Shifts in the conversation: Teacher-led, peer-led, and computer-mediated discussions

Linda B. Gambrell

During the past three decades there has been sustained interest in the role discussion plays in learning from text. In the 1980s, attention shifted from teacher-led to peer-led discussion groups, as evidenced by the increasing number of journal articles and conference presentations on the topic. The current trend is clear—research and classroom implementation of computer-mediated discussions (CMD) of text are providing new insights about discussion and learning and are raising issues of great importance about how discussion can lead students toward a better understanding of text.

Teacher-led, peer-led, and computer-mediated discussions

Text-based discussions are literacy events in which students collaboratively construct meaning or consider alternative interpretations in order to arrive at new understandings of text. In teacher-led discussions the teacher guides students in their understanding of text. Teacher-led discussions are typically characterized by an interaction pattern of teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation (IRE). The IRE pattern reflects teacher leadership of the content and interaction, providing fewer opportunities for student control or response. Teacher-led discussions can be used effectively, particularly when teachers offer feedback rather than evaluative comments (Mercer, 1993). On the other hand, teacher-led discussions often leave little time for extended student response and provide fewer opportunities for students to interact with other members of the group. Thus, many teachers have initiated more opportunities in their classrooms for students to engage in peer-led discussion groups where the teacher serves as a facilitator. In peer-led discussions, students are supported and encouraged to engage in problem-solving talk that leads to a more in-depth understanding of the text (Almasi, 1995; Maloch, 2002).

There is currently increasing interest in dialogue or discussions about text that take place online (Wade & Fauske, 2004). Today, it is not unusual to find elementary-age children engaging in online discussions about text with students from other schools, other states, and even other countries. Computer-mediated discussions differ significantly from teacher-led and peer-led discussions because they are print based, have permanence, and take more time to produce (Wells, 1999). Wade and Fauske argued that CMD is a promising forum for fostering dialogue and discussion because technology is becoming increasingly interactive and collaborative. Many teachers believe that CMD can enhance learning for students who feel marginalized in classrooms. CMD has the potential to "enfranchise" all students in the classroom with "every student having a voice and engaging in dialogue with each and every other member" of the discussion group (Flores, 1990, p. 109).

What is important for us to acknowledge is that there are benefits that can be derived from all three modes of discussion. We know that, these days, peer-led discussion is getting more attention from teachers and researchers and that teachers are trying to talk less and to support children in engaging in peer-led discussions. Cazden (1997) cautioned us about the danger of sliding too easily into a
pendulum swing from teacher-led to student-led discussions—both have much to offer as students develop and emerge as active constructors of their own learning. However, while CMD adds to the opportunities available to students through discussions about text, we should acknowledge the benefits of varied forms of discussion—from teacher led and peer led to computer mediated.

Research insights about productive, engaging discussions of text

There is a substantial research base supporting the finding that student engagement in discussions about text results in improved reading comprehension, higher level thinking skills, and increased literacy motivation (Almasi, 1995; Almasi, McKeown, & Beck, 1996; Gambrell, 1996). As we plan and implement discussions in our classrooms, whether the discussions are teacher led, peer led, or computer mediated, research suggests that the following points are of particular importance:

* **Learning is in the talk.** Learning is enhanced when students have opportunities to talk about their ideas and to respond to the ideas of others (Mercer, 1993). Research by Kucan and Beck (2003) suggested that small-group discussion supports intellectual engagement with text. They concluded that in order for students to learn how to think at higher levels about text, they need to participate in conversations with others.

* **Providing opportunities for students to interact with one another and to challenge the ideas of others supports higher level thinking.** Lively discussions are sparked when students add to or challenge the comments of others. This type of exchange provides students with scaffolding for higher level thinking skills as they hear the comments of their peers, and it enables them to make similar attempts. Research conducted in fourth-grade classrooms by Almasi et al. (1996) found that students are more engaged in reading when provided with opportunities to respond to and challenge one another’s interpretations, challenge the author’s style, share their opinions about the text, and question the meaning of the text.

* **Providing students with opportunities to discuss both narrative and informational texts supports comprehension development.** Studies of elementary classrooms have not found evidence of widespread use of informational texts (Duke, 2000; Scharer, Peters, & Lehman, 1995). Even fewer studies have investigated how discussion influences the comprehension of informational texts. Both narrative and informational texts should be used for discussions so that students will develop understandings of both genres and be able to think critically about them. Research by Horowitz and Freeman (1995) revealed that children’s understanding of narrative and informational texts increased when given the opportunity to read and discuss them.

* **Interesting and relevant text enhances discussion.** The qualities of the text influence student participation in discussion. In a study conducted by Evans (2002) of fifth-grade students’ perceptions of discussion groups, students repeatedly said that reading a book they liked helped them participate in their discussion group. While students in the Evans study differed on what they considered to be a “good” book, they were in agreement that reading a book they liked helped them more fully participate in the discussion group. Allowing students to explore issues and ideas that are personally relevant enhances motivation. When students are provided with opportunities to decide what aspects of the text they want to talk about during a discussion, motivation and participation increase. Texts that are interesting and relevant enable students to take ownership of the discussion, resulting in increased engagement (Almasi, 1995).

* **Having a “bossy” group member influences participation in discussions.** In the Evans (2002) study, fifth-grade students reported that the presence of a bossy group member was a negative influence on their discussion group. Students indicated that being bossy was different from being a leader and that people in their group who were bossy tried
to take over their discussion. The students in the study described leaders as respectful, inclusive, and responsible, whereas a bossy member was described as one who "tells you what to do and how to do it" (p. 63). "They're always hogging everything and you can't get to say nothing because they talk too long" (p. 65). Evans reported that, when observing a group with a bossy member, she watched the other students struggle with how to respond and that, most often, students simply withdrew from the discussion and let the bossy member take control.

- Providing opportunities for students to ponder confusing aspects of text or to challenge the text improves reading comprehension. It is important that we create a classroom climate that values good reasoning over correct responses. A number of studies have investigated the value of discussions that focus on identifying and revealing conflicts between personal and textual ideas. Research on peer-led discussions (Almasi, 1995), Questioning the Author (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997), and book clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997) revealed that discussions that provide opportunities for students to ponder confusing aspects of text or to challenge the text help students "gain not only a deeper understanding and appreciation of text ideas, but also a deeper understanding of what it means to think about those ideas" (Kucan & Beck, 2003, p. 3).

Provide a nurturing environment for all types of discussion

We have discovered a great deal about the role of discussion in learning from text from research conducted on both teacher-led and student-led discussions. The emerging research on computer-mediated discussions will add to the themes and issues related to extended and connected discussions of text. Future research on small-group online discussions about text has the potential to add to our knowledge base about the relationship between discussion and text comprehension.

Regardless of whether teacher-led, peer-led, or computer-mediated discussions are being used in the classroom, or whether the classroom is rich in a combination of these discussion modes, the teacher will continue to play a significant role in providing a classroom climate that supports and nurtures student discussions and thinking about text.

References


