

STUDENT-CENTERED DISCUSSION STRUCTURES  
IN THE SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

by

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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this action research project was to examine the effect of implementing frequent and structured student-centered discussions on student participation and engagement in those discussions. The project, which took place in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade Honors English class over a ten-week time frame during the first two months of the school year, implemented a variety of different discussion structures and connected activities, such as journal prewrites and post-discussion written reflections. Data sources included a six-question survey completed by all students during the first week of the school year, in-class journal entries from all students throughout the project, and videotaped discussions. Three overarching themes related to the research question emerged from the data: student opinions related to discussion structure were influenced by the status and gender of the student; explicit structure and consistently enforced discourse norms had a positive impact on the participation rate of lower status students; and providing students with opportunities to process their ideas in writing and then discuss those ideas in a small group lowered a student's affective filter and led to a richer dialogue between students than typically occurred in a larger discussion. Conclusions drawn from this action research project include the need to consider status discrepancies within the classroom when planning student-centered discussions and the benefits of implementing strategies such as journal writing and smaller-group discussions to lower students' affective filter and increase authentic student dialogue.

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## CHAPTER 1—PROBLEM STATEMENT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Context for the Research**

The focal classroom featured in this action research project was located in a racially diverse high school in a mid-sized, suburban western Washington city. The population of the surrounding community was heavily influenced by its proximity to a large military base. Consequently, the transitory nature of the student body has had a destabilizing influence on the school community as a whole. With many students entering and leaving the school frequently due to forced family military relocations, it becomes increasingly important to develop a supportive community within the classroom to help bridge the gaps in students' prior academic knowledge. Additionally, as many of the students in this school had received their prior education in different school districts all over the country, their academic needs were varied and complex. Because all new knowledge must be connected with prior knowledge (Zull, 2002), a wide variety in students' academic histories presents a challenge to educators. This challenge is compounded, moreover, in a classroom such as the one featured in this paper, where students with a wide variety of academic backgrounds still needed opportunities to coconstruct their learning in an active manner, utilize one another as resources, and provide the teacher with multiple methods by which to assess understanding and ability.

Providing students with multiple opportunities to engage in authentic, dialogic discussion can become an important step in creating the conditions that support this co-constructed learning (Alvermann et al., 1996; Applebee, Langer,

Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Hadjioannou, 2007; Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007).

This authentic, dialogic discussion does not come easily, however. In the secondary English language arts classroom, there are multiple forms of classroom discussion that can be utilized, and each discussion has a range of possibilities related to the size, structure, and purpose for that discussion. The participation style of the students and the teacher can also change depending on the purpose for and structure of the discussion (Parker, 2006; Parker & Hess, 2001). Participating in whole-class discussions at the secondary level can be intimidating for many students, as they are often unaccustomed to active verbal participation in traditional school settings (see, for example, Alvermann et al., 1996; Evans, Alvermann, & Anders, 1997; Graff, 2009; Maloch, 2002).

Additionally, teachers often find themselves feeling unprepared to utilize student-centered discussion practices in their classrooms (Fisher, 2011; Parker & Hess, 2001; Philpott, Clabough, McConkey, & Turner, 2011; Thein et al., 2007).

Within the focal classroom of this study, students participated in multiple Socratic-style seminar discussions with a central text and guiding questions. The general discourse occurring in this class outside of Socratic seminars also encouraged student responses and commentary throughout instruction; however, this discourse often occurred in a teacher-centered pattern, with students rarely responding directly to one another. This mirrors the majority of classrooms around the country, where the standard teacher-initiation, student-response, teacher-evaluation/feedback (I-R-E/F) style of classroom discourse remains the most commonly used form of talk in the secondary classroom (Enright, Torres-

Torretti, & Carreon, 2012; Graff, 2009; Parker & Hess, 2001; Parker, 2006).

Unfortunately, this specific structure does not often encourage students to build upon one another's comments, nor does it increase their ability to view one other as resources and coconstructors of knowledge and meaning (Beers & Probst, 2013; Freire & Shor, 1987; Wells & Arauz, 2006).

As students shift from a teacher-centered discourse style into Socratic seminars, they often continue to direct their comments toward the teacher rather than each other. Whole-class seminar discussions are also consistently dominated by a relatively small percentage of the class, with the majority of the participants only speaking when directly asked a question by the facilitating teacher (Maloch, 2002). In general, the most frequent discussion participants are white male students, while female students and students of color of either gender are less verbally active in discussions (Evans, 2002). The issue in my particular class was not as simple as the non-participants having nothing to say, however; written work these students produced demonstrated otherwise. Based on text-based journal responses which the students provided as an entrance-ticket to the seminar discussions, the majority of the students did, in fact, have ideas and opinions about the discussion materials. Additionally, students' post-discussion journal responses indicated that the less verbal participants often had well-developed opinions about the discussion topics. This apparent contradiction seemed to point directly to the process of engaging in a whole-class dialogic interaction as somehow inhibiting students' active verbal participation during class discussion. The pre- and postdiscussion journal writings that occurred in



this classroom were directly related to the need to assess and better understand student thinking and engagement around the central texts, especially in the event that many students did not verbally participate in the discussion (Dyment & O’Connell, 2010). Ultimately, in this particular classroom, there existed a clear disconnect between what many students wrote in their response journals and what they contributed to the whole-class verbal discussions.

What, then, were the conditions inhibiting so many students from participating in whole-class discussions? Why were so many students able to articulate in writing their ideas around the texts they read, yet unable or unwilling to actively engage in authentic student-to-student dialogue? The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in Grades 6-12* (CCSS) include six anchor standards in the “Speaking and Listening” strand which require students to demonstrate their ability to participate and engage in a variety of discussions, respond directly to one another, and increase their ability to consider multiple perspectives (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). It becomes increasingly difficult to assess each student against these standards accurately, however, when verbal participation is sparse and inconsistent. Quite frequently, students’ perceived engagement with literary texts and their subsequent participation in classroom discussion remains imbalanced, highlighting the complex relationship between the social and academic spheres of the classroom.

The motivation for this action research project grew directly out of a desire to investigate this complex relationship. As a student, my own history with

discussion-based learning environments included a mixture of a few positive and many negative experiences. Yet contemporary research and theories about learning overwhelmingly point to the clear academic benefits of authentic student talk and dialogic interactions in the classroom (Applebee et al., 2003; Hadjoannou, 2007; Langer, 1994). As a pre-service teacher, I was committed to making space for students to explore and grow through active participation in all facets of the classroom discourse. The challenge, as I saw it, was in encouraging students to take an active role in their learning without pushing them so far outside their comfort zones that the learning became inaccessible and daunting. In an attempt to find this balance, I sought to increase the frequency of all forms of student-centered discussions in the classroom, implementing a variety of structures and making the expectations for each style of discourse clear and explicit.

### **Literature Review**

In order to inform my understanding of the overall value of discussion-based approaches to teaching English language arts, I sought out previous research into the practice of increasing students' active verbal participation in the classroom. I utilized a combination of empirical research studies and published articles by noted scholars in the field of English language arts discourse, synthesizing their findings to create a foundation which supported my action research project. The following literature review is organized into two sections. The first section explores the potential positive academic benefits for students when student-centered discussions are utilized to increase opportunities for

authentic student talk. The second section identifies the challenges students and teachers may face when enacting that authentic student talk.

### **The Value of Student Talk**

Active and frequent participation in classroom discussions can provide opportunities for students to become the architects of their own understanding as well as the coconstructors of their learning process (Alvermann et al., 1996; Hadjioannou, 2007). The ideal discussion-based classroom community involves a space in which all students have not only a right to speak but also an obligation to support their ideas with reasoning and evidence when speaking, in order to help other students understand and critically examine their ideas (Cornelius & Herrenkohl, 2004; Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2007). Authentic discussion and a process of shared inquiry function as the antithesis of transmission-style instruction that traditionally posits the teacher as the keeper of all important knowledge (Freire & Shor, 1987; Hadjioannou, 2007; Louie, 2005; Parker & Hess, 2001). Increased ability to take on a new and different perspective, develop an empathetic response to literary characters, and practice equitable discourse techniques are a few of the hopeful outcomes of a discussion-rich classroom (Alvermann et al., 1996; Evans et al., 1997; Louie, 2005; Thein et al., 2007; Thein, Guise, & Sloan, 2011). Meaning in a text is not located solely in the words on the page, but is instead created in the “transaction with those words that takes place in the reader’s mind” (Beers & Probst, 2013, p. 34). The true value of reading, therefore, lies in providing students with the opportunity to authentically connect with and discuss the unique stories, characters, concepts,

and historical settings contained within a text (Langer, 1994). These authentic connections to texts are often made by students during a dialogic discussion, as they provide opportunities for spontaneous scaffolding by linking directly to students' prior knowledge (Applebee et al., 2003).

In a yearlong, multistate research study, Applebee and colleagues (2003) found discussion-based approaches to teaching, when combined with high curricular demands, resulted in increased academic performance for students regardless of school type or ability track. Data was collected from 64 classrooms in 19 schools across five states, and the sheer volume of the collected data increased the validity of the study's findings. Multiple quantitative measures were used during the data analysis phase to control for many possible extraneous variables, leading the researchers to make the confident conclusion that discussion-based approaches to teaching positively correlated with later student academic achievement levels. Pre- and posttests administered in the fall and spring indicated that all students who experienced some form of authentic discussion as a regular part of their classroom discourse exhibited increased academic performance at the end of the school year. While the gap between the achievement levels of high and low academic track students in this study persisted, the findings suggest a slight narrowing of that gap, as the students in the discussion-based, lower-track classes began to catch up with their higher-track counterparts (Applebee et al., 2003).

This study was particularly valuable to my research as many quality indicators are present and increase the overall validity of the findings. Because

there were so many variables within this study, the researchers attempted to control for each one individually and examine the results in as decontextualized a manner as possible. This was done to provide greater assurance that the increased academic achievement of the students was actually caused by the discussion-based teaching practices and not by an extraneous variable such as students' prior academic ability or school type. Researchers also made the limitations of the study clear, such as the fact that all of the classrooms were relatively traditional, teacher-led classrooms. In addition to addressing threats to internal validity, Applebee and colleagues also addressed threats to external validity by providing information about the study setting and participants in extreme detail. The thick description provided in this study increases the transferability of the findings from that context to another similar context.

As this study was designed to be intentionally large and encompass all forms of dialogic, discussion-based teaching practices, researchers did not specify which methods of student talk had the strongest positive impact on later student achievement levels. However, Applebee, et al. (2003) make an essential contribution to the existing literature by showing clear evidence to support the benefits of authentic student talk in low- and remedial-track classrooms. The findings of this study highlight the relative infrequencies of discussion-based teaching practices in lower-track classes. Considering all aspects of increased opportunity for authentic student talk correlated with higher academic achievement, it is especially important to utilize discussion practices in classrooms with higher proportions of struggling students.

## **Challenges to Enacting Authentic Student Talk**

One particular challenge to implementing authentic, student-centered discussion practices lies at the very heart of the shared inquiry model (Parker & Hess, 2001). As students work together in a joint process of meaning-making, their relative inexperience may make it difficult for them to challenge their own or others' interpretations and perspectives (Alvermann et al., 1996; Thein et al., 2011). Accustomed to relying on the teacher for frequent feedback, direction, and organization, students may grapple unsuccessfully with the shift from "recitation-style structure to one with decentralized patterns of interaction" (Maloch, 2002, p. 109). In addition, purely student-led discussions may exaggerate existing issues of social class, gender, status, and race, leading to a lack of authentic participation by marginalized group members and a perpetuation of the status quo in the verbal interactions between the students (Alvermann, Young, Green, & Wisenbaker, 1999; Cornelius & Herrenkohl, 2004; Hemmings, 2000). Without consistent teacher intervention and guidance, students often struggle to critically examine social justice issues within a text, as well as fail to attend to the same issues that may be occurring within their own small-group or whole-class discussions (Evans et al., 1997; Hemmings, 2000; Thein et al., 2011). Before students can effectively engage in classroom discussions, there is a need to establish clear and explicit expectations and norms within the speech community (see, for example, Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009; Hadjioannou, 2007; Kendrick, 2010; Maloch, 2002; Parker, 2006). Discussion in the secondary language arts classroom can take multiple forms, each with a different purpose and distinct set

of necessary procedures (Parker & Hess, 2001). The relevant procedures for each discussion type, therefore, must be explicitly scaffolded for students, particularly when working in the less-familiar format of student-led discussions (Cornelius & Herrenkohl, 2004; Maloch, 2002). Inexperience with student-centered discussion often leads students to rely heavily on the leadership of the teacher, as well as struggle to navigate disagreements and group-dynamic challenges which may arise (Evans et al., 1997; Maloch, 2002).

**Group discussion norms.** Evans, Alvermann, and Anders (1997), in their qualitative research study focusing on student-led discussion groups, found that “instruction needs to be designed that teaches and promotes collaboration” (p. 119), as students cannot be expected to adhere to group discussion norms if they are unclear of what those might be. The students in this study struggled to negotiate a situation in which those discussion norms were either broken or ignored altogether. Unfortunately, the results of this study suggest that “peer-led literature discussions often reinforce sexist stereotypes that the discussions are designed to interrupt” (p. 117), as the students were unable to critically examine their comments and the lack of a teacher-facilitator often resulted in gender and status conflicts between students. The researchers explore the idea that specific desired norms for participating in a group discussion are rarely explicitly taught in many traditional classroom settings, leading to an enactment of restrictive societal norms already in place in students’ lives. Evans and her colleagues suggest increasing opportunities for students to reflect on their own experiences

in group discussions as a vital first step in establishing a positive classroom discourse community (p.120).

Another powerful way teachers can counteract the challenges faced by students during group discussions is to provide students with multiple discussion tools to encourage critical, text-based responses. These tools include sentence-starters, an increased vocabulary for entering a discussion, methods of building upon another student's ideas, and ways to respectfully and critically disagree with one another (Alvermann et al., 1996; Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009; Michaels et al., 2007). Explicitly scaffolding the norms of classroom discussion through the use of modeled discussion tools can help students transition to effective group discussion practices that lead to a more equitable discourse (Evans et al., 1997; Hadjioannou, 2007; Louie, 2005; Maloch, 2002; Thein et al., 2011).

Teachers who are able to set up clear participatory norms and allow students to frequently engage in discussions provide rich opportunities for students to practice perspective-taking, engage one another in an authentic discourse, and take an intentional approach to the coconstruction of their knowledge (Alvermann et al., 1996; Hadjioannou, 2007; Kendrick, 2010; Louie, 2005; Thein et al., 2007). In a case study examining the conditions that most effectively led to authentic student discussion, Hadjioannou (2007) found six main environmental features that increased the quality and effectiveness of student-centered discussion: an intentional, well-planned physical set-up to the classroom; high curricular demands; strong teacher belief in the students; strong student belief in themselves; a positive relationship between the classroom



community members; and the presence of explicit norms guiding student participation. In a setting in which all of these environmental factors were present, student engagement and authentic discussion flourished. Within the boundaries of well-developed procedures and clear expectations, the students in this study were able to conduct completely student-led literature circles, often requiring very little direct teacher-facilitation. Students appeared comfortable with all classroom expectations and individual roles during collaborative activities, with specific acts of teacher discipline rarely necessary. While the findings of this study present a high-quality model for a novice teacher to aspire toward, the results of a case study with such a small participant sample size (a single classroom of twenty-four fifth-grade students) cannot be readily generalized to another setting. The classroom in this study had a relatively homogenous student demographic and included many students who had been with the same teacher for two consecutive years, thus further limiting the transferability of this particular outcome to a different setting (Hadjiioannou, 2007, p. 396). In order for authentic participation in student-centered discussion to become a reality within the classroom, the above research would strongly suggest that the expectations, norms, and procedures for all varieties of student-centered discussion be explicitly taught and consistently enforced.

**Gender norms.** Transcending implicit and explicit gender norms is, for adolescents, one of the most difficult aspects of classroom interaction to navigate during student-centered discussion (Alvermann et al, 1996; Clarke, 2006; Evans et al., 1997; Thein et al., 2011). Evans and colleagues (1997) found that female

students in mixed-gender discussion groups were often disempowered by male classmates who attempted to take their power away by preventing them from speaking altogether. Power, in these mixed-gender groups, was viewed as a fixed commodity that could only be transferred, not shared (p. 111). In stark contrast, female students in same-gender discussion groups appeared to view power as a sharable commodity, allowing all group members to exhibit different aspects of control at various times. Additionally, individual student silence itself was presented as a complex action, sometimes resulting from forced disempowerment at the hands of other group members, while at other times being the preferred participation style of the individual student in question (p. 112). This study, strengthened by its discourse-level analysis and follow-up interviews with focal students, exemplified the common perception of male students as discussion-dominators, while female students often took on a submissive role in these spaces.

Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) describe this phenomenon as the enactment of *social scripts* which determine what is gender-appropriate in a given context. As students enter high school, they become exposed to a much larger group of their peers, and this becomes a new stage on which to act out these gender norms. Students begin to differentiate their behavior early on, with the majority of girls becoming increasingly quiet and reserved while many boys enact more dominant, loud, and rambunctious attitudes. As girls move into adolescence, implicit and explicit gender cues encourage them to increasingly take on the role of the accommodating, passive student (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 100). In a

follow-up to her 1997 study, Evans (2002) found that the majority of problems experienced by the students in student-led discussion groups occurred in mixed-gender groups and predominantly fell along gender lines. One recurrent theme was the tendency for other students to label a girls' attempt at leadership in student-led dialogues as "bossy," stating that this had "a negative influence on their discussion group" (p. 6), while most boys that exhibited the same behavior were believed to be exhibiting leadership qualities. The girls in the study would often blame the boys' more confrontational and antagonistic behavior for their lack of participation in the discussions, while the boys would in turn claim the girls' lack of participation must be linked to a lack of academic preparation on their part. The students in general claimed to feel much more comfortable working in same-gender discussion groups.

While the students featured in this study were in the fifth grade, and therefore significantly younger than the tenth-grade students in the present action research project, the relevance of the findings is increased by the presence of multiple measures of qualitative research. Credibility and dependability were increased by the use of triangulated data sources, a nine-month data collection period, and an explicit method of discourse-level data analysis. The depth of detail provided about the study's participants as well as in the discourse analysis also increased the transferability of the findings. Evans' (2002) qualitative research study provides compelling insight into the ways in which students navigate gender norms in classroom discussion.

When students attempt to behave according to perceived expectations based on external categories such as gender, the difference between what students think internally and what they show externally can lead to an unpleasant cognitive dissonance for those students (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). The societal pressures of staying within the prescribed gender roles stands firmly at odds with what these students think and feel, causing students to allow only the socially acceptable parts of themselves into the classroom. This often leads to inauthentic interactions, preventing students from making true connections with each other and with the curriculum (p. 104). In the discussion-rich classroom, however, students are encouraged to engage in an authentic discourse style which requires them to move beyond the typical gendered definitions of acceptable participation. Far too often, without deliberate teacher-facilitation and continually reinforced discussion norms, student-centered discussions become a space in which restrictive gender identities are continually enforced and reinforced by the students (Clarke, 2006; Evans, 2002; Evans et al., 1997).

**Power and status.** Schools, like many other institutional settings, often serve to perpetrate the “perspectives of dominant groups and suppress or misrepresent the experiences of subordinated people” (Hemmings, 2000, p. 72). In order for truly collaborative, inquiry-based classroom discussions to flourish, Hemmings argued that social relations within these classroom spaces should strive to be as egalitarian as possible (p. 72). Although this attempt at equal-status interactions sounds good in theory, in practice it is often quite difficult to manifest. In a case study exploring the classroom experiences of two veteran

teachers enacting their own versions of a democratic classroom dialogue, Hemmings (2000) highlighted an example of how these democratic practices can fail to produce the desired results. In an honors U.S. history course at a large, racially diverse public magnet high school, the focal teacher, Dr. Marshall, was successful in implementing lively and passionate student-led discussions and debates that centered directly on the course materials. However, these discussions were almost exclusively dominated by the high-status students in the class, without any direct intervention by the teacher. Although the White, middle-class students were the numerical minority in this classroom, they maintained the highest positions of social status in the school. This status hierarchy played out in Dr. Marshall's classroom, despite the fact that his version of a student-centered democratic classroom dialogue was originally intended to empower all of his students and encourage active participation by all (Hemmings, 2000, p. 79). Preexisting beliefs about status and the power tied to social-class positions were deeply engrained in the students and appeared to transcend a single teacher's attempts to deconstruct them within the classroom discourse. Rather, the researcher suggested that Dr. Marshall's teaching practices were somehow responsible for increasing the power and status of the already privileged students in his classroom (p. 88). While the results of this case study cannot be directly applied to another context due to the limited participant size, the experiences of a well-meaning, veteran teacher provide a cautionary example of the ways in which unaddressed issues of status and power can impact the experience of discussion-based teaching practices.

## Research Question

The aim of this action research project was to look beyond the surface of the classroom discourse to explore the underlying issues that might contribute to a lack of consistent student participation during classroom discussions.

Restrictive gender norms, unclear discussion expectations, and student familiarity with teacher-centered instructional practices are all aspects of the secondary English language arts classroom that prevent many students from confidently participating in an authentic discourse in group discussions (Alvermann et al., 1999; Alvermann et al., 1996; Clarke, 2006; Evans, 2002; Evans et al., 1997; Maloch, 2002; Thein et al., 2007; Thein et al., 2011).

However, in the era of the Common Core State Standards, there is more official emphasis than ever before on a student's ability to "initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions...building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (CCSS, 2010, p. 48).

Unfortunately, poor discussion structures and inauthentic or sparse participation can prevent classroom discussions from leading to the autonomy-supportive, shared-inquiry process many would hope for (Hemmings, 2000; Thein et al., 2011).

In a classroom community that seeks to empower students to become active participants in their own education, students need to feel safe and confident enough to make the transition from putting their ideas and opinions on paper and speaking those words out loud during a classroom discussion. In light of the challenges students face when attempting to take this important and

difficult step, this action research project sought to explore the following question:  
How does providing students with frequent opportunities to engage in discussion within specified structures affect student participation in classroom discussions in the secondary English language arts classroom?

## CHAPTER 2—METHODS

### **Community and School**

Cedar Valley High School<sup>1</sup> was located in a rapidly expanding suburban city in the Pacific Northwest. Just to the northeast of the city was a reservation belonging to a federally-recognized local native tribe. The city also had a significant military population due to its proximity to a large military base, and this gave a somewhat fluid identity to the community, as many families move in and out of the community as a result of required military relocations. The neighborhoods immediately surrounding the school were some of the oldest in the city, with overall lower property values than other, more-affluent parts of the city. Newer housing developments with higher-value homes had been constructed on the edges of the city limits over the past decade, and the school's population rose to over 1,100 students for the first time in school history as of the 2012/2013 school year (per district website).

The high school itself was built in 1994, with an open-concept floor plan that included multiple buildings situated around a central building that housed the library and administrative offices. Four nearly-identical buildings were set around the central building, and each one held ten general classrooms, two computer labs, and an open commons area. The open design of the school reduced the cramped, crowded feeling that often exists in many high schools. During the course of the study, groups of students were often seen moving about the campus freely, even during scheduled class times.

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<sup>1</sup> All names of participants and places have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.



## **Student Demographics**

According to a 2012-13 performance report located on the school's website, of the 1,120 students enrolled in the school, 40.7% were eligible for free or reduced lunch, which indicated the overall lower socioeconomic status (SES) of the surrounding community. There were no documented English language learners (ELL) in the school, as the school did not have the resources to support their needs, and all ELLs were instead enrolled in a high school approximately five miles away. The district website reported that 2% of the student body were labeled as *transitional bilingual*. The racial demographics of the school were reported to be 50.1% European American, 15.4% Hispanic, 12.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 10.3% two or more races, 10.1% Asian American, 9.4% African American, and 2.9% American Indian. This high level of racial and ethnic diversity resulted in a school that was, according to one of the vice principals, "still trying to find our true identity as a school and a community."

## **Study Participants**

The focal classroom in this study was a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade English language arts course. The school included two tracks for 10<sup>th</sup>-grade English—standard and Honors—and the class featured in this study was an Honors-track class. The class enrollment of thirty-two students sat right at the allowable capacity for the district. There were nineteen female and thirteen male students, with one male student having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) due to ADHD and one female student with a 504 plan for social anxiety and panic disorder. The racial, ethnic, and gender demographics of the class were not accurately representative

of the wider school population, with a significantly higher percentage of European American students and a significantly lower percentage of African American and Native American students than the school as a whole.

The classroom itself was relatively spacious, with plenty of room for students to move around, even with the class at full capacity. The students sat in groups of four at large rectangular tables. The tables themselves were arranged in a wide rectangle toward the outer walls, leaving a large open space in the middle of the room. A smaller, square table sat in the very center of the room, and this table was often used as a place where students could turn in work at the end of the period and where the milk crate with their class folders and notebooks sat during the period. Having four-student tables rather than individual desks encouraged frequent collaborative activities, yet made a true circle arrangement during a seminar discussion quite challenging. In addition to the eight large tables, three additional office-style desks sat against two of the side walls. These desks were available for use by classroom T.A.s, but were also available for other students to sit in if they were in need of additional space for any reason. There was a strong sense of respect for students' personal autonomy and physical space in this classroom, with students self-regulating their bathroom trips and having the freedom to move about the classroom during almost any point during the class period. The classroom also included overflowing bookshelves filled with the classroom teacher's own personal collection of literary texts as well as instructional teaching guides and informational texts. The walls were decorated with literary-themed posters, postcards sent by former students,

and student-created visual projects and posters. The front of the room had a double-length white board that stretched almost entirely from one side of the room to the other, and the teacher's computer and desk were against that wall as well. While this technically served as the front of the classroom, the arrangement of the students' tables made it so that a number of students had their backs to the front of the room. However, the large open space in the middle of the room allowed me to move about while instructing, utilizing the entire space more than just standing at the front of the room. There was also a large indoor commons area located just outside the door to the classroom, and groups of students often requested to work out there during collaborative groupwork time when the noise level in the classroom was higher than normal.

### **Teacher Practice: Student-Centered Discussion**

The focus of this action research project was to provide weekly opportunities for students to engage in student-centered discussions around a focal text and guiding questions. These discussions, occurring approximately once per week, included explicitly addressed norms and discourse patterns, such as looking toward the person who is speaking, referring back to the text when supporting one's opinions, and attempting to build upon one another's ideas when speaking to create a coherent dialogue rather than a series of disjointed comments. These norms were introduced to the students over the first two weeks of the school year, and they were continually reinforced during the discussions. Most of the discussions included a prewriting exercise as well as a post-discussion reflective journal response. One of the possible academic benefits of

student-centered discussion practices is an increase in students' engagement with text; however, there are challenges that must also be addressed before this academic benefit can be realized for all students. Some of these challenges include student and teacher lack of experience with student-centered discussions, oppressive gender norms, students' perceived status discrepancies, and a lack of proper scaffolding for student literary engagement and understanding. The discussions I implemented were of a structured nature, yet that structure varied depending on the context of the discussion. Overall, the majority of the discussions included a prewrite designed to give students an opportunity to gather their thoughts before joining the active discourse, a written post-discussion reflection that served to reinforce their understandings and ideas, and explicit norms and guidelines intended to increase the comfort level and lower the affective filter for everyone involved (Cohen & Lotan, 2014). There were also a few spontaneous whole-class discussions that occurred as the class became more comfortable with each other and with my teaching style. These discussions occurred after journal writing activities that often served as warm-ups at the beginning of each class period.

### **Discussion Structures**

Three distinct structures for discussion were utilized over the course of the two months of this study: formal seminar discussions including either the entire class or half of the class at a time, smaller group discussions of between six and

eight students, and discussions at individual table groups of three to five students.

**Discussion at table groups.** These less-formal discussions happened often throughout the quarter, including during weeks two, three, four, and seven. The structure of these discussions was essentially the same in all instances. First, students would respond in writing to a given prompt in their classroom journals at the start of the class period. The prompt would be displayed on the white board at the front of the room, and the time allocated for writing was typically between four and eight minutes. Students would then be given around five minutes to go around their table group and share what they had written with the other members of their group. After each student had a chance to share with their table group, a few students would be selected at random to share out with the whole class. Random selection was accomplished by using numbered Popsicle sticks to select one of the eight tables in the room, and a second set of Popsicle sticks with colors corresponding to each of the four seats at the table was then used to determine which student at the group would share. Any student that was called on had the opportunity to share what they had written about or what someone else at their table had shared with the group, and if they chose to talk about what someone else had said they were to give that student credit for their ideas. After a few students had been called on to share, I would open the discussion up for any student in the room that wanted to expand on what had already been said. Students were not awarded participation points for engaging in these discussions; rather, they received a small amount of daily participation

credit for the journal writing and the table group discussions were considered a normal part of the classroom discourse.

**Small, structured group discussions.** There were two instances of semi-formal discussion, taking place during weeks five and six, in which students were working in groups larger than their regular table groups but smaller than a formal seminar group. In the first instance, the students worked first in pairs and then each pair joined three other pairs to make a group of eight students. Each pair was responsible for sharing out specific information they had collected together, and after all four pairs had a chance to share with the group, the group of eight was asked to discuss all of the information as a whole and determine whether there were any disagreements or alternate interpretations. Rather than a pre- and postdiscussion journal tied to this discussion as in other weeks, the writing associated with this activity was done in a graphic organizer that then became a resource for the students throughout the remainder of their work with *Macbeth* (see Appendix B). Similar to the table group discussions, students did not receive numerical credit for participating in this group activity and discussion. They received full credit for completing the graphic organizer and were encouraged to view the collaborative element of this lesson as beneficial for their learning and the learning of their classmates.

The following week, students selected from three text-based prompts and wrote an in-class journal response to their chosen prompt. After the writing exercise, students were moved into groups of between six and eight based on which prompt they had chosen to respond to. This discussion had a less-rigid

structure than the previous week, and the instructions given to the students were minimal. They were told that this smaller discussion was designed to be a warm-up for the formal seminar discussion they would be having the following day, and were then given approximately twenty minutes for the discussion portion of the lesson. They were still instructed to follow the basic discourse norms for a group discussion, including making eye contact with the person speaking, building off of one another's comments, and making space for every student to actively participate in the dialogue.

**Formal seminar discussions.** Formal seminar discussions occurred twice during the quarter, during weeks four and six. In week four, students read a provided article about the representation of gender in literature and then did a quick journal write exploring the modern representation of women in media and literature, connecting these concepts to *Macbeth* when possible. After they had some ideas on paper, they moved into a large circle for their first formal seminar discussion of the year. Sentence starters such as, "(Name), I agree with you because..." and "(Name), can you say more about..." were provided on the document camera to help scaffold the desired discourse in this type of discussion. To open the discussion, all students were given an opportunity to make an opening statement related to the journal prompt or the article they had just read. After we had gone once around the circle (with students either commenting or electing to pass), the discussion was open for anyone to contribute. Students were encouraged to connect their comments to the ones previously made by other students. When there was around ten minutes left in

the class period, students that had yet to make a comment at any point in the discussion were given one last opportunity to make a closing statement, as they were all aware that full participation credit for the discussion portion of this lesson required making at least one comment during the discussion. Students were then asked to complete a brief reflection on the discussion as homework that night, assessing their own participation relative to the goals they had set for themselves prior to the discussion and writing about at least one thing someone else in the group said that either changed or challenged their own thinking.

The second formal seminar, during week six, had a similar structure to the first, yet with a few key changes. Students again completed a pre-discussion journal write, as well as the aforementioned less-formal smaller-group discussion the day before the seminar. Another important change was that I elected to use an inside/outside structure for the seminar rather than having all thirty-two students attempting to sit in one large circle. Within the first group, students were again given the option to make an opening statement related to the journal write or small-group discussion from the previous day. After one time around the circle, the open discussion portion of the seminar went for about fifteen minutes, and during this time, the students seated outside of the seminar circle were instructed to write at least one thing they heard during the discussion that they would have liked to have commented on and one thing they heard that was something they had not yet considered. After fifteen minutes, the groups switched places. Rather than giving the second group a chance to make any opening statements, they were asked to jump right into an open conversation, as they had the benefit of



having listened to their classmates' discussion already. When there were a few minutes left in the class period, the second group was given the opportunity to make final statements to ensure all students had an opportunity to talk and receive full credit for the discussion. The second outside circle, like the first, was to write to the same two things in their journals during the second half of the discussion. In the case of both formal seminar discussions, students were aware the total combined point value was higher for the pre- and postdiscussion writing activities (15 points for each for a total of 30 points) than for verbally participating in the discussion itself (15 points). This scoring structure allowed students to receive 30 out of 45 possible points without actually speaking in the discussion, as long as they were present in class and respectfully attending to their classmates during the discussion. This was done in an attempt to lower the affective filter for the students that felt additional stress at the thought of 'required participation.'

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data was collected over seven weeks during the first quarter of the school year. Planned seminar discussions were implemented on two occasions, with related writing opportunities connected to each one. Additionally, other less-formal yet still explicitly structured discussions occurred throughout the duration of the study. Six-question surveys were administered to the 30 students that were enrolled in this class during the first week of school (see Appendix A). Data from pre- and postdiscussion writing exercises and videotaped classroom discussions were collected from all 32 students throughout six weeks of the

school year, as the students worked with their first full-length text, William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. This data collection concluded just before the end of the first-quarter grading period, as the students completed their work with the play. The week-by-week breakdown of the data collection is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Data Collection Chart*

Data Source	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7
Student Journals		X	X	X		X	X
Videotaped Discussion				X	X	X	X
Survey	X						

**Survey**

A six-question survey was administered to each student during week one (see Appendix A). The survey was used to gather information about students’ prior experience with classroom discussion, their beliefs about whether or not all students’ voices were valued during class discussions, and what specific things they thought might help more students feel comfortable engaging in those discussions. These surveys were handed out on the third day of the school year and students were given as much time as they needed to fill the surveys out by hand during class.

During data analysis and coding, particular attention was paid to survey questions 3, 4, and 5:

3. What might help all students feel more comfortable in class discussions?
4. Have you ever participated in a class discussion that you thought went really well? What worked well about it?
5. During whole-class discussions, do you feel like all voices are valued and listened to? Are some voices valued more than others?

Student answers to these questions were analyzed and coded using a constructivist approach, letting the themes emerge from the data during the analysis process (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Mertens, 2010). Student responses to the survey questions were conceptualized and given a code that encompassed the overall meaning in the response. The coded responses were then put into categories that allowed for comparisons of the data in different grouping methods, such as by gender and status. I was also able to look for common themes that showed up across multiple data sources, as the codes and conceptual categories were similar across all data sources.

### **Videotaped Class Discussions**

I videotaped two formal seminar discussions as well as three less-formal class discussions that occurred throughout the quarter. Relevant portions of these videos were transcribed and the comments were coded and categorized (Mertens, 2010). These videos provided a data source to track student participation quantity and type in these discussions. This data source helped me understand and consider how the students were verbally relating to one another,

who was talking, when they were talking, and how often they talked. I was also able to track student participation during discussion and relate it to other elements of the lesson, such as the specific structure of the discussion and the connected writing activities.

During data analysis, particularly relevant segments of the discussions were identified and transcribed, and the data from these transcriptions were coded and categorized (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Mertens, 2010). Data transcriptions were analyzed at the discourse level and coded using a constructivist approach (Mertens, 2010). I allowed the themes within the data to emerge and continued to refine the categories as I moved through the data-analysis phase. When appropriate, both student and teacher comments during the discussion were coded and categorized, with attention to specifics such as who was doing the talking and at what phase of the discussion their comments occurred. As the physical structure of each discussion was unique, each discussion was analyzed independently. Many of the same codes and categories were used across all five videos, however, to allow for greater comparison across structures to identify common themes and key differences. Videotaping and then transcribing portions of the discussions provided a more reliable data source related to the discussions than relying only on my memory and research journal.

### **Student Journal Writing**

Journal responses were collected from all of the students in the class. This data source included responses to prediscussion prompts as well as postdiscussion reflective writing. The discussion prewrites involved text-based

questions that were designed to stimulate student ideas around an overarching concept. These prewrites occurred on five occasions during weeks two, three, four, six, and seven. The postdiscussion reflections, occurring only after the formal seminar discussions during weeks four and six, asked the students to consider how their ideas may have been confirmed or changed through the process of engaging in the discussion, how they would evaluate their own participation in the discussion, and what they would like to focus on to improve their experience and participation the next time. Students were also required to indicate at least one specific comment a classmate had made during the discussion that they found particularly interesting and give credit to their classmate by name.

Data collected from student journal responses provided a method for including the entire class in the analysis process to look for patterns that may have occurred throughout the class. I was also able to draw connections between individual student journal responses and that particular student's participation (or lack of participation) in subsequent discussions.

As with the transcribed segments of the videotaped discussions, student journal responses were analyzed, coded, and categorized to search for common themes and unique student experiences (Anderson et al., 2007; Mertens, 2010). To make the quantity of data manageable, student responses were given short codes that conceptualized their response and allowed me to create workable categories for the data. For example, in response to the prompt, "What helps you feel comfortable participating in class discussions?" the response, "People being

open and accepting of what I have to say” was coded as Respect for Others (RFO). Any response coded as RFO was eventually put into the larger category Positive Environment (PE). Finally, defining characteristics of each category were explored to help give each category meaning. Common themes in student responses that were placed in the Positive Environment category included a feeling of respect, a lack of judgment, and a high knowledge of their fellow classmates. Analyzing students’ written work in this manner provided a method for going beyond what a student was able to contribute to the discussion itself and allowed me to get further into their ideas and thoughts, as well as explore the larger social and environmental aspects of the classroom that might be impacting their participation level and style. This data was especially important as a means of hearing from the students who were not active verbal participants during the discussion, as the videotaped discussions only provided student comments from those who verbally participated. Collecting, categorizing, and coding the data from student journals also linked students’ internal thoughts with their external behavior and participation during the discussions.

### **Research Journal**

Throughout the data collection process, I kept a reflective research journal in which I documented my observations and developing interpretations. This journal was particularly valuable for documenting what transpired during lessons in which the discussions occurred within table groups, as those lessons were not videotaped. Additionally, some videotaped discussions which occurred in smaller groups only feature audible comments from the groups seated nearest the video

camera, which made my documented observations written immediately after school an invaluable resource to refer back to during the data analysis phase of this project.

An example of an entry from the second time I had students respond to a journal prompt, talk at their tables, and then had a few students share out to the whole group reads, “When we did the table sharing, I let it go four minutes rather than two because they were so into it! During the whole group share-out time, I took volunteers first and then never even needed to use the Popsicle sticks to call on students because they kept volunteering! They just wanted to talk and talk. They were even building off of one another’s comments!” This research journal was also used as a place to record my thoughts and observations relative to the overall research question and the developing environment of the classroom.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

As the study featured a smaller participant size over a short (seven-week) time frame, I provided a high level of descriptive detail about the classroom, the participants, the relevant guiding questions, and the various discussion structures that were utilized throughout the study. This level of detail allows the reader to assess the transferability of the findings to a different context. Data from videotaped discussions was analyzed at the discourse level, with attention paid to the words of the participants as well as the context in which they were written or spoken. This style of analysis provided a more holistic interpretation of the

context in which the class discussions occurred and gave insight into how that context might have impacted the verbal participation of the students.

Collecting data from students' own written journals and survey responses also increased the credibility of my interpretations of the discussions as the practitioner researcher by providing the students with an opportunity to put the experiences into their own words. These journals gave the students a space to provide their own explanation and interpretation of their experience during the discussions. I also engaged in formal peer debriefing during the coding and analysis phase of this action research project, which further increased the credibility and dependability of my findings and interpretations of the data.

Throughout the data collection process, I kept a research journal to explicitly document any changes in my ideas about what was happening in the classroom. I continued to add to this research journal throughout the data analysis phase, and this process of memoing increased the confirmability of the findings and interpretation of the data.

Some aspects of this action research project lessened the credibility and dependability of the findings. There were limited opportunities to gather data, as the formal seminar discussions occurred on only two occasions over a six-week period. Students wrote in their classroom journals on many occasions, but those journal responses were only directly tied to any form of classroom discussion larger than four-student table groups on six occasions. While the table group discussions were an effective way to increase student engagement and provide them with additional time to talk through their ideas, it was not always feasible to



videotape students during these discussions, and as the classroom teacher I was typically engaged in other teacher responsibilities during this time and therefore unable to take detailed notes about these conversations. The limited time frame and data collection opportunities within this project both negatively impacted the credibility of these findings.

Another limiting factor that affected the credibility of my findings was that none of the data sources in this study allowed me to collect data from students anonymously. Two of the data sources—student surveys and journal entries—were completed as in-class activities and students received participation points for them. As their answers to the questions were not anonymous, students may have been inclined to respond in ways they thought were favorable to their academic standing.

Additionally, the study will feature only tenth-grade Honors students during the first and second months of the school year as they work with a single play, William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. These factors decreased the transferability of these findings, as they would be difficult to transfer to a different context.

## CHAPTER 3—FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

### Findings

The aim of this action research project was to explore the effect on student engagement and verbal participation in class discussions through the implementation of a number of unique discussion structures. Three overarching themes related to my research question emerged during the data analysis process as I analyzed student survey responses, in-class journal responses, and videotaped classroom discussions. The following themes were initially present in students' survey responses and were then reinforced throughout the remaining data sources.

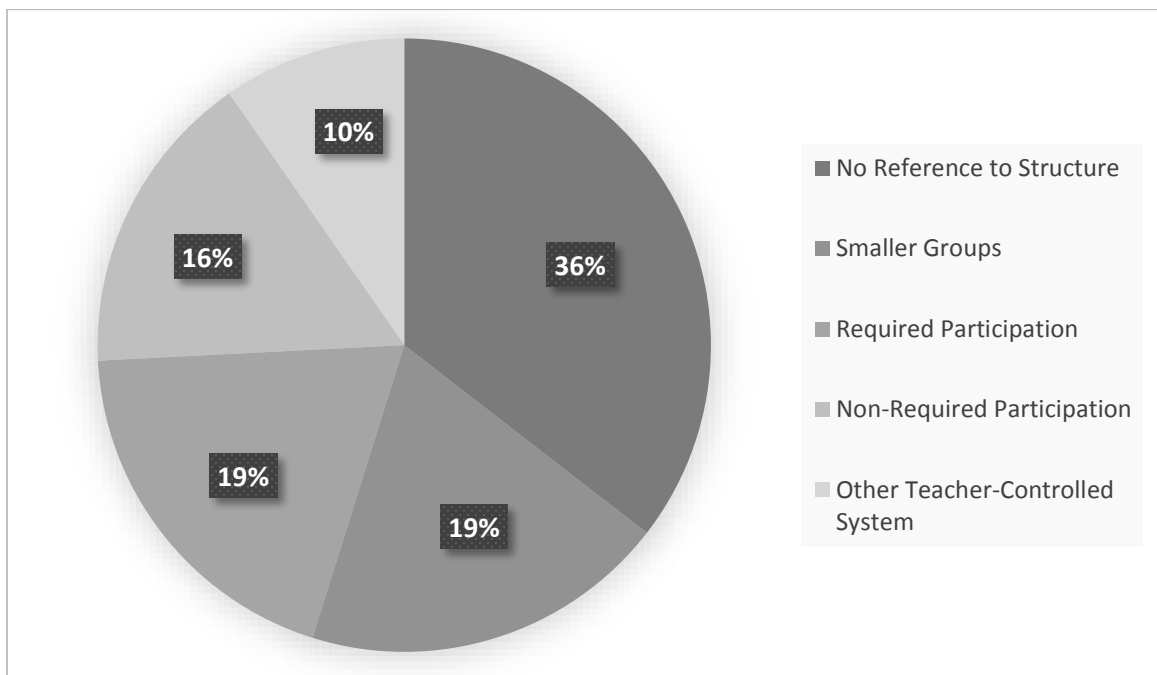
- 1) Student opinions related to discussion structure were influenced by the status and gender of the student.
- 2) Explicit structure and consistently enforced discourse norms had a positive impact on the participation rate of lower-status students.
- 3) Providing students with opportunities to process their ideas in writing and then discuss those ideas in a small group lowered a student's affective filter and led to a richer dialogue between students than typically occurred in a larger discussion.

#### **Discussion Structure, Student Status, and Gender**

The initial theme to emerge from the data was that students had widely varied opinions about the influence and benefits of particular structures on classroom discussions. While I never specifically asked students to state their preferred discussion structure, information related to this theme was pulled from

32 student responses to survey questions 3 and 4 (see Appendix A), as well as an in-class journal writing completed by the same students during the fourth week of the school year (prior to the first whole-class seminar discussion).

In response to survey question 3, “What might help all students feel more comfortable in class discussions?”, when students did reference a specific structure for discussion, the structures they referenced varied greatly, as shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Student responses to survey question 3 (n=32).

Seven out of 32 students referenced a structure for discussion that included talking in smaller groups (as opposed to the entire class) as possibly helping more students feel comfortable participating in discussions. Of the 11 responses that referenced a form of participation requirements, six students indicated they believed required participation in classroom discussions would help more students feel comfortable engaging in the dialogue, while five students

said that not requiring participation would increase student comfort. There were also three references to a desire for some sort of teacher-controlled system, such as a 'ticket to talk' system, which they believed would ensure the discussion had a more balanced feel and was not dominated by a handful of voices.

This variety in desired structure was also present in student responses to a journal entry during week four. The day before the first scheduled whole-class seminar discussion, students were asked to respond in their classroom journals to the question, "What are some things that help you feel safe and comfortable in the classroom overall and in discussions in particular?" A number of student responses referenced structural aspects of the discussion as influencing whether they felt safe and comfortable. Russell, a student with an IEP for ADHD who also exhibited characteristics of having low social status, wrote, "What I think would make people feel safe is if everyone is talking to each other and no one feels singled out." A similar response from another male student with low social status, Jeremy, indicated that "not being seemingly forced to talk" was something that made him feel more comfortable in a class discussion. In contrast, Lauren, a student with both high academic and social status, wrote that "if everyone had to say one thing" it might help more students feel comfortable engaging in the discussion.

While preferred discussion structure did not fall exactly along gender or status lines, there were certainly noticeable patterns related to both of these categories. One important note to emphasize here is that, because this was an Honors English class, there were very few students I would categorize as having

had truly low academic status when compared to the rest of the students in the school. However, for the purposes of this research project, there were three female and three male students whose overall classwork positioned them as having noticeably lower academic status when compared to the other students in the class.

Table 2

*Status, Gender, and Discussion Structures*

	<b>High Academic and High Social Status</b>	<b>Low Academic and High Social Status</b>	<b>Low Social and High Academic Status</b>
	<b>No Reference to Structure</b>	<b>Structural References</b>	<b>Structural References</b>
<b>Male Students</b> (n=13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No reference to structural elements of discussion</li> <li>Common responses included topic knowledge or interest in topic as influencing participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Referred to specific structural elements of discussions</li> <li>Common responses included desire for optional participation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Referred to specific structural elements of discussions</li> <li>Common responses included desire for optional participation</li> </ul>
	(n=8)	(n=3)	(n=2)
	<b>Structural References</b>	<b>No Reference to Structure</b>	<b>Structural References</b>
<b>Female Students</b> (n=19)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Referred to specific structural elements of discussion</li> <li>Wanted clear structure to guide discussions, prevent 'dominance' by a few voices, ensure participation by all</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No reference to structural elements of discussion</li> <li>Common responses included classroom environment influencing participation in discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Referred to specific structural elements of discussion</li> <li>Wanted clear structure to guide discussions, prevent 'dominance' by a few voices, ensure participation by all</li> </ul>
	(n=13)	(n=3)	(n=3)

Table 2 categorizes the students in the class by gender, academic status, and social status. Common themes in student survey and journal responses are included in the table based on the intersections between gender and status. For male students, being low status in one or both categories led to common responses referencing structure. For these students, low academic status and low social status both led to similar desires for non-required participation. Male students that were high in both status categories were unlikely to reference structural elements and instead focused on topic knowledge and interest as influencing whether they (or others) participated in class discussions.

In direct contrast to their high-status male classmates, female students with both high academic and social status were more likely to articulate specific desired structures for discussion, such as ones that prevented a small group of students from dominating the conversation. However, unlike the low-status male students whose responses were similar regardless of which category of status they were identified as being low in, female students' responses differed depending on which category of status they were low in. Female students with low academic status responded in a manner that more closely resembled the responses of the low-status male students. Female students with low academic status were more likely than their high-academic-status counterparts to focus on classroom environment rather than mention any form of desired discussion structure. Female students with high academic but low social status had responses that mirrored those of female students rated high in both status categories—responses from both groups were more likely to reference structural

aspects of the discussion as impacting their participation and the participation of others.

Female students with high academic status, regardless of their level of social status, seemed to feel as though their ability to participate in a discussion was directly related to whether some students were allowed to dominate the discussion. These ideas seemed to be linked to the influence of discussion structure on who was able to participate, how often, and in what ways. One such journal response from a student said that she felt more comfortable in class discussions “when people let other people talk and don’t hog the spotlight.” Another particularly telling response from a female student was that “being given opportunities helps me feel safe to share my ideas, talk, and contribute to discussions.” I interpreted her response to mean she did not always feel she was given adequate opportunities to enter into discussions and that active verbal participation would be easier if she felt those opportunities were more overt. Overall, these findings indicated there was a complex set of interactions around the way status and gender were intersecting to influence students’ views on discussion structures.

### **Discussion Structure and Participation**

The interplay between student status and discussion structure that developed out of an analysis of survey question 3 and the week four journal prompt led me to investigate how students’ perception of the status of other students impacted their beliefs about discussions. This eventually led to the second overarching theme to emerge from this action research project, which

was that explicit discussion structures and consistently enforced discourse norms had a positive impact on the participation rate of lower-status students.

**Participation and the perceived status of others.** Most (22 of 32) students indicated in response to survey question 5 that they believed some students' contributions were valued by their peers more than others during classroom discussions. Nine of these 22 students suggested differences in academic ability were the reason some students' voices were valued more than others. Lauren, a high-status female student, wrote, "The voices of students with better grades are valued more." Another ten students indicated that the voices of students with higher social status in the class were valued more than their lower-status classmates. One example of this was a student who wrote, "Some voices are definitely more valued. Especially when the voice is a popular person." Another student wrote that, "people that are liked in class are more valued than others." The remaining three of the 22 who wrote that some students were valued more than others did not specify why they thought this, just stating that they believed it to be true. Students appeared to have very developed beliefs about the influence of academic and social status on others' perceptions of the value of a student's contribution. I was not surprised by this finding, and it helped me understand why students who perceived themselves as having low status would find it difficult to talk during a class discussion. Reflecting upon the responses to this survey question, I came to the understanding that students in this class with low academic status were likely to believe other students would not value their ideas as meaningful contributions, particularly when those verbal



contributions were directly related to academic content. Students with lower social status appeared to feel uncertain about how and when to enter the dialogue, likely because the social realm of their lives rarely included opportunities to talk directly with the students in the class with higher social status. The students in this class indicated through their written responses to the survey questions that in their past class discussions, interacting with their classmates across perceived status discrepancies was difficult and presented a complicated challenge for many students.

**Elements of a high-quality discussion.** In response to the fourth survey question, 18 of 32 students listed things like being exposed to multiple perspectives and a high quantity of participants as elements of the best discussion they had experienced in the past. This told me students were aware that a good class discussion was one in which many people were talking and everyone had a different opinion. One response that captured both of these sentiments read, “Most class discussions that go well are ones that many people participated in and where everyone’s opinions are heard.” Unfortunately, many of the same students said in response to question 5 that they believed some voices were valued more than others. This led me to conclude that the environment of most of the previous class discussions in which they had participated was one in which not all students felt comfortable sharing or believed they were equally valued by their classmates when they did share. Simply put, if the majority of the students in this class believed a good discussion was one in which most or all of their classmates were able to verbally contribute, it seemed problematic that

students saw academic or social status influencing how they were viewed by others.

**Some discussion structures level status discrepancies.** The structure for the first formal seminar discussion included an opportunity for students to make an opening statement at the beginning of the discussion. Students knew they would need to make at least one comment during the discussion to receive full participation credit. To ensure all students were provided ample opportunities to participate, they were told prior to the seminar they would have the option to make a brief opening or closing statement. Unlike the typical discourse during a seminar discussion, which pushes students to respond directly to statements made by their classmates and build upon one another's ideas, going once around the circle and allowing students to make an opening statement provided them with a chance to state an idea or opinion they could have formulated ahead of time. It also erased the ambiguity of when it was appropriate to jump into the conversation, as each student, in order around the circle, took a turn either electing to make an opening statement or to pass. During the first seminar, only five of the 12 male students elected to make an opening statement, yet 12 of the 19 female students took the opportunity. Five of those 12 female students had previously mentioned in their survey or journal responses feeling some amount of trepidation about speaking in front of the class in a formal setting, so it was interesting to see them take the opportunity to speak so early in the discussion. It would seem that the ability to make a verbal contribution to the discussion without feeling as though they were interrupting another student was particularly

beneficial for the female students in this class. In fact, of the remaining seven female students who did not make an opening statement, two of them were only able to make a comment at the end of the discussion when they were given one final chance to make a closing statement. Social norms related to gender and discourse often lead women to interrupt or talk over another person far less than their male counterparts. Female students in this class appeared to be showing signs of an awareness of this social norm and found the structure of the first seminar discussion to be one that helped them overcome this restrictive norm and find a way to successfully engage in the discussion.

One student who exemplified this finding was a girl named Sue. Sue was a student with very high academic status who was also very quiet and reserved with her classmates. Sue did not seem to need very much time to process her ideas before speaking; however, she exhibited signs of feeling uncomfortable entering into the dialogue without a clear indication that it was her turn to speak. In her survey response to question 3, Sue wrote, "I think the 'ticket to talk' system works well. If it weren't there, there would be people who talk the whole time and people who stay silent. That system works well because it gives equal chances for everyone to talk." During the first seminar discussion, Sue offered a well-developed opening statement but then did not speak again. In both of the smaller, structured group discussions that occurred during weeks five and six, Sue was able to actively engage in the discussion only when it was clearly her turn to speak, and she struggled to enter the discourse at any other time. The quality of her academic work and her prediscussion journal responses suggested

that Sue had a strong understanding of the focal text and the overarching concepts, leading to the conclusion that her limited participation in class discussions was related to something other than academic ability. For Sue, as well as many of the other students in the class with low social or academic status, the structure of the first seminar discussion allowed her to transcend her lower social status and find an entry point into the dialogue. The theme explored in this section was particularly interesting in relation to previous research by Evans (2002), Hemmings (2000), Maloch (2002), and Thein et al. (2011), all of whom found evidence that lower-status students, particularly female students and students of color, struggled to actively engage in classroom discussions and were therefore less likely to access the academic benefits of those discussions. In this classroom, discussions that included clear structure and enforced discourse norms led to higher participation for lower-status students.

### **Lowering the Affective Filter**

The final theme to emerge from my data was that providing students with an opportunity to process their ideas in writing and then allowing them time to discuss those ideas in a small group lowered their affective filter and led to a richer dialogue between students than had occurred in the first whole-class seminar discussion. While every discussion during the course of this project included related writing activities, I became more intentional in my efforts during the later weeks to provide students with ample time, prior to discussions, to respond to specific text-based questions in writing. I also significantly lowered the number of students involved in any one discussion group after the first seminar,

and the first formal seminar was the only discussion in which all 32 students were engaged in the same discussion at the same time. Various grouping methods were experimented with for all subsequent discussions, with each different structure leading to a higher quality and quantity of student participation than during the whole-group discussion during week four.

**Student knowledge of topic and increased processing time.** Initial survey and journal responses indicated that students felt there was a strong correlation between discussion participation and topic knowledge. In response to survey question 3, one student made the suggestion that other students might feel more comfortable engaging in the discussion “if they know enough on the topic,” while yet another student hypothesized that if students could “analyze the topic well enough to discuss it” there would be a higher level of participation in the discussion. While every discussion that occurred had *Macbeth* as the central text, it is safe to assume students became more knowledgeable about the text as the quarter progressed, therefore increasing their comfort in discussing the play. One particular student who provided strong evidence to support this theme was a male student with low academic status named Ricardo. He had never taken an Honors class before and was only enrolled in this class because taking a class of academic rigor was a requirement of his enrollment in an AVID college preparatory class. In response to survey question 3, Ricardo stated that making sure “the topic is something everyone can understand” would help more students feel comfortable engaging in the discussion. Ricardo was then one of the four students who did not participate at any point during the first seminar discussion,

despite having written in his journal the day before the seminar that his goal was “to have my voice and thoughts recognized and respected.” During the written reflection completed after the discussion, when students were asked to evaluate their progress toward meeting their previously identified goal for the discussion, Ricardo wrote, “I didn’t really even attempt it this time because it was a subject I didn’t really understand or get.” Based on this response, Ricardo felt his lack of knowledge about the topic rather than any aspect of the discussion structure was what had prevented him from being able to enter into the dialogue.

Two weeks later, all students were presented with three journal prompts and were instructed to select one of the prompts and respond to it in writing. Students self-selected one of the following three prompts and were given five minutes to respond to the prompt in their journals:

- 1) How has the manipulation motif influenced the plot thus far?
- 2) Examine the role of ambition in the play. Whose ambition is the driving force of the play so far and why?
- 3) How does Shakespeare establish the connection between gender and power? How is power (who has it and how they use it) influenced by ideas about gender?

After five minutes of quiet writing, students were moved into groups of between six and eight based on which prompt they had chosen to respond to. The only specific instructions they were given once they were in their small groups was to take turns going around the circle and discuss the ideas they had written about with the other members of their group. This small-group discussion

was presented to the students as a warm-up for the formal seminar that would take place the following day. Ricardo's group was able to get off to a quick start, with one female member of the group initiating the discussion by reading her response directly from her journal. This was another a student I had identified as having low academic status in the class, and she seemed to benefit from the opportunity to explore her ideas in writing prior to engaging in the discussion. Her relatively high social status in the class seemed to help her take the initiative to start the conversation. After she finished speaking, she looked at the student to her right and nodded at him to indicate it was his turn to speak. This method of formal turn-taking was not something I had specifically instructed the groups to do, although I had told them they needed to make sure every member of the group had a chance to speak. Ricardo was the third group member in line to speak, and he too took advantage of having written down his ideas in his journal prior to the discussion and chose to read directly from his paper. This was notable since he hadn't participated at all in the first seminar discussion and never raised his hand to volunteer an answer or ask a question during class time. This particular discussion lasted for approximately eight minutes, and while all members of Ricardo's group did not stay on topic the entire time, each student was able to speak for a longer period of time than they had in the first seminar. As we were two weeks further along in our work with the play, it is reasonable to assume that each student's knowledge of the topic of the discussion had increased, and when combined with a low-stakes writing exercise and a smaller group size, that these factors contributed to students having an easier time

engaging in the active dialogue. However, the discussion was still primarily dominated by higher-status students, further emphasizing the fact that students need a higher level of intentional structure to ensure all students regardless of status are able to make meaningful contributions to the dialogue.

**Writing and prior small-group discussions lead to increased participation in second seminar.** Student participation in the second formal seminar discussion increased in two ways: more students participated in the second seminar than in the first, and many of those students were able to speak multiple times. During the first seminar discussion, four students did not make a single verbal contribution to the discussion. This was in spite of the fact that students were aware they would not receive full credit for the discussion unless they made at least one comment. Each of these four students passed on the opportunity to make an opening statement, was unable to enter the dialogue during the open portion of the discussion, and opted to pass when offered a turn to make a final closing statement at the end of the discussion. Two weeks later, during the second formal seminar discussion, three of these four students were able to make at least one verbal contribution during the discussion. The remaining student from the group that did not speak during the first seminar was the only student of the 32 that elected not to speak during the second seminar.

There were a couple of factors that likely contributed to this increase in student participation from the first seminar to the second. The first was related to a change in structure. The second seminar had two concentric circles of 16 students rather than one large circle with all 32 students at once. The time



allotted for the discussion was divided in half, with each group of 16 having about 20 minutes for their portion of the discussion. When one half of the class was seated in the inner circle, the other half formed a larger circle around the outside of the inner circle, silently observing the dialogue and taking notes in their journals. While each student was still technically speaking in front of all 31 of their peers, each student only had to contend with 15 other students when deciding when and how to verbally enter into the discussion. Having to attend to the nonverbal cues of half as many people as well as knowing there were half as many people that could potentially disagree with their comments both lowered affective filters and made the second seminar easier for students to cognitively engage and verbally participate in. Videotape footage from this discussion showed 10 of the 16 students in the first inside circle verbally participating during the open-dialogue portion of the seminar. Five of these 10 students had already made an opening statement, meaning they did not technically need to participate again in order to receive full credit for the discussion. Student participation beyond the single required comment was purely voluntary, which led me to conclude that students were either more confident in their ideas, more comfortable with the smaller group size, or a combination of both. When students responded to one another's comments during the discussion, they built upon the previous comment and added their own ideas to it.

Another element that positively increased the quantity of participants and the quality of the dialogue was the semistructured small-group discussion the previous day. By the time the second seminar began, students had already

responded in writing to at least one of the discussion prompts and had discussed that topic in a small group the day before. Many of the exact ideas brought up during the small group discussion were predictably brought up again during the formal seminar, yet in a somewhat surprising manner. On more than one occasion during the formal seminar, a lower-status student voiced an idea or posed a question that had originally been presented by a higher-status student in the small-group discussion. One example of this was during a brief lull in the formal seminar, when a male student with high social and academic status asked an authentic question of the group, wondering “what would have happened if Macbeth didn’t try to act on the prophecy. If he just did nothing.” Camille, a student with high academic but low social status, quickly jumped in to respond to his question. Camille was typically reserved during discussions; she had only made a single comment during both the first seminar (an opening statement, when it was clearly her turn) and during the small-group discussion in the previous class period (again, when it was clearly her turn as the group went around the circle). Her response to an authentic question during the open dialogue portion of the second seminar discussion was the first time she had successfully inserted herself into the active discourse. Also of note was the content of her contribution. In response to the question posed by her classmate, Camille brought up the idea that the witches were responsible for telling Macbeth the prophecy in the first place, and then she suggested that the witches would continue to push Macbeth toward action, essentially erasing his individual choice to act on the prophecy or not. This exact idea had been presented by a higher-

status student in Camille's group during the previous small-group discussion. Camille appeared to have an easier time articulating a complex idea when it had already been favorably received by her peers. To me, this was a somewhat surprising outcome of allowing the students to discuss these topics in a small group prior to the larger, formal discussion. I had expected some students to use the small group discussion to try out their ideas in a safer space. What I had not expected to see was the way some lower-status students took the ideas of their higher-status peers and used them as their way to enter the dialogue. This told me that not only did the small group structure increase overall participation in the second seminar, but it provided me with evidence that the students were seeing one another as valuable resources of information—one of the academic benefits of student-centered discussion that I had been hoping to cultivate in the classroom.

### **Limitations of the Project and Implications for Future Practice**

As each of the discussions in this action research project included a unique structure and involved different guiding questions, it was somewhat difficult to compare participation rate and type from one discussion to the next, as there were always potential confounding variables that may have contributed to a noticeable change in student participation. In the first seminar discussion, statistics around participation trends related to gender may have been partially influenced by the topic of the discussion, which centered on representations of women in classic and contemporary literature. In the second seminar discussion, although the quality of students' participation was unquestionably impacted by

the small-group discussion the day before, the inside/outside structure that was used in that seminar may also have played some part in that change.

Another factor limiting my ability to make generalizations based on the data I gathered is that I did not conduct individual student interviews or administer a final survey at the end of my student teaching. Both of these would have been really useful methods of gathering information directly from the students that allowed them to communicate their individual experiences over the course of the project. The student survey I did administer (see Appendix A) was, out of necessity, written prior to the actual beginning of this action research project. Some of the questions could have been written more efficiently, and I believe there was some variation in the ways students interpreted the questions. Specifically, questions 3 and 5 produced a range of responses that led me to question how some students were understanding them. Question 3, which asked students to identify things that might help more students feel comfortable during class discussions, would have been better aligned with my inquiry if it had been worded instead as, "What might help students feel comfortable actively participating in class discussions?" It is reasonable to assume that some students suggested nonrequired participation as something that might increase student comfort, as it would mean students that did not feel entirely comfortable could relax and not worry about making any verbal contributions. Survey question 5 was also ambiguously worded and may have impacted the nature of the conclusions drawn from it. The question asked students if they felt that everyone's voice was equally valued during class discussions. I wonder if it was

possible some students thought I was asking them if they themselves valued the voices of all students equally rather than if they felt others valued all voices equally.

Assumptions about student status levels were made based on my observations, notes from my research journal, interactions between students, and the overall quality of students' academic work. Students were never asked to identify their own status relative to their peers, as I did not feel these would have been appropriate questions to ask my students. Academic status level was identified based on student grades, writing ability, and the frequency with which students engaged in the general classroom discourse during instruction. Social status levels were based on the ways in which students interacted with their peers, how often students spoke up in class in ways that were not directly tied to the academic content of the lesson, and, in some cases, students' own references in survey or journal responses to feeling shy or less social than their peers. It is important to be aware of the complicated nature of status, however, and to attend to the nuanced ways that who has status can change from lesson to lesson. An example of this from this action research project was my initial assumption that female students would have a more difficult time than male students engaging in the first formal seminar discussion because of engrained social norms related to gender. Yet this assumption did not account for the academic content of the discussion, which required students to explore issues of gender representation in literature and media. The content of this particular discussion seemed to favor the perspective of the female students and

positioned them as the more-knowledgeable and therefore higher-status students.

Throughout the majority of my own educational career, participating in formal seminar discussions presented a difficult challenge, particularly because of my own self-perceived low social status. Late in my college career, I grew to strongly appreciate the academic benefits of engaging in frequent discussions with my peers, and as a preservice teacher I was attempting to balance my past hesitancy to participate in discussions with my new pedagogical philosophy around increasing authentic student talk. I found I had always assumed lack of student participation in discussions was tied directly to the student's perceived lack of social status in a class. This personal bias did not give enough credit to the influence of students' low academic status or lack of confidence in their own ideas on student participation. When students lack confidence in their ideas or are not given enough time to process their ideas internally or in writing, even in an Honors class like this one, they will struggle to enter into the active discourse. Providing students with ample time to answer questions in writing is an effective way to help them gather and process their ideas before asking them to articulate those ideas out loud in front of other students. Also, whenever possible, students would benefit from discussions structures that allow them to discuss things in smaller groups with clear guidelines for participation and accountability measures to ensure all students are actively engaged in the discourse. My teaching practice will benefit from further investigation into the intersection of gender and status on students' experiences in classroom discussions. Particular areas of

interest will include exploring whether these initial themes hold up over a longer-term study, and whether similar themes are present in other contexts, such as remedial classes or other grade levels.

The wide range of student preference relative to discussion structure was not surprising, and it was the initial basis for my interest in investigating the various structures possible during student-centered discussions. Based on my own experience in discussions as a student and on what I had experienced working with high school students prior to this study, I knew there was never going to be one single structure that every student liked. With this variety of desired structures in mind, it is important to explore the factors that contribute to creating a safe classroom environment for discussion, as complex status discrepancies will always exist in the classroom. Part of my job as a teacher will be to work to limit the ways in which status issues can disrupt or prevent learning and active participation in the classroom discourse. Smaller group sizes and structures that included a mix of open discussion and individual turn-taking were both elements of this action research project that I will work to include in my future implementation of discussion-based teaching practices. I am also interested in learning more about the use of online discussion boards. These boards can serve as a supplementary discussion tool that combines increased time to process ideas in writing and a lowered affective filter, as the conversation is happening electronically rather than face to face. There is also the possibility that online discussions boards would increase students' ability to thread their comments and build on one another's ideas, since the comments stay visible and

can be revisited throughout the conversation rather than depending on memory to reference something specific that someone else said.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Research and theory highlighting the benefits of increasing authentic, inquiry-driven student talk in the classroom led me to place a high value on student-centered discussion practices, yet my concern for equitable student access to those discussions was always in the forefront of my mind. As a preservice teacher, I focused my early planning on discussion structures and how designing the perfect structure might encourage the highest level of participation and lead to a high-quality dialogue between the students. In reality, it would seem that as long as there was a set structure to the discussion and the guidelines and expectations were clearly laid out for the students, exactly what the structure was mattered less than I had anticipated, since there was never going to be a time that every single student liked a particular structure the best. If the environment was positive and conducive to risk-taking and a good dialogue between the students, the particular structure of the discussion had less impact on student participation than I had previously imagined. Unlike their varied structural preferences, students articulated strikingly similar beliefs about the best classroom environment in which to have a discussion. The majority of students mentioned things like getting to know their classmates and feeling like all opinions were respected as important elements of a positive classroom environment. Factors such as an increased knowledge of their classmates, teacher and peer respect for all opinions, a positive environment free of any



judgment, and a lack of purely right or wrong answers were common themes in student journal responses. There was very little disagreement about those concepts—all students wanted to know they would not be made fun of, be judged by others, or feel like their answers were incorrect. Allison, a student with a documented 504 plan for social anxiety and panic disorder, wrote in response to the journal prompt, “Something that would make me feel more comfortable would be feeling like I can actually put myself and opinions out in the open without being totally judged.” While the concept of feeling judged might vary a bit from student to student, it will be my responsibility as the classroom teacher to ensure there are norms in place that limit students’ perception of being personally evaluated based on the content of their academic ideas.

Overall, the use of student-centered discussion in this class did seem to reap many of the academic benefits presented by the literature that informed my research. There were a few notable successes for individual students, including Allison, the student with a 504 plan for social anxiety. Unable to participate in the first seminar discussion, she not only spoke during the second seminar, but she began volunteering to read out loud during in-class readings of the text. At the conclusion of this research, I feel more strongly than ever that providing students with frequent opportunities to engage in discussions is a necessary component of a high-quality, engaging curriculum, provided I maintain an awareness of the complex interactions between academic and social status and structure in supports to help all students actively participate in those discussions.

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APPENDIX A: STUDENT SURVEY

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class Period: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What experience, if any, do you have with whole-class discussions in school?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. What do you enjoy about participating in class discussions?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. What might help all students feel more comfortable in class discussions?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Have you ever participated in a class discussion that you thought went really well?  
What worked well about it?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. During whole-class discussions, do you feel like all voices are valued and listened to?  
Are some voices valued more than others?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. How might you apply the skills you gain from class discussions in the real world?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B: CHARACTER ANALYSIS GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Per.** \_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Act:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Assigned Character:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** As you read the play, examine the scenes for what they reveal about the character and fill in the chart using your own words. Be sure to cite where your evidence is coming from in format used in the example below.

Character Name:	Evidence/Quotes (Use Act, Scene, Line – Ex: I.iii.34-40)	Significance/What does it reveal about the character?
What the character says to others (Dialogue)		
What the character says to him/herself (Soliloquies)		
What others say about the character		
What the character does		