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Small Groups: A New Dimension in Learning

Peter Smagorinsky

In *A Place Called School*, John Goodlad (1984) describes the “flat” atmosphere in most classrooms, due to the ubiquitous “frontal” teaching style in which the teacher stands at the front of the class and talks, while the students listen, record, and repeat. This style, he says, has a dulling effect on adolescent minds, killing their spirit for learning and making school a lifeless experience. Goodlad recommends organizing classrooms to promote more student inquiry, making them active seekers of knowledge rather than passive receptacles of facts. This focus on inquiry was also among the central recommendations of the English Coalition that met in July 1987 to assess the teaching of English and consider its future directions. In response to the prescriptive recommendations of such recent critics as E. D. Hirsch (1987) and Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn (1987), coalition members, who came from diverse backgrounds, agreed to a platform calling for students to cultivate their intellectual curiosity, repudiating the notion that teaching involves imparting factual knowledge and that learning involves memorizing it.

One alternative to the traditional “frontal” teaching style is to incorporate small-group activities in our lessons. Many studies document the value of small groups in promoting learning in a variety of language arts areas, prompting students to develop new strategies, increase social interaction, and improve skills. George Hillocks, Jr. (1986) describes the highly successful “environmental” teaching mode that reduces lecture and teacher-led discussions and substitutes small-group, problem-centered activities designed to engage students in high-level interaction. The involvement inherent in small-group work would break the flat atmosphere of our classes and add

depth and dimension to our instruction. Small groups allow a greater range of students to participate in discussions, and to do so under less threatening conditions than whole-class discussions create. Without the judgment of a teacher and without the intimidation of twenty-five other students listening in, students feel more comfortable to participate and take risks in small groups. With activities designed to engage students in probing, challenging inquiry, small groups can help restore both social and intellectual vitality to our instruction.

Following are four ways to incorporate small-group activities into most literature units. They are by no means the only types of small-group activities an English teacher can use; Hillocks’ 1986 study, for instance, concerned only research on composition. Students can also work in small groups to conduct collaborative research, to write and produce short plays, to study vocabulary, to conduct panel discussions, and to accomplish a variety of other tasks. The four types of small-group activities I’ll discuss here all concern improving reading comprehension and fall in these categories: (1) introductory activities; (2) studying symbolic episodes; (3) synthesizing ideas within a literary unit; and (4) weaning students from teacher-dependence.

Introductory Activities

Students should explore a theme or concept from upcoming literature prior to reading. The establishment of a cognitive map to provide a framework for understanding is critical to comprehension, according to the authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, the research compendium of the Commission on Reading (1985). Small-group activities

can help students analyze the types of problems that come up in the literature and draw better on their own experiences to understand the reading. (See Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern 1987.)

For instance, let's say a class is going to study a series of stories dealing with conflict with authority. Such a unit might include such short stories as Bordon Deal's "Antaeus," Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," James Baldwin's "The Man Child," Daphne du Maurier's "The Old Man," Mary Lavin's "The Story of the Widow's Son," and Willa Cather's "The Sentimentality of William Tavener," plus a longer work such as Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, or *Death of a Salesman* or *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller. To prepare students for the problems presented in these works, a teacher could devise a series of scenarios that portray various characters coming in conflict with authority figures. (The idea of developing scenarios for small group study was suggested to us by Hillocks.) The scenarios should represent a range of conflicts which challenge students' values about how compliant one should be with seemingly unfair authority figures before violating the principles of conscience. Here is an activity that students can do in small groups as an introduction to a unit based on literature that concerns conflicts with authority:

Assignment: Each of the following scenarios involves an individual coming in conflict with an authority figure. In a small group of four students, read each one carefully. Then, as a group, rank the characters according to how much you admire them, putting a #1 by the scenario in which you admire the character's behavior the most, a #2 by the scenario in which you admire the character the second most, and so on. You must rank all five of the scenarios. [The scenarios, presented with considerable dramatic detail, involve a football player obeying his coach's demeaning orders, a girl refusing to do a history assignment she considers busy work, a soldier obeying dangerous orders that he knows are ill-conceived, a worker in a hardware store obeying her boss's orders given just to keep her busy, and a boy disobeying his parents to rendezvous with his girlfriend after hours. For examples of such scenarios, see Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern 1987; Smagorinsky and Gevinson in press; and Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter 1982.]

Ranking the characters will force students to identify which behaviors they feel are most appropriate under given circumstances. After analyzing these characters, students will be prepared to understand and evaluate the characters from the lit-

erature who find themselves in similar predicaments. The advantage of doing this activity in a small group, as opposed to having the whole class simply discuss them, is that more students can participate in the discussions, and that they can express themselves more candidly than they might under the pressure of addressing a group of twenty-five students and one adult.

Different small-group activities require different follow-ups. An activity such as this would not be collected and graded but would be followed by an all-class discussion in which the groups compare their decisions. The focus should be on what type of behavior is appropriate in response to different degrees of autocracy and on how to resolve conflicts with authority figures. In so doing, students not only judge the characters in the scenarios but bring their own experiences to bear on the problems that arise in the literature.

Studying Symbolic Episodes

Richard Wright's *Native Son* opens with an extraordinary scene in the Thomases' rundown apartment, in which a big black rat terrifies the family, finally being brutally cornered and crushed by Bigger. The scene is symbolic of Bigger's life in the ghetto, with the frightened, cornered, and hostile rat signifying Bigger, the equally frightened but more powerful Bigger representing white society, and the apartment standing for the ghetto. Paradoxically, Bigger represents his oppressors, illustrating Wright's belief that ruthlessness born of fear is a human, rather than white condition.

Many novels include a symbolic episode of this type, often represented in a dream or a vision. Small groups are an excellent forum for studying these brief scenes and determining how they represent the patterns that exist within the literature. Working independently of the teacher, but with peer help, students can break down the scene, identify its components and their relationships, and place it in the structure of the work as a whole. In a challenging assignment of this type, students can feel free to take more risks in the intimate confines of a small group than they would in the formal and forbidding atmosphere of a whole-class discussion. Students should do the assignment after they have analyzed the novel enough to get a grasp on the characters; it would be best, for instance, to save the opening passage from *Native Son* for a small-group activity half way through the

novel, since it wouldn't make much sense to students who had read little of the story.

The assignment should ask students to go beyond merely making a chart listing correlations. You might ask them to do the following:

Regard the opening scene of *Native Son* as a set of symbols representing the characters, conditions, and relationships that exist throughout the novel. Your task is to

- a. Identify the significant characters and incidents in the scene, and tell what they represent in the novel as a whole.
- b. Give specific examples from elsewhere in the novel that support the connections you make.
- c. Explain the ideas that Wright is trying to convey through the construction of this symbolic scene.

Whenever you give an assignment like this, be sure to provide the students with hard copy of their responsibilities, either by writing the assignment on the board or distributing it on paper. Unlike the introductory activity on conflict with authority, the product of this assignment should be collected and graded. A teacher can either ask all students to produce their own responses to the question, which will ensure greater participation, or collect one response from each group, which reduces the paper-grading load. The question can also serve as the basis for a follow-up discussion involving the whole class.

Synthesizing Ideas within a Literary Unit

A series of large-group discussions can give students a good understanding of different aspects of a novel or a series of stories. A good teacher can help students relate ideas from the stories during the discussions, but even under the best of circumstances students will benefit from some type of formal synthesis. A small-group activity can be a useful step in having students pull together key unit concepts on their own without explicit teacher guidance. If we are serious about developing critical thinking skills in our students, we must give them opportunities to make connections independent of direct teacher influence.

Let's say that students are studying protest literature, based on materials from the colonial rhetoric of Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and/or Thomas Paine; literature from the women's suffrage or ERA movements; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"; Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience"; writing from Eugene Debs or other socialist reformers; and a longer work,

such as Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Dee Brown's *Creek Mary's Blood*, George Orwell's *1984*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, or *Black Elk Speaks*. In order to help students compare and connect ideas from the different authors, students could get in small groups and study the relationships among the different works. They should have a specific assignment, possibly tied in with their composition assignments. For instance, they might be required to do one or more of the following:

1. Compare Thomas Paine to Patrick Henry in the following ways:
 - a. Their concepts of God and His attitude toward a revolution.
 - b. The conditions they identify that justify violence.
2. a. What distinction does Thoreau make between *men* and *non-men*? Generate an original hypothetical situation that might inspire protest and tell how each would act in the situation.
b. According to Thoreau, would Martin Luther King, Jr., be a man or a non-man? Explain your judgment.
3. What would Martin Luther King, Jr., have done in McMurphy's situation in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? In what ways would their actions be similar? How would they be different? (The same question could be posed for protagonists in the other longer works recommended.)

Answers to these questions, like the ones in which students analyze symbolic passages, are turned in for a grade and also serve as the basis for a follow-up discussion.

Weaning Students from Teacher-Dependence

A teacher can use small groups as a weaning stage between a teacher-led discussion of a process or concept and students' independent display of the mastery of the unit's lessons. (For a more detailed description of how to use small groups in this manner, see *The Dynamics of English Instruction*, 1971, by Hillocks, McCabe, and McCampbell.) For a unit on maturity, or coming of age, students might read Doris Lessing's "Through the Tunnel" and "A Sunrise on the Veld," Alice Munro's "The Red Dress," Irwin Shaw's "Peter Two," Richard Wright's "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," Nicolai Chukovski's "The Bridge," and Leslie Norris's "Shaving," with possible outside novels being Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* or Gordon Parks' *The Learning Tree*. The fundamental problem in analyzing coming of age in these stories is to

1. Define maturity
2. Identify key incidents that cause the character to mature
3. Identify characteristics that the character displays before the incidents that we can classify as immature according to our definition
4. Identify characteristics that the character displays after the incidents that we can classify as mature according to our definition
5. Explain how and why the character has changed in the story and of what benefit that change is

In all-class discussions, the teacher could lead students through the process of analyzing the characters' maturity, possibly using two or three stories to make sure that students understand how to go about such an analysis. (Of course, I am not suggesting that we can reduce literary analysis to such a simple formula; I would assume that good discussions would attend to other aspects of the stories as well.) The next stage would involve small-group analyses of one to three stories, depending on how soon the students grasp their interpretive responsibilities. Their task should be similar in structure to what the class had done under the teacher's direction, but now they are operating with greater autonomy. When the small-group analyses (which the teacher collects and grades and possibly follows up with whole-class discussions) indicate that the students are capable of working independently, they should analyze a story or novel entirely on their own, without the benefit of teacher or peer help. Thus, the small-group format has served as an intermediate stage between the teacher's direct instruction and the students' independent performance.

These four suggestions for small group activities can enliven literary study and help students

become more independent learners. They focus the classroom on the students and their own inquiry, lessening their reliance on the teacher and improving both their social and cognitive skills. Small groups do indeed add a new dimension to learning, one measured not only in research but in the improved ambience in our classrooms.

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