



INVITING THE DINING ROOM TABLE CONVERSATION INTO OUR CLASSROOMS

By Kimberly Athans

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Abstract: The author discusses essential skills and strategies teachers can use to create a shared linguistic space in today's English classrooms. Topics such as increasing reading enjoyment and developing voice, agency, purpose, and authenticity in student writers are a major focus. Readers will learn how to unpack information overload in the digital age and utilize a National Writing Project model for literacy instruction to increase and enhance the voices of literacy in classrooms. Special consideration is given to the roles of translanguaging and discourse communities in elevating those voices. As a National Writing Project Teacher Consultant and teacher of literacy and preservice teachers, the author draws on her experiences, research, and expertise to encourage teaching for the greater good, with an effort to inspire the writers of tomorrow and create a balanced literacy approach that is not only effective and rewarding but inspiring.

Keywords: National Writing Project, discourse communities, reading enjoyment, writing instruction, balanced literacy

Fred Rogers once said, “One of the greatest helps in the development of literacy is the dining room table conversation” (King, 2018, p. 187). This aphorism has always stuck with me because I recall being an only child among a room full of adults, where I sat and listened to the grown-ups converse. I remember hearing words I did not know and trying to surmise their meaning based upon context, picking up idioms and turns of phrase, and wondering why they were used. Even more vividly, I recall anecdotes, words, and casual comments that I admired, adopted, and used in my own conversations or in my writing. Although I was not aware of it then, the exposure to these conversations was helping me to hone my listening skills as well as draw conclusions and make inferences. Most importantly, it was providing me with a foundation of literacy that supported me throughout my life.

Nowadays, I tend to assume there are not many dining room conversations for children to become a part of and glean the same nuances I did. As a child, I grew up immersed in literacy practices in a whole language approach to learning. Our teachers taught us cursive and encouraged us to go to the library and Scholastic Book Fairs to develop a reading habit. They published our writings in class books that we shared in an author's chair, which required a foot stool to climb onto and which gave us a feeling of pride, sitting there while reading our words to our classmates. Conversely, today's students can click a mouse or touch a screen and be inundated by more information than they know what to do with, but they may not be exposed to the art of the communication, discourse communities, and

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texts rich in content and vocabulary outside of school as often as I was (Wolf & Stoodley, 2018).

This leads me to some profound questions: What changes the language of my classroom to make it a more challenging, rewarding, and shared linguistic space? What are the most important skills I believe students need to be successful in school and life? What should the sounds of literacy be in the classrooms of my future teachers?

To explore these questions, I must consider one I have been grappling with since I entered my first classroom 28 years ago: How do English teachers do it all? In my literacy classes, I encourage my preservice teachers to follow Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle's (2018) daily literacy plan of read, write, think, and create. This is an easy momentum to abide by to ensure that students are reading like writers and writing like readers. Engaging in metacognition and reflection, their lessons culminate in the highest level of Bloom's Taxonomy: creation.

This agenda is an offshoot of the six components of balanced literacy: the minilesson, independent reading, conferring and assessment, small group instruction, read-alouds, and shared, interactive reading. While Gallagher and Kittle focus on secondary student learning, the compilation of a balanced learning day for students is of utmost priority. Teachers also need to focus on the essentials they think students should learn and review each year, such as priority standards with key skills including summarizing, inferencing, synthesizing, and thinking critically. Considering these ideas as the sounds of literacy that fill our classrooms will help us learn to offer multiple learning opportunities and will help us balance our teaching lives.

Read More

One of the most insightful conversations I have had with other English teachers recently was sparked by Carol Jago's (2024) keynote address *The Science of Teaching Reading in the Digital Age* at the California Association of Teachers of English convention. Jago stated that students are reading less and enjoying it less, adding that they are starving for something as nonreaders. To a packed room full of teachers, she urged, "Students are hungry—both intellectually and emotionally" (9:55). She shared that in 1984, 35% of 13-year-olds read for fun; today, that number is a low 14% (9:55). Even worse, 42% of low performing students rarely read for fun (10:05).

The culprit? Social media and screens. These not only turn kids from books but can make them feel bad about themselves and their friendships. Reading is the balm that can heal this sad truth. What does reading do for our students? Jago (2024) says that it gives them a more quiet, vicarious reading experience, better mental health, and a sense of stillness. Reading allows students to step out of the chaos of life. Jago encourages teachers to share books that they love with students as often as they can and seek to understand the needs and challenges of students. Helping them to become good readers who read widely and deeply changes their narrative and ushers them into a literate life. As teachers, we can do this by creating a shared linguistic space that supports a community of writers and readers who develop their literacy skills together, alongside one another, while growing from the experiences they share in the classroom.

What makes a good reader? Typically, the answer is usually a reader who has been continuously exposed to literature and print their whole life. Unfortunately, the digital age reader has become adept at skimming for the gist of a text. Jacobs (2011) believes that we lose much from skimming and reading without being attentive, but that it is becoming the only way we know how to read in the digital age. He urges us to be lost in a book like we were as children. Jacobs reflects on his experience reading beloved books from years past, and he suggests that we read rapt: "completely absorbed, engrossed, fascinated, perhaps even carried away" (p. 86). He suggests, "Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives. In later life, we might admire, we are often entertained, we may modify some views we already hold, but we are more likely to find in books merely a confirmation of what is in our minds already" (p. 149). The books we read in our early years create the bar against which all other books are measured, allowing students to see their past as this shared linguistic space, thereby growing a deep community within a classroom.

In many English classrooms today, the current trend is to assign summaries or shortened versions of texts versus texts in their entirety. Kelly Gallagher (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018) warns against this. In summary, we are not doing our students a favor by cutting out the hard stuff, and when students embrace confusion, that's where the real learning occurs. It is better to teach fewer texts well than offer students a smattering of bits and pieces of texts.

Jago (2024) encourages teachers to give book talks and introduce books with a "Vygotskyian nudge" (10:05). Another way to address this is to read just the preface, or the first few pages to students, sort of like a book preview. Students can also give book talks in class or create book trailers. Jago also reminds teachers that the canon can take the enjoyment out of reading for students, but it can also expose them to their home run book (Von Sprecken et al., 2000). We do not need to discard the canon entirely in

exchange for pop culture texts, nor do we have to cling to the canon and dismiss the contemporary. We have the opportunity to revise the canon, keep what serves us well, and incorporate the literature that will become classics. It is our canon to shape. “If students read more books, we wouldn’t be fighting about which books they should read” (Jago, 2024, 10:40). Her comment resonated deeply with teachers fighting current censorship battles. Keeping books in our classrooms moving freely from student to student and hand to hand can change the sounds of literacy one student at a time.

Perhaps another language of the English classroom is what Jago (2024) called “the fiction effect,” which is the idea that reading complex novels, untangling metaphors, and following deep philosophical arguments allows students to develop a habit of mind as readers. Classrooms need to mirror the practices of authentic readers. Teachers need to help readers build stamina by minimizing distractions, setting goals, and increasing reading time. The most important literacy support we can offer is to give students time to read and to talk about reading. We need to help them develop stamina by preserving independent reading. Research has shown that 15 minutes of reading each day helps students become better readers and writers by increasing vocabulary and knowledge of sentence construction. It can also foster a love and appreciation of reading (Gallagher & Kittle, 2021).

Another change in the sound of literacy may be: What does it mean to teach a book? Teachers need to make reading purposeful and real for students. They need to immerse them in a world of ideas and allow them to make connections, while providing choices, enrichment activities, and opportunities to write and talk about what they are reading. I think we would all welcome this changing sound happening in our classrooms.

Write Often

One way to support a shared linguistic space is to empower student writers. Newkirk (2009) says that writing is the other side of the bed [to reading] that is never slept in. This metaphor is an unfortunate yet apt way to view the English language arts (ELA) classroom. Writing is a vital skill that we need to teach our students. As a National Writing Project (NWP) Fellow, I center my classroom around writing and mirror the pedagogical practices of the NWP Summer Institute, where each day participants move through a series of writing exercises. What follows is a list of the NWP Summer Institute suggestions for building a community of writers (K. Athans, personal communication, June 2023). I use these daily in my classroom:

- Write into the day
- Share a poem of the day
- Read

- Write
- Share our writing
- Discuss our writing and reflect on our process

The best move teachers can make in a writing-centered classroom is to create a community of writers. Have students write in class, use mentor texts to model writing, and include your own writing. A great mentor text provokes something: a memory, a passion, a desire to write. Have students share their writing with one another. Most importantly, have students publish work in real-world contexts thereby diversifying the sounds even more richly.

My ultimate goal as a writing teacher is to create confident writers. Many high school English departments, unfortunately, focus too heavily on writing arguments and claims and synthesizing evidence rather than having students write more personal pieces. While argument may be an important skill to master for college, it should not be so exalted that we lose sight of why we even write in the first place—connection.

Sadly, to teach students to write arguments, teachers have focused so much on that particular genre of writing that they have neglected all other genres as well as—dare I say it—reading. In the digital age, this developing reading deficit is a disaster. 32% of students in today’s schools are receiving below grade level texts (Jago, 2024). In fact, public school leaders estimate that about half—49%—of their students began the 2022–23 year behind grade level in at least one academic subject, according to data released by the National Center for Education Statistics (Jago, 2024, 10:00, citing Camera, 2023). The paucity of reading skills in a post-pandemic world is affecting students across the content areas, and it is our job as English teachers to remedy this deficit.

The sounds of literacy have changed over the years. When I began my teaching career, we taught six texts a year. Now, in many high schools, students read two core texts a year. Student preparation is lacking (Horowitch, 2024). How is this solving the problem with the low literacy levels? How is this preparing students for the reading of dense, difficult texts they are going to encounter throughout college and career paths? How is this creating lifelong readers who value the written word? I am reminded of Rose’s (1989) comment:

My students needed to be immersed in talking, reading, and writing, they needed to further develop their ability to think critically, and they needed to gain confidence in themselves as systematic inquirers. They had to be let into the academic club. (pp. 141-142)

It is futile to ask a student to craft an argument regarding *any* text if students do not have a sense of their voice, style, agency, and confidence as a writer. They need a strong

reading base and exposure to multiple, diverse texts in a variety of genres to develop those skills. Our students need to develop a habit of reading and a comfort with language long before they become confident writers. They need to see what makes a text a work of art, how the right word used in a certain way can conjure an experience, emotion, or reaction to something. Newkirk (2021) says:

My worry is that we have been asked to buy a lie—or rather a series of them. That analytic writing is somehow a higher form of thinking than story; that the major function of school writing is to explicate literature; that creativity is for the talented few ... that rigor, not pleasure, is what we should be aiming at. If we accept those lies, we lose our birthright as English teachers. (p. 140)

Students need to be moved to argue for or about something after they have developed a desire to join the conversation because of lived experiences, a heightened sense of self, and the evolution of their own passions. This can arise through exploring creative forms of writing and expression.

It is time to shift the way we look at our roles as English teachers. We hold in our hands very delicate hearts and minds, and what we say and do in our writing classrooms can condemn and shame or exalt and nurture. As writers and readers ourselves, we must stand by what we know works, carve out time to read and write daily, and celebrate the work we do with our students and one another. Only then will our students write with any sense of agency. They bring so many gifts of language, culture, ideas, and perceptions to the classroom. Our charge is to harness these gifts and help our students find their voices in a greater discourse community. Perhaps the greatest gift they bring are their stories—there is nothing more rewarding in a shared, linguistic space.

Think Constantly

Reading and writing are recursive literacy practices that stimulate the generative theory of language in thinking (Newkirk, 2009). By making their thinking visible to students, teachers can take the mystery out of reading and writing. Another valuable goal is to make time to confer and talk to students, invite students into the discourse community, and provide a safe space for them to share their ideas with a partner or in a whole class discussion. Engaging students in critical thinking leads to ownership, autonomy, and independence. Seasoned educators know that decision making, reflection, revision, and self-critique make internal conversations external.

We need to encourage today's students to look for ways of knowing beneath the surface and beneath the rhetorical action and situation. Educators must consider how their instruction may affect minoritized and marginalized students. They must continue to dare to dream, develop,

and pursue ethical ideas even in the face of overwhelming political difficulties and technological advances. Jacobs (2020) calls this *defilement* and says that it is made up of the ideas of information overload and social acceleration—the perception that the world is changing too quickly. To combat this, he suggests “informational triage” (p. 12), where we pause and attempt to unpack what is real and what is not, what is relevant and what is not, and where we direct our attention to have an authentic and meaningful interpretation of our experiences.

Yasmin (2022) offers a resource that can also help students unpack misinformation, conspiracy theories, satire, half-truths, and myths. This unpacking helps students understand how social media algorithms work and how journalists make decisions on what makes something newsworthy. Teaching visual rhetoric, media literacy, and digital and multimodal literacies is essential to developing critical thinking skills and societal awareness in the digital age. I remind my students that everything is text (Derrida, 1985); this truth is another layer of what it means to teach in today's language arts classroom.

Perhaps the biggest echo reverberating in classrooms is the changing sounds of literacy that come in the form of artificial intelligence (AI). The use of AI poses a real ethical challenge, among many other things. It is a tool, and the tool is only as good as the user. Interestingly, it is just a myriad of symmetrical codes that hold dominant narratives and preferred meanings. There is no authentic voice in AI—no imagination, empathy, or accountability.

My take on AI is to trust your voice and nurture the voices of your students. My worry is that AI will take away their voices. As teachers in the digital age, we need to ask ourselves where ways of thinking come from. I am encouraging my preservice teachers to create assignments that lead students through creating thinking processes and are tied directly to their curriculum and instruction. By having students do their prewriting, composing, revising, and peer reviews in class, we can support the cognitive growth connected to the writing process and be present in a way that leaves AI in the background, perhaps to be used only as a tool to spur thinking. Although, I am still hesitant to use it to explore ideas because I think this exploration provides some of the best thinking our students do.

When students are free to come up with ideas and see where their thoughts take them, I am reminded of Adrienne Rich's (1995) wisdom: “Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking, and naming for you; it means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts; hence, grappling with hard work” (p. 157). Our primary concern as English teachers should be encouraging our students to trust in their own voices and creative minds, rather than those of a machine, solidifying thinking and processing as a dominant sound of future classrooms.

Create Freely

With so much focus on standardized testing and often constrictive ELA standards, there is still room for creativity through poetry. Some English teachers are afraid to teach poetry, and their anxiety can be contagious. Being afraid to be wrong in poetic writing and interpretation is the worst approach. Instead, teach kids to play with words and genres (Romano, 2000). Form makes meaning possible, but moving beyond the literal language can be empowering.

Tapping into multilingual student experiences offers the opportunity to celebrate poetry through translanguaging, which is the ability to move fluidly between languages. In translanguaging, students can think in multiple languages simultaneously and use their home language as a vehicle to learn academic English (Najarro, 2023). Literacy educator and author Nawal Qarooni states that “with this method, two things can be true at once, get in between them. Use a contrapuntal form of writing poetry—intertwining two languages and personas to become one. Multilingual writers use paired poetry to find themselves.” (Reif, 2022, 11:15).

Poetry is just one way of seeking joy. According to Muhammad (2023), *daily joy-practices* light up our classrooms. She encourages teachers to celebrate happiness, wellness, beauty, healing, and justice for oneself and others. She wants educators to teach from cultural and historical realities to cultivate identity, skills, and intellect for all students. This can give students a powerful desire to join the conversation of the larger discourse of their varied communities.

I believe that everyone has gifts to contribute to our learning community (Freire, 2020), and it is my desire to provide my students with a safe space to celebrate those gifts. In my classroom setting, I work to create a space of dialogic co-inquiry. I am aware that there are many layers of culture, ethnicity, and experience that do not fit neatly into a definition, so I attempt to focus on non canonical perspectives and multiple lenses. Having students read and write poetry with this lens is one way to accomplish this aim.

When I participated in the Sam Houston Writing Project, I remember feeling a profound sense of awareness of my students as creators. I entered the experience as a teacher of writing, yet after a month of writing daily, sharing my writing with others, and creating a class book together, I emerged as a writer. My experience as a participant allowed me to understand the process a writer goes through, which enabled me to see my students as real writers.

This realization was life changing for me. It altered the way I taught and assessed writing. It also shifted the way I created formative and summative assessments and convinced me that I needed to engage my students in

more acts of creating. From then on, I approached my curriculum with an invitation to create in conjunction with the reading of literature. As I reimagined my course design, I incorporated more opportunities for creative processes in assignments such as multi-genre papers, blackout poetry, one-pagers, silent conversations, mind maps, and commonplace books, where students record ideas, quotes, observations, and connections to their readings.

Rich (1993) admonishes us that we “must write, and read, as if your life depended on it” (p. 52). Former English teacher and teacher educator William Broz (2011) taught *To Kill a Mockingbird* to his English education students because he knew most of them never read it when it was assigned in high school. To his dismay, he noted that most of his students, future English teachers, also did not read it the second time around. He warned us: “If students do not read the assigned texts, nothing important is happening in your literature classroom” (p. 15). Not reading is seen as an epidemic in many English classrooms across the country. As English teachers of shared linguistic spaces that nurture the many sounds of a literate life, we should be teaching the recursive practices of reading and writing every day for something bigger than ourselves—our future. As such, students need to read in order to be fully present in our classes. They need to read to combat the laziness and complacency of a scrolling culture. Today’s English classroom is a place where students read, write, think, and create as an engaged community of learners.

Seek Authenticity

Authentic engagement in the English class is, and always has been, about living the best kind of human life—a good life. Plato taught that the unexamined life is not worth living. Living a good life means being aware. Aristotle espoused this idea of the good life in his view that the mark of an educated mind is sufficient knowledge in many fields of inquiry in a pluralistic society (Daude, 2023).

As teachers, we need to encourage students to not just write for a grade or to fulfill the confines of an assignment, but to enter a conversation in a more eclectic, shared linguistic space. Students need to have an authentic audience for their writing, and they need to see a purpose for their study of literature and diverse texts. I encourage my future teachers to anticipate the needs of everyone who our students will touch and impact in the future and, in doing so, teach to those needs. Jacobs (2020) likens literacy practices like reading the classics to breaking bread with the dead. He warns us that the writers are not guests at our table; rather, we are guests at theirs. This metaphor of a shared discourse around a table as a linguistic space is fitting for today’s English classroom where the focus should be on becoming better people, creating stronger habits of mind, and working for the greater good by building literate lives among the ever-evolving dining room conversation.

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