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Improving Comprehension Through Text Discussion: What Does the Research Say?

Michael L. Kamil, Ph.D. • August 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Engaging Text Discussion

Highlights

- Dr. Michael Kamil, chair of the Improving Adolescent Literacy practice guide, reviews the findings of a meta-analysis of empirical research on how text discussion impacts reading comprehension.
- “Efferent” (text-focused) discussions have more impact on student talk and reading comprehension than expressive (“afferent”) or critical/analytic approaches.
- Simply putting students into groups to talk is not enough to enhance comprehension and learning.
- The greatest effects of the efferent approach were for below-average and average ability students.

About the Interviewee

Michael L. Kamil is Professor of Education at Stanford University. He is a member of the Psychological Studies in Education Committee and is on the faculty of the Learning, Design, and Technology Program. He received his B. A. from Tulane University and his M.A. and Ph. D. from the University of Wisconsin.

Currently he serves as an advisor to the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program for the Department of Education. He also serves as chair of the research panel for the New York State English Language Arts Standards Revision. He is a member of the United States Steering Committee for the United States involvement in the 2009 administration of the Program in International Student Assessment (PISA). In addition he is a member of the Adolescent Literacy Advisory Board for the Alliance for Excellent Education.

He was a member of the National Reading Panel, chairing the subgroups on comprehension, technology, and teacher education and was a member of the RAND Corporation Reading Study Group, which produced the report *Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension*. He was also a member of the National Literacy Panel, synthesizing reading research on language minority students. He was Chair of the Planning Committee for the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading Framework. In addition, he was a member of the Carnegie Corporation Advisory Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy. He currently is a member of the Technical Advisory Committee for the Partnership for Accessible Reading Assessments. He also is Chair of the PREL Reading Advisory Panel.

He has recently served as the Chair of the group that produced *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices*, a practice guide from the Institute of Education Sciences. Other publications have included the *Handbooks of Reading Research*, Volumes I-III. Currently he is the lead editor for the forthcoming Volume IV. A volume on vocabulary instruction and one on early childhood professional development are in preparation.

Full Transcript

I'm Michael Kamil. I'm a Professor of Education at Stanford University, and I was chair of the committee that produced the Practice Guide Improving Adolescent Literacy.

One of the interesting features of the Practice Guide is that we have a recommendation that discussion around text ought to be a part of improving adolescent literacy. Most of the evidence for this comes from a meta-analysis that was performed by Karen Murphy, Ian Wilkinson, and their colleagues at Ohio State University. They looked at all of the research that they could find on text discussion and analyzed it to see what kinds of effects there were.

There were three separate approaches that were used in studying the effects of discussion on text. The first of these is called "efferent" discussion, and this is a term for Louise Rosenblatt, and it simply means that the text is the focus of the discussion, what is it that the text actually says. In that case, students are talking about and discussing what the specific meanings of the words and the phrases and the sentences and the images and so on in the text. Not necessarily what they feel about it, not necessarily what it means, but what does the text actually say.

The second, for literature folks, might presumably be afferent, which is Louise Rosenblatt's term. That's the opposite of efferent. But in fact because of the very different approaches that they found in the research, the people who wrote the meta-analysis decided to use the term 'expressive,' and expressive is much of the same. It's affective response. What did you think about the text? And it's the kind of thing that very often happens in classrooms. What's your reaction to this passage or to this novel or to this story?

The final one was a method that they termed critical analytic, and this is an approach to discussion where the intent of the discussion is to debate ideas. You interrogate the text. You ask about the author. You ask about the issues. The researchers found several interesting conclusions that were consistent across the research studies, the 42 studies that qualified for the meta-analysis. In these studies, there were very few approaches that increased literal or inferential comprehension or that improved critical thinking and reasoning. So, this is important because this isn't a guarantee that discussing text is going to improve comprehension or critical thinking.

The most surprising of the findings that the researchers found in their meta-analysis was that the most successful method was the efferent discussion that is the discussion about what the text actually says. This is where the students debate or talk about what the text actually said, not what it meant, not how they could use it, but what the text actually said. What was in the text. This is almost universally the opposite of what teachers are inclined to do. They tend to ask students how they like the text, how they felt about the text, or what they thought the text might do in terms of their daily lives and so on. But that's not useful unless students understand what's in the text, and I think that's the success of the efferent method is that it guarantees that students gets access to the meaning of the text before they talk about the uses to which they could put the text or whether they liked it or not.

Good readers don't need to do this, but in fact poor readers very often can't read the text any other way. If they discuss it, it clears up all sorts of things for them. In addition, they found that just simply putting students into groups was not sufficient to improve comprehension, that the type of discussion was very important, and that this isn't just simply a matter of getting students to sit with each other and do the kinds of things that they might be required to do in these various programs that are intended to stimulate discussion.

The biggest effect of discussion around text was actually for average and below-average students. This is one of the few methods that we come across in the educational research literature that doesn't give high-achieving students an extra advantage—the so called Matthew Effect, where high achieving students benefit even more than low achieving students. So, this has the potential to close the achievement gap at least with regard to comprehension around text.

Finally, the idea that this helps students who are average or below average, doesn't mean that you should use it only with those students. You need to have heterogeneous discussion groups in which students of all abilities are involved. This means that high-achieving students might actually organize their thoughts when

somebody asks them to explain something, but it also means that the average and below-average students are going to benefit from seeing what it is that people discuss when they understand the text without much difficulty.