

Grand Conversations in the Classroom
A Presentation for the 2009 National Reading Recovery &
K-6 Classroom Literacy Conference

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The Grand Conversation is an authentic student led conversation about a story where students ask the questions, discuss their thoughts and feelings, and make meaning as they talk about the story. Conversations are characterized by spontaneity rather than predictable questions. Teachers use stories to get students to think in different ways and to know the joy of reading and the gift of a story waiting to be unwrapped and explored, as students are whisked away to unimaginable places. Children learn that making meaning comes from within as they bring their knowledge and experiences to the story and learn from the knowledge and experiences of their peers.

Influential work in Grand Conversations includes that of Ralph Peterson and Maryann Eeds from Arizona State University who presented five beliefs and practices associated with using literature in the classroom (2007).

1. Story is an Exploration and Illumination of Life

- Access to new worlds
- Learn about other people and self
- Learn about feelings not experienced before (love, loneliness, belonging, alienation, hopelessness, hope)

2. Interpretation is a Transactional Process

- Develop our own interpretations
- Students have a say in choosing issues to talk about
- Understandings are transformed and become believable

3. Children are Makers of Meaning

- Owners of their thoughts, experts, and critics
- Learn that what they have to say is valued and that they are expected to have their own opinion
- Challenge of making reluctant participants visible in conversations

4. Collaboration is Essential

- Build meaning through what they bring to the story and what they take away from others
- Students learn from stories and reflection
- Teachers as learners and listeners

5. Dialogue is the best Pedagogy

- Allows for an active construction process
- Strengthens listening and speaking skills
- Respect for other viewpoints

Our Journey

Our journey of the grand conversation took place over a 5 week period. We visited a second grade class twice a week for 30-40 minutes each time.

Day 1: Explained the grand conversation to second grade students, gave a book talk on 5 stories and class voted on three stories they wanted to hear.

Day 2: *Henry's Freedom Box* is the true story of Henry Brown, who escaped slavery by mailing himself in a crate from the slave state of Virginia to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We gave students some background on the history of slavery, read the story, re-explained the grand conversation, and then had conversation with students about the story.

Day 3: Students participated in an oral retell of the story *Henry's Freedom Box*, completed literature logs (How would you feel if you were Henry?), and shared in our grand conversation.

Day 4: Read *Perfect the Pig*, the story of a pig that gets his wish to have wings and fly but afterwards is not treated so well by other animals and even a man who tries to take advantage of Perfect's unique abilities. Students participated in an oral retell, and completed consensus drawings for our consensus board (drew a scene of what they thought was the most important issue in the story to discuss).

Day 5: Viewed our consensus board drawings to determine how to begin our grand conversation, had our grand conversation.

Day 6: Completed literature logs to prepare for story *Mr. Peabody's Apples* (How do words hurt or help), read story, brief conversation. *Mr. Peabody's Apples* is the retelling of a Ukrainian tale where a young boy learns the damage that gossip and rumors can do.

Day 7: Reread *Mr. Peabody's Apples* through an interactive read aloud, retelling and summary.

Day 8: Completed a Life Lessons Chart whole group to determine story theme, grand conversation on what the lesson means to students.

We asked the classroom teacher if we had time to do another conversation with one more story. We chose the story *The Relatives Came*.

Day 9: Completed literature logs to prepare for story *The Relatives Came* (write about your relatives), read story, retell story. *The Relatives Came* describes the time when the relatives came up from Virginia to visit family and the feelings of warmth and closeness that came from the activities the family shared.

Day 10: Retell story *The Relatives Came*, completed sketch-to-stretch, grand conversation based on sketch-to stretch drawings.

What We Learned from Grand Conversations in the Second Grade

The purpose of our journey was to capture how grand conversations changed in a 2nd grade classroom over several weeks. Our goal was to make grand conversations the core of our meetings; to help students learn to simply talk about books. Through this experience we learned that before students engage in grand conversations we need to look at the following:

- Establish an atmosphere of trust and respect for students to openly share and listen to each other's ideas.
- Provide support for children interacting/sharing ideas.
- Allow students to decide which books to read.
- Encourage personal responses to the literature.
- Asking many questions during the discussion limits children's responses.

- Grand conversations need to be ongoing---put into practice from the beginning of the school year.
- Connect the books with events in children’s lives.
- The most natural way to respond to literature is by talking.

Tompkins (2007) suggested the following guidelines for having a grand conversation.

- Choose a story and this can be a teacher read aloud or students reading a story or part of a story.
- Get ready to have the conversation through activities such as quick writes, literature logs, consensus board, sketch-to-stretch, life lesson charts, and other activities that get students thinking about the story.
- Have a conversation by asking “Who would like to begin? or What did you think?” (Tompkins, 2007, p. 348). According to Tompkins teachers may find small group conversations helpful before whole group conversations if students are shy and hesitant to share in a large group setting. Teachers can use the activities above to start conversations as well. Allow students to share two or three comments so that others get a chance to share.
- Use questioning to direct students’ attention to important highlights that they may have missed in their conversation, which can include story theme, new perspectives, story structure, or author’s craft.
- Wrap up the conversation by summarizing, predicting (next chapter), making connections, or drawing conclusions.
- Reflect through literature logs (optional). This can be a place for students to make predictions for the next chapter.

Grand Conversation Strategies

We used the following strategies to prepare students for conversations. These activities should be considered a starting point and do not represent all of the strategies that can be used.

Literature logs (or reading logs) were used so that students could write their thoughts or feelings about characters, story topic, or plot.

Consensus board is a strategy to determine what should be discussed during the grand conversation. Older students write down thoughts and connections to a story and then share them with a small group with the objective of trying to come to a consensus as to which issues should be discussed during the conversation (Namba, n.d.). We adapted the strategy to use with younger learners. Each student drew a picture of what they thought was the most important issue that should be the topic of our conversation. They labeled their pictures. We grouped the pictures and glued them onto butcher paper and then added a label to categorize the pictures so that the students could see what they felt was most important and wanted to talk about. The category that had the most pictures was our first point of discussion.

Sketch-to-stretch is where students draw a symbolic representation of the story instead of a picture of the story. According to Tompkins (2007) students “focus on using symbols to represent what the story means to them. Students can use not only pictures but also words, colors, or shapes. (p. 286). Sketch-to-stretch can be a challenge with young students who are very literal and want to draw a picture of their favorite part of the story. Instead drawings should show what the story means to students. This might be something you practice together whole group first.

Life lessons chart developed by Drew (n.d.) can be used after reading to identify story theme and make personal connections to the theme. On a piece of chart or butcher paper write the story title at the top. Underneath write the heading “Theme” and together identify and write the theme or lesson the author wants the readers to understand. Some stories may have several themes so you may want to choose one at a time to analyze and use another piece of paper for another day. Next write the heading “Supporting Evidence from Story” and find and list under the heading all of the examples in the story that support this theme. Write the final heading underneath “So what? What does this theme mean to me? How does it relate to my life?” This is the part that can be used for your conversation. Ask students to share how the story connects to their lives. Maybe they or someone they know has experienced a similar situation. Maybe they have learned something new and can tell you how it will affect their lives.

Children's Literature Used for Grand Conversations

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Levine, E. (2007). *Henry's freedom box: A true story from the Underground Railroad*. New York: Scholastic Press.

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About the Presenters

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