontload Angela Johnson’s *The First Part Last*. Students are generally eager to make judgments about the protagonist of this text (a teenage father named Bobby), and this excerpt invites a wide array of responses. The conflicting predictions help build anticipation and incentive to read the text (Whose prediction is right? What kind of person is Bobby?). At the same time, the excerpts provide some hints about the characters and plot, which helps orient students’ reading. Both purpose and background knowledge support comprehension, which will encourage the sense of competence necessary for flow (Duke and Pearson 205–06).

**Reading Journals to Engender Control, Goals, and Feedback**

For teachers who want to hold students accountable, one alternative to comprehension questions is the reading journal. Journals that focus on student responses to a text let the student maintain control over their attention and purpose in reading while providing...
an efficient way to hold students accountable. While reading questions are based on someone else’s priorities, metacognitive journals give students more control and responsibility over the reading process. Students can use such journals to keep track of their own questions and responses, thereby supporting active reading and thinking about texts (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, and Murphy 116).

Reading journals also help create “clear goals and feedback” for students. Through modeling, the teacher demonstrates that having reactions to a text and attending to those reactions is what good reading looks like. When the goal is a grade on a quiz, students must wait for the teacher’s evaluation. When the goal is active reading, a flip through their journal’s pages lets the students know immediately that they are successful.

**Passage Presentation for Immediacy and Feedback**

In work on the social nature of literacy, scholars highlight the salience of authentic feedback from peers (Gee 126). Though public performance is not itself a part of the theory of flow, it does create an opportunity for immediacy and feedback. We can leverage this by inviting students to identify and present key passages from their assigned reading. For example, in a class studying characterization through *Of Mice and Men*, students identify passages that reveal new and important qualities about secondary characters. Students share their choices with the class along with context and justification for their selection.

The remainder of the class discusses the merits of the selections and whether they should be added to the class’s ongoing character logs. As study of the novel continues, student-selected passages grow into a reference point and resource for the class. Presenting and defending a selection publicly creates an immediate experience that may fully engage a student.

**Putting It Together: A Flow Experience to Draw Students into the Text**

Each of these pieces—frontloading, student-centered response, and public discussion—can help create a flow experience. However, students who are certain that reading and responding are drudgery may still refuse to open the book and never have the opportunity to stumble into a flow experience. Here is where building a lesson around “read aloud” can make a real difference.

When I taught Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I started with a frontloading lesson that introduced the central characters through a “tea party” activity (Christensen 115). As part of the activity, students made predictions about the characters, and they were intrigued by Janie—a woman who had been married three times. Uncertain that this would be enough to motivate students to read, I read the first chapter aloud.

As I read, I paused and returned to the questions and predictions they had made initially, inviting them to revise and add new thoughts, and modeling the sort of reflective reading required by the reading journal. Though our unit was to be focused on figurative language and how it shapes the theme of a novel, that is not where we started our work. We started by enjoying the language and the characters, just as any avid reader would. Students made jokes and sometimes broke off into side conversations about Janie’s gossipy neighbors and Hurston’s strong description (“firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets” was always a hit) (2). While such side conversation was usually a nuisance, at that moment, peer-to-peer discussion created an immediate, joyful experience with the text. After reading for a bit, I paused and invited students to share their thoughts about the novel with textual examples to back up their impressions (another unit objective). All responses were welcomed and the only evaluation was commentary by peers, placing control for the reading experience in their hands and demonstrating that engagement was what competence looked like. This single lesson previewed the unit for the students, letting them experience some of the practices that would support the flow experience, including a focus on fun, peer feedback, and a sense of competence and control.

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Thought literary study and discussion is serious and important work, as teachers we must recall that most of us were drawn to it because of the intense pleasure we feel when reading literature. We
read most eagerly when we foresee ourselves getting lost in a text, being pulled into a flow experience. Many of our students do not associate reading and discussing school texts with that kind of joy. While we can certainly use stopgap measures such as reading quizzes or audiobooks to induce students to read, all will benefit from experiences that build internal motivation to read and engage with texts. If we are hoping that students will come to discussions prepared and enthusiastic, reading motivated by joy and interest is clearly more powerful than reading motivated by academic consequences. 📚

**Works Cited**


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**Outside Seaside High School**

When he misbehaved he was told “Go outside class and face the ocean.” Minutes later he would forget why he was sent out there, not that anyone ever asked.

In a half hour he became two people.

He was the one who talked ocean looked with blue eyes instead of black and listened like the wind does.

When he was called back to class he was the other one.

—Jim Hanlen

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