Getting the Discussion Started

By Margaret G. McKeown and Isabel L. Beck

Although constructivism sounds deceptively simple in theory, many teachers encounter obstacles in creating constructivist classrooms. This constructivist approach to teaching literature gets students to do the talking and the thinking.

The notion of a constructivist classroom derives from the strongest instructional implication of what has been called the *cognitive revolution* (Gardner, 1985). That is, for effective learning to occur, students must construct their own knowledge and teachers must orient their instructional practices toward teaching for understanding. Instead of transmitting knowledge to students, the teacher becomes their guide and helper, assisting students to make their own connections. But as Courtney Cazden (1988) says about such visions, "It is easy to imagine [classrooms] in which ideas are explored rather than answers to teachers' test questions provided and evaluated. . . . Easy to imagine, but not easy to do" (p. 54).

Even teachers who examine their practice and shift toward a constructivist orientation encounter many obstacles along the way. Creating an environment in which students build their own knowledge is a much harder task than just asking questions and fielding answers. In fact, after hearing the variety and unpredictability of students' responses and needs in the classroom, we amended our notion of teachers as symphony conductors (Shulman, 1987) to one of teachers as air traffic controllers.

An Instructional Approach for Constructivist Classrooms

We have been working on a project for seven years that helps teachers engage students with text through an approach called Questioning the Author (QtA) (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997, 1998). This approach encourages students to consider authors as fallible human beings who may not be clear or complete in conveying their ideas; it engages students in a dialogue about the text. By challenging the notion of the author as authoritative voice, students more readily and enthusiastically grapple with the meaning of the text. Students respond to such teacher-posed queries as "What is the author trying to say?" and "What do you think the author means by that?"
We have worked with 30 teachers from grades 3 through 9 and have witnessed consistent results across classrooms. Teacher-dominated talk becomes dialogue shared between students and teachers, questions and answers become centered on meaning and ideas, teacher responses extend conversations and develop ideas, and students begin initiating their own questions and responding directly to their peers' contributions (Beck, McKeown, Worthy, Sandora, & Kucan, 1996; McKeown, Beck, & Sandora, 1996).

First Steps in Creating Constructivist Classrooms

We worked closely with teachers as they developed constructivist environments in their classrooms. We provided extensive ongoing support, observed lessons and provided feedback, gave demonstration lessons, and collaboratively analyzed transcripts of videotaped lessons and

planned lessons to consider specific problems as they arose. As we accumulated experience with teachers and their classrooms, we identified the components of a constructivist classroom.

Moving the Thinking to Students

The first two questions that we ask teachers are "Who's doing the talking?" and "Who's doing the thinking?" Teachers are often stunned to see how much they dominate the discourse in their classroom. Often teachers think that they are providing forums for discussion, but they tend to respond too readily when student responses are not immediate. As one teacher said after examining a transcript of her lesson before she began implementing QtA, "I was doing great. I answered all my own questions."

The issue is how to get the ball in the students' court and keep it there. To initiate a productive discussion of text, the teacher needs a focus and must help students direct attention toward that focus. By *focus* we mean something informal: What do you want students to glean from the text? What would you like students to be able to say at the dinner table if they are asked what they read about in school that day? For example, a focus in reading Mary Stolz's *Storm in the Night* (1988) might be understanding that Thomas's grand-father suspects that Thomas is secretly afraid of the storm and leads Thomas, in an affectionate way, to admit his fear and see that it's all right to be afraid.

Questions That Ignite Thinking

Teachers must identify places in the text that are key to building an understanding of the focus and then develop questions that initiate a discussion of these ideas. Questions that focus on the authors' ideas work better than questions that elicit facts and details. Talk that focuses on literal information is flat and static. For example:

Teacher: What did Philippe paint a picture of?
Andre: A parrot with a sun.
Jesse: The story that his mother told.
Teacher: The story his mother told. Now he's put a picture behind that story. And what startled him?
Donna: A tourist came up to him.
Teacher: Yes, a tourist came up to him; a tourist startled him. And what did this tourist want to do?
Roger: Buy his picture.

In contrast, questions that focus on figuring out what's going on allow readers to make connections. Teachers promote discussion by asking, "What's the author trying to say?" "What's this all about?" and "What's happening here?" For example:

Teacher: What do we see happening to Philippe here?
Amanda: A tourist came up and said he wants to buy the picture he painted. But he sort of surprised him.
Teacher: Surprised him? What's that about?
Amanda: It was the picture he painted for his mother as a present. He didn't know anyone would want to buy it. He wasn't trying to sell it.
Brett: He wants to give it to his mother, but he really wants money, too. He's poor, so he needs money.

Responses to open-ended questions are, of course, less predictable than responses to questions that ask, "Where does the story take place?" and "What is our character's name?" Preparing for a constructivist environment means that teachers must anticipate students' reactions and the obstacles that they might meet in trying to answer questions or articulate a text's ideas. Expect thinking, not eloquence.

A constructivist approach captures thinking in action, so responses may sound tentative, muddled, or fragmented. But that's good! The goal is to have students consider what's in a text and put their thoughts together, moving toward meaning as ideas accumulate. The teacher's role is to know what to expect but to be flexible. Provide room for the unexpected, the nascent thought, the diamond in the rough of an idea.

Handling Student Responses

After providing a focus and posing a question, the real crux of keeping the discussion going arrives: How to handle student responses—responses that may be half-formed, sparse, or off target. There are two danger areas that teachers must work to avoid. One is simply collecting students' comments—following students' responses with "OK, and what do you think? Anyone else have a comment?" These kinds of noncommittal rejoinders provide no focus for students to build on, but simply invite them to lengthen the list of ideas. Comments remain unconnected and scattered. The second danger is to simply take over the discussion, providing all the elaboration and connection for the students when their responses don't seem rich enough.

The toughest issue in developing a constructivist environment is to treat students' comments in such a way that they invite other students to extend and elaborate on them, moving the discussion forward in meaningful ways. We have identified techniques that seem especially productive for this purpose. The two that we see teachers use most often and most effectively are *marking* and *turning-back*. *Marking* spotlights a student's response and uses it to set a useful direction for further discussion. *Turning-back* reflects thinking back to the students.

Consider the following response in which a student, David, has identified an important theme in a story.

David: His mother just told him, "Go upstairs," and didn't say, "Oh, poor thing," or stop what she was doing. Now he's all worried again that he's really got some disease.

Teacher: David noticed that our character gets worried about this disease again when his mother doesn't pay attention to him. Why do you think that is?

Note how his teacher marked David's comment by characterizing it as something that David has noticed, paraphrased the comment, and posed a question that turned the idea back to students for further consideration.

The teacher used another technique, called *revoicing,* to paraphrase David's response. In revoicing a student's comment, the teacher repeats the gist of it, but transforms the language, perhaps making it more general or more sophisticated so that it is richer grist for the discussion mill. Here the teacher transforms David's description of the character's mother's reaction by saying that his mother "doesn't pay attention to him." This revoicing may prompt students to pick up on the connection between the character's concern about his health and his not getting enough attention.

Turning the discussion back to students is also a valuable way to encourage students to reconsider ideas that are not supported by the text. In such instances, a teacher might respond, "I'm not sure if that's what the author was getting at. Who can help us sort this out?" or "What did the author say to make you think that?"

Eliciting the kind of discussion that builds meaning requires more than simply asking students what else they have to say. Effective questions invite students to further discuss what is on the

table rather than to add an unrelated detail. For example, we find that teachers develop better opportunities for building meaning with such turn-backs as "Can we get a little more on that?" "What's that mean?" "How does that fit in here?" "What would give Laura that idea?" and "How does that strike you?"

The Teacher's Constructivist Stance

The teacher in a constructivist classroom works as hard as one who uses a recitation or lecture mode, but differently. The hard work goes toward focusing and eliciting student thinking rather than toward providing information. A classroom environment that elicits thinking must be one in which students feel safe enough to share their formative thoughts. One way that teachers can provide this environment is to *model* their own thinking process. For example, a teacher might open a discussion this way:

I read this, and I said, "Who are all these characters and why are they all going to this one place?" The author really has me confused here by starting the story this way.

Modeling demonstrates that the reading process is a dynamic, effortful one and that even experienced readers meet obstacles in understanding text. Students also learn that comprehending text requires collaboration between students and teacher; the teacher is not merely measuring students' mastery of the literature.

Finally, establishing constructivist classrooms takes practice. If students are truly to become active learners, then a constructivist approach is not something that teachers can pull out occasionally for novelty. Teachers and students have to develop active, constructive habits of mind. Constructivism must become part of the classroom culture; the eventual goal is to have students use this active process in reading on their own. In the words of a 5th grader reflecting on her experiences in a QtA classroom, "If you don't think about what you're reading and you just read, that's not reading. You're just looking at scribbles on a piece of paper" (McKeown & Beck, 1998, p. 124).

References

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Hamilton, R. L., & Kucan, L. (1997). *Questioning the author: An approach for enhancing student engagement with text.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Hamilton, R. L., & Kucan, L. (1998, Spring-Summer). Getting at the meaning: How to help students unpack difficult text. *American Educator, 22*(1–2), 66–71, 85.

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Worthy, J., Sandora, C., & Kucan, L. (1996). Questioning the author: A yearlong classroom implementation to engage students with text. *Elementary School Journal, 96*(4), 385–414.

Cazden, C. B. (1988). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Gardner, H. (1985). *The mind's new science: A history of the cognitive revolution.* New York: Basic Books.

McKeown, M. G., & Beck, I. L., (1998). Talking to an author: Readers taking charge of the reading process. In R. Calfee & N. Nelson (Eds.), *Yearbook for the National Society for the Study of Education: Vol. 97, No. 2. The reading-writing connection* (pp. 112–130). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.

McKeown, M. G., Beck, I. L., & Sandora, C. A. (1996). Questioning the author: An approach to developing meaningful classroom discourse. In M. G. Graves, B. M. Taylor, & P. van den Broek (Eds.), *The first R: Every child's right to read* (pp. 97–119). New York: Teachers College Press.

Shulman, L. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review, 57*(1), 1–22.

Stolz, M. (1988). *Storm in the night.* New York: Harper Collins.

Margaret G. McKeown (e-mail: mckeown@vms.cis.pitt.edu) is Research Scientist and **Isabel L. Beck** is Senior Scientist and Professor of Education for the University of Pittsburgh, 646 Learning Research and Development Center, Pittsburgh, PA 15260.