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AUTHOR Optner, Ruth L.
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ABSTRACT

"Group groping," a classroom activity in which discussion units of five to seven students search into a text (play, essay, poem or short story) to illuminate a problem posed by the teacher, is a way of making discussions both teacher-directed and student-centered. After a class has read a work, the teacher provides background information to initiate the assignment. The various groups then search for specifics in the work under study, share their findings through oral reports made by group spokesmen, and compose papers based on their search. Some benefits of this approach include heightened student enthusiasm over the works covered and students' ability to gain access to new works. (A diagram of a teacher-directed group study of a literary work and an illustration of this approach using a symbolic analysis of Richard Wright's "The Man from Underground" are included.) (DD)

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Group Groping: A Process for Learning

RUTH L. OPTNER
San Fernando Valley State College

The discussion method of teaching, venerable as Socrates, is a useful prop in the English teacher's inventory of classroom devices. Through artfully contrived questions, the teacher attempts to lead the students into a productive examination of works of literature. At best, discussions involve students in the learning process, enabling them to find their own answers to questions rather than dutifully absorbing teachers' answers through the lecture-notetaking routine. At worst, discussions are like a ping-pong rally, a recitation bouncing back and forth from teacher to students, with points going to the ones who know the answers.

Such discussions occur between the teacher and the few students who have read the assigned work. Some dialogues are inspiring, others are a waste of time. We occasionally mistake a shouting match among more vocal class members as inspirational when it merely enables them to vent their emotions on their fellow students. Some of us encourage topical detours, recognizing the value in allowing the quiet student to become motivated to talk in his English class in the hope that English will then seem relevant.

It is all too easy to initiate the turned-on discussion which has really turned off the work under consideration. However, in these days of world, national and campus turmoil, such classroom encounters are sometimes necessary to tap off mounting pressures of frustrated feelings. In times of crisis, the supercharged atmosphere requires the tangential talking to

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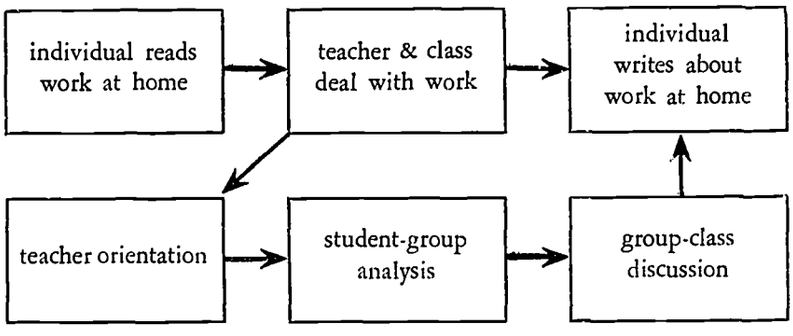
RUTH L. OPTNER teaches freshman English and advanced composition for English majors at San Fernando Valley State College. She works from a background both academic (master's in English literature at UCLA) and practical (essays and articles in such magazines as **Parents, Better Homes and Gardens, Living for Young Homemakers,** etc.). The technique described in this article arose from her efforts to involve the "silent majority" in a particularly sluggish class.

ground the emotional electricity. Such detours are valid from time to time.

But the diversionary discussion is potentially a trap that pulls the class off course. How can a discussion be both teacher directed and student centered? Can a teacher on the sidelines direct student energies into the work under study rather than away from it? "Group groping" is a method that has shown some promise. The group consists of a discussion unit of five to seven students. The groping is a group search into the text which the students read at home but restudy in class to illuminate a problem posed by the teacher.

The mechanics of forming groups, setting tasks, scheduling oral and written reports are in the teacher's hands. The follow-through is student centered, through student directed discussion, and ultimately through individual writing assignments. The study begins and ends in homework. The classroom process proceeds in three stages: First, the teacher provides background information to initiate an assignment; second, the students work in groups, jointly searching for specifics in the work under study; third, the findings of the groups are correlated and shared with the class through oral reports from group spokesmen; finally, written work is generated as an outgrowth of the students' search.

Diagram: Teacher-directed group study of a literary work



1. provides information
2. divides class into groups
3. assigns topic to each group

1. groups form (desks moved into circles)
2. search through text for evidence
3. notes taken, findings shared

1. group spokesman summarizes
2. class asks questions
3. discussion widens from group to class

To make the process work, the teacher needs fortitude to let the students carry the discussions by themselves, and the students need to have read the work before coming to class. If these conditions are met, something constructive will emerge. The dynamics of this group interaction may be illustrated by describing a project of my college freshman English class. Its application to other grade levels, from junior high school on up, is adjustable. (A teacher may choose, for example, to allow the students class time for the reading in the lower grades).

The orientation step is familiar, the teacher as lecturer introducing a new unit of study. Whether the work is a play, essay, poem or short story, the qualities of the particular type and the vocabulary to describe them are told briefly, in just enough detail to launch a discussion. To introduce Richard Wright's "The Man from Underground" I started with a known element of fiction, *point of view*. The students were familiar with the first person narrator who tells the story. I added to their vocabulary the terms *third person limited* (objective description of character's actions) and *third person omniscient* (subjective identification of character's thoughts). The students, without prompting, looked at the text, quickly identifying the mode as third person. It would take them longer to identify it as limited or omniscient.

Moving to new ground, I brought up *motif* and its related aspect, *symbol*. To see where they stood, I asked what these terms meant. They defined a symbol as "something that stands for something else." Refining this further, I added that it is something concrete that stands for an idea, such as the dove symbolizing peace, or a gavel symbolizing order. Motif, a repeated figure in a design or musical composition, was defined as an element that recurs singly or in clusters, suggesting the direction of the story. Although symbols and motifs overlap in meaning, I pointed out that within a story a symbol remains constant while a motif may shift in different contexts. Water, light, dust, and slime are motifs of shifting meaning in the story. I mentioned these along with the symbols of the church, dream and dead bodies. By now their curiosity was aroused. They were eager to check out what I suggested and to find new examples for themselves.

Considering the identified motifs and symbols as minimum baggage for their solo search, I suggested that they start by listing some of the images of sight, sound, smell, feel and taste. In so doing, they would encounter the motifs and symbols automatically. I further suggested that these elements would give clues to the central idea of the story. We had not discussed the idea of the story, nor had we labelled other elements of

fiction. We had only identified the point of view from which the story was narrated, and had acknowledged the presence of certain motifs and symbols. The students were starting their journey with a knapsack supplied with three definitions and a handful of named motifs and symbols. They were to search out others to see where they might lead.

The next step for the teacher is to divide the class into groups and to assign each group a specific path to explore. Dividing them into groups of five to seven, trying to include a leader in each group, I instructed them to move to different parts of the room and to arrange desks in a circle facing one another. Before they moved, I assigned each group a different three pages of the story, reminding them to identify the motifs and symbols (not to worry which was which), to identify and list sensory images, and to see how these elements related to one another and to the central idea of the story.

At this stage, the teacher needs courage to let the students take over. The initial chaos of moving desks will soon give way to stunning silence. The control mechanism passes from the teacher to the text which seems to exert the pull of gravity as the students hunch over their books, riffle pages, and occasionally murmur to one another. These gentle noises are a welcome first sign of life, suggesting that something might happen in time. The noise increases as students identify images and motifs. In about ten minutes, discussion becomes animated, students arguing, poring over the book, writing things down. All are involved, unlike the teacher-directed discussion.

It is harder to reassemble the class than to fragment it. After thirty minutes of working in groups, the students are entranced with their discoveries and want to spend more time exploring. The need to reassemble desks into rows, to begin to share findings dictates the end point of the group groping process. Group spokesmen reveal searches down many labyrinths, some to dead ends, others to flashes of insight. Questions are raised as well as answered, insights along new pathways are illuminated for the teacher as well as the student.

The writing assignment emerges from the artifacts that the students produce. They found, for example, correlations between the dream stage, the darkness and the foggy state of mind typical of the man underground, contrasting with the "dead world of sunshine" above. One spokesman admitted, "We didn't stay with the part you assigned. We went clear to the end." Enthusiasm exceeds expectations; one soon learns to expect the unexpected. Other correlations were found between water and the passage

of time, smells and the presence of death. A useful quotation suggested symbolic relationships:

> He stood in the dark, wet with sweat, brooding about the diamonds, the rings, the watches, the money; he remembered the singing in the church, the people yelling in the movie, the dead baby, the nude man stretched out upon the white table. . . . He saw these items hovering before his eyes and felt that some dim meaning linked them together . . . , convinced that all of these images with their tongueless reality, were striving to tell him something.[1]

Tongueless reality became the springboard for writing. Each student was invited to select a cluster of motifs or symbols, and to explore their "tongueless reality," what they were saying to him, the reader.

One student interpretation, written in class, indicates the grappling with the text that occurred:

> In the beginning pages the motif "dream" served as a way to explain the boy's state of mind. His state of mind reflected his being chased and accused of murder by the police. He was in a state of paranoia. He felt the police car was upon him when he was standing above the open manhole. While in the sewer, after being bumped around, he wondered if he were dead. Many instances of death approached him in his mind such as sliding into a down-curve, catching a disease, lighting a match in a gas pocket, and the earth crumbling and burying him above. As the story continued, "dream" took on a new role of foreshadowing events to come. His dreams about the deaths of the baby and women, his choking from the water hint of future events.
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> Light and sunshine were used to express the "tongueless reality" concerning the darkness that people lived in. Adjectives for sunshine such as **dark, obscene, cruel,** and **hot glare** were used. The boy as he removed the manhole cover "looked into a hot glare of sunshine through which blurred shapes moved." As the boy came out of the underground, he was "drowned in the terror of yellow light and he was in a deeper darkness than he had ever known underground." The paradox of the sunshine being dark could indicate the author's view that people are in the dark about their world.

The interpretations varied, but all were grounded in the text. The process of learning from one another was productive because it started and ended with the story.

To recapitulate, the teacher starts the students on their journey with minimum provisions, in this case definitions of motif and symbol, identification of where they exist and how they operate. By pointing out the first

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[1]Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," *Black Voices*, Ed. by Abraham Chapman (New York, 1968), pp. 136,7.

signpost, the teacher directs the student to find others. He soon travels forward through the text in consultation with his fellows. He enjoys the excitement of his own discoveries, finding other signposts, following their lead to the end.

The follow-on work starts with the group spokesmen making oral reports to the class. This serves to bring the differing insights of each group to the class as a whole. It also gives the teacher the opportunity to plan future work to cover new ground. For example, other pathways of character development, use of flashback, function of setting may need pinpointing. The feedback mechanism from student to teacher assures that future assignments and classwork will be coordinated.

A permanent gain for the student is a process to gain access to a new work. He learns to look for something specific, to notice a thread traveling through a work, to take notes on the strands, to correlate, to understand. Learning to study is a byproduct of the story-centered discussion process. A student explained to me his learning to study in the group groping experience: "You tell us what to look for, then you give us some hints, then we can find them, and pretty soon we see other things ourselves." This is not a technical explanation, but it suffices to illustrate the process and the byproduct.