

Meaning Makers

Leading Book Discussions that Actually Work

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A book club where you don't even have to read the book? Sounds odd, but we promote our library's monthly book club for fourth and fifth graders as more of a social club, a place to make new friends.

We don't aim to improve reading comprehension; we don't even require kids to read the book (although that is encouraged!). We simply want kids to experience reading as a fun social activity.

Still, about two-thirds of our one-hour club meeting time is spent discussing the book. (Thanks to the generosity of our Friends of the Berkeley Public Library, we are able to give away copies of each book to our members, which numbers about twelve each year.)

It should go without saying, but we have learned that an engaging discussion actually is fun unto itself. In fact, it's better than simply hanging out. A wide range of personalities can be present and contribute. And over the course of the year, we become a community of inquiry—people who help each other learn.

It wasn't always this way.

Some things we did well from the start. For example, we have always given kids the opportunity to vote from a slate of books that we put together. We include icebreakers and book-related games.¹

Yet every year, as the school year progressed, kids seemed to disengage. Disruptive side conversations kept erupting. By April, kids would be crawling (literally!) on the floor under the tables. For lack of a better explanation, we called it spring fever and dismissed it as something that we couldn't control.

But we were wrong. How did we go from crawling under the table to deep engagement?

The Meaning Makers

An encounter with *The Meaning Makers* by Gordon Wells, emeritus professor of education at the University of California,

Santa Cruz, finally pointed us in the right direction.² In his book, he notes, "Unless students are given opportunities to formulate the sense they make of new topics in their own way, using their own words, an important means of gaining understanding is lost."³

Wells encourages teachers to see their role as collaborators in the learning process. Education is meant to be a process that helps kids create meaning out of their experiences of the world. Although he was talking about the classroom, his research seemed applicable to our book club. I began to understand that crawling under the table was a kid's way of saying that our book discussions' meaningfulness was wearing out as the year progressed. Were there ways we could give kids a bigger role in shaping the discussion?

Open-Ended Discussion Questions

The first step was to set some principles:

- Questions should have an infinite number of right answers.
- Questions should allow kids to be the experts; that is, allow them to talk from their own personal knowledge, opinion, and experiences.
- Avoid questions that appear to simply be testing kids on their recall of the text.

To give you a better idea, here is an example of a question we used in our earlier years. *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper is about Melody, a girl with incapacitating cerebral palsy;



no one realizes that she is actually brilliant. Then one day, a device allows her to “speak” for the first time.

Our original question was, “*What is a memory that Melody has of growing up before she was in fifth grade? What do you learn about her from that memory?*”

A better question would have been, “*If you had a friend who reminded you of Melody in some way, what was that person like?*”

The original question is reminiscent of a reading comprehension question from a school test. The discussion leader might even feel an urge to assess the correctness of an answer. The original question does give kids the freedom to choose which memory to talk about, but each memory is associated with a small range of answers that can be considered either correct or not correct/less correct.

Unfortunately, this type of question rewards only those kids who can get a correct answer. In contrast, when questions allow any kid to be as right as any other, kids realize that they cannot fail in a book discussion. This gives them courage and a voice. The improved question still asks kids to think about what they know about Melody without testing them on that knowledge.

Let Go of Control

In the past, we (the adult discussion leaders) never showed our discussion questions to the kids. We sometimes changed the order of the questions in keeping with the flow of the discussion. We sometimes allowed kids to ask their own questions when they naturally arose. Still, our place in control of the discussion was clear.

Now we have learned that letting go of all that control does not result in chaos. We still create a list of questions for initial guidance and perspective.

How has this improved discussion? Kids have more time to think about their answers. Shy kids have an easy way to participate; they can simply choose one of the questions and read

it aloud. And kids actually do ask their own questions, and those questions are very stimulating.

A Discussion of Peers

The Meaning Makers gave us one other crucial insight—adults should resist the urge to comment on every answer to every question.⁴

Adults do this all the time. Imagine this scenario. A teacher asks a question. A student gives an answer. The teacher responds by tacking on a comment that is intended to be supportive, such as “That’s a great answer!”

However, in doing so, adults set themselves up as the hub of the conversation. They become the authorities on whether the answer is good or bad. Our goal for our book club is to have a discussion where everyone feels equal. But in a true discussion of peers, there is, by definition, no one person at the center.

The Role of Adult Facilitators

What *is* the role of the adult discussion leaders? We do want to ensure that everyone has a chance to talk, especially the quieter kids. For this reason, we do call on kids who raise their hands, at least initially.

As the year goes on, however, we encourage the kid who posed the question to take the lead on choosing who will speak next. We have found that kids really do try to be fair, and we never have had a problem with kids only calling on their friends.

We only have two rules governing our meetings—make space for everyone (don’t monopolize the conversation) and connect your comment (or question) to other people’s comments. In other words, don’t go off on unrelated tangents. Our discussions are rich and fun, and we often run out of time.

And I am thankful, truly thankful, to be able to say that kids don’t crawl around under the tables any more. &

References

1. For more information about leading book clubs, see Desiree Webber and Sandy Shropshire, *The Kid’s Book Club: Lively Reading and Activities for Grades 1–3* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2001); and also Elizabeth Knowles and Martha Smith, *Talk About Books!: A Guide for Book Clubs, Literature Circles, and Discussion Groups, Grades 4–8* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).
2. Gordon Wells, *The Meaning Makers: Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn*, 2nd edition (Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters, 2009). This study (see page 170) is the original source for the statement: “The single most important

activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.” The report by Richard Anderson et al., “Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report on the Commission on Reading” (Urbana, IL: Center for the Study of Reading; Washington, DC: National Academy of Education, 1985), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED253865.pdf> references an article by Pearson and Gordon, but if one traces the sources back, one eventually lands on the first edition of Wells’s study.

3. Wells, *The Meaning Makers*, 310.
4. Wells, *The Meaning Makers*, 287.