
Leading a Group Discussion in English Language Arts

What is *Leading a Group Discussion in English Language Arts*?

In a group discussion, the teacher and all the students work on specific content together, using one another's ideas as resources. The purposes of a discussion are to build collective knowledge and capability in relation to specific instructional goals and to allow students to practice listening, speaking, and interpreting. The teacher and a wide range of students contribute, listen actively, and respond to and learn from others' contributions.

Discussion is not synonymous with discourse; it is a kind of classroom discourse that centers on the co-construction of meaning in which teacher and students use one another's ideas as resources in the pursuit of a specific instructional goal. The teacher sets up a discussion to create multiple entry points so all students can participate confidently. As students share ideas, the teacher facilitates, eliciting and keeping track of student thinking, helping students put their ideas in conversation with one another's, and, when appropriate, consolidating ideas. While student talk is at the heart of the practice, the teacher intervenes as needed to maintain focus on the text or task, to ensure that norms for healthy and productive discussions are upheld, and to encourage and allow all students to engage in and benefit from the discussion.

While student-led discussions are an important feature of many English language arts (ELA) classrooms, they require the teacher to do a significantly different kind of work than do teacher-led discussions. For that reason, student-led discussions are beyond the scope of this particular high-leverage practice. *Leading a group discussion* centers on the work a teacher does to enable and facilitate collective knowledge-building in the classroom. Importantly, discussion of this kind may occur in short intervals in the course of other kinds of activities—for example, activating prior knowledge, evaluating a mentor text, debriefing a warm-up activity, or sharing small group learning with the class often call for short teacher-led discussions. The more commonly envisioned seminar-style discussion of a literary work also draws on this high-leverage practice, the difference being primarily in the amount of time dedicated to each part of the discussion. Ultimately, the techniques of *leading group discussion* come into play in nearly every class meeting.

How can *leading group discussion* in English language arts advance justice?

Much like *eliciting and interpreting individual students' thinking*, the practice of *leading a group discussion* provides opportunities for students to realize the power of their ideas and their voices. The free and fair exchange of ideas is a bedrock of a healthy democracy. Being an engaged world citizen requires the ability to share, justify and defend one's ideas and—perhaps even more importantly—to listen attentively and thoughtfully to the ideas and perspectives of diverse groups of others. Group discussion offers an opportunity to practice the skills of reasoned argument, debate, and collective knowledge-building with common goals. Teachers can frame group discussions as opportunities for young people to make sense of something difficult together, and to support one another to both speak and listen in ways that advance the classroom community and common good. Finally, when well-led by a teacher, discussion provides students with the cultural capital needed to engage in academic discourse: using content specific vocabulary, practicing disciplinary norms and routines, and engaging with rich and rigorous content.

What Are the Elements of the Practice?

Leading a group discussion includes enabling, framing, orchestration, and attention to representations of the content. Each of these features entails specific kinds of work as the teacher plans, equips students to

engage in, and facilitates discussions that support the group to collaboratively build understanding in service of a shared goal.

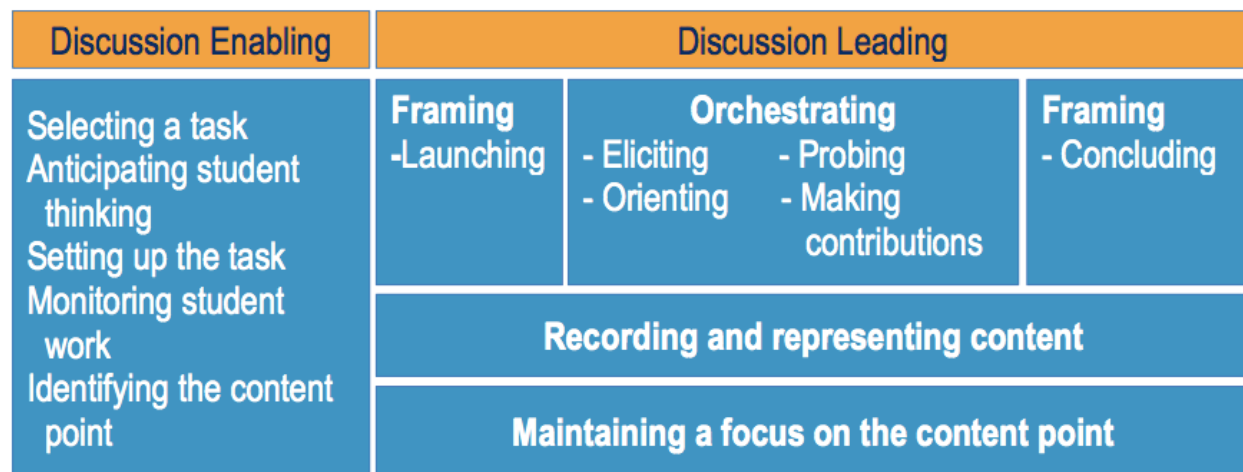
Decomposition

DISCUSSION ENABLING	DISCUSSION LEADING		
Preparing	Framing	Orchestrating	Recording and Representing Key Content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying the content point of the discussion Selecting a discussable task or text Anticipating student thinking Setting up independent or small group work with task or text Monitoring student work 	<p>Launching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Telling students the goal of the discussion Activating prior knowledge (if necessary) Posing an open-ended question or issue related to the content point Reviewing norms for discussion (if necessary) Efficiently engages students in the discussion <p>Concluding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting students to remember or make sense of content Taking stock of where the class is in the discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraging and allowing all students to participate Eliciting multiple ideas Probing students' thinking to clarify and expand student ideas Orienting students to the contributions of others Ensuring that students are attending, listening, and responding to the ideas of others Supporting students in connecting ideas Making strategic contributions Using moves such as redirecting, revoicing, and highlighting to keep the discussion on track 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determining what content to record and in how much detail Attending to the accuracy of records and representations Recording in ways that are clear, organized, and visible to the class Using language and/or representations that support student understanding and participation

Recording and representing content during discussion may not necessarily mean the teacher attempting to record all student contributions on the board or other public workspace; part of the work of leading discussion involved determining what kinds of recording and/or representations best support students' participation and understanding.

Underlying all of a teacher's work leading discussion, and implied in many of the techniques in the table above, is consistently maintaining focus on a central, content-related point. The diagram below conveys this, and represents the relatively linear nature of this teaching practice.

Diagram



What is challenging about learning to *lead a group discussion* in English language arts?

Eliciting, coordinating, and focusing student thinking in pursuit of shared understanding is demanding work. Teachers must field unexpected interpretations, recognize uncanny brilliance that students

demonstrate, and address misinterpretations of the content in the moment. This work demands deeper and more flexible knowledge of the content than that which novices likely developed as students of English. Shifting from the role of discussion participant to that of discussion leader can be difficult not only because of the added demands on content knowledge, but also because novice teachers are often themselves engaged and passionate readers and writers. This can make it difficult to share intellectual space with their students, as sharing space requires teachers to shift their own thinking and theorizing into a supporting rather than starring role in the discussion. On the other hand, when students are especially engaged in the intellectual space of a rich group discussion, it can be easy to lose track of the learning goal in the midst of displays of enthusiasm that are exciting to witness as a teacher. Leading a discussion that foregrounds students' sensemaking and invites the lively exchange of ideas while remaining focused on the instructional goal demands from the teacher a combination of skill, restraint, and specialized content knowledge.

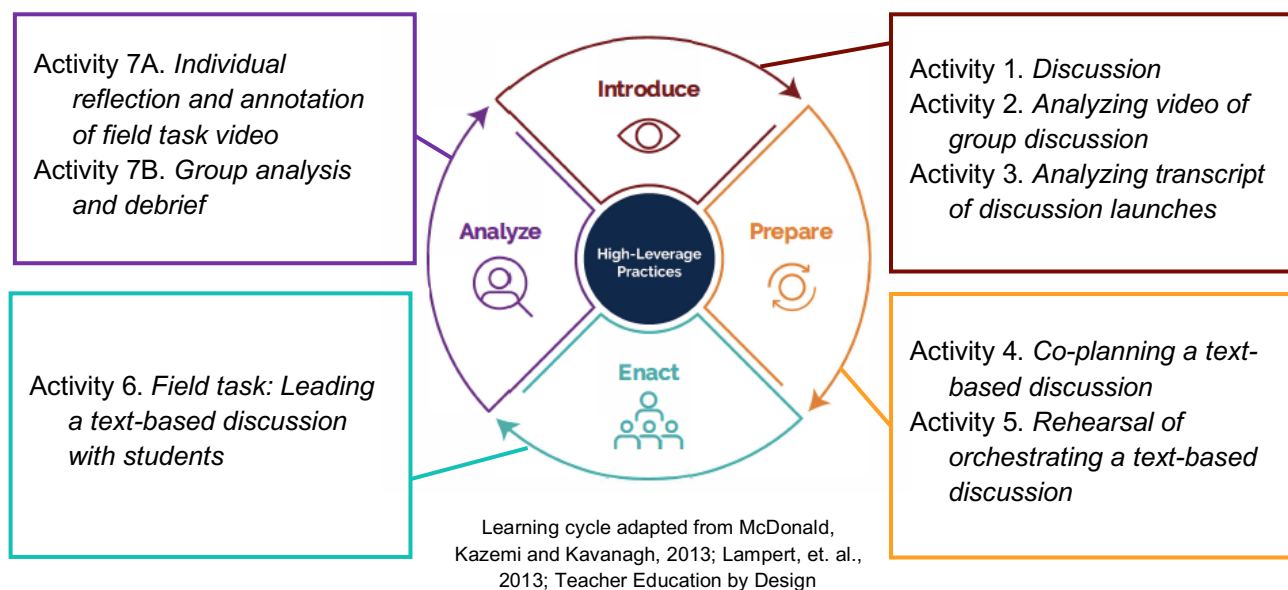
The Learning Cycle:

A deliberate progression of work on *leading a group discussion* in English language arts

This learning cycle is a sequence of activities that develop novice teachers' understanding of and skill with the high-leverage practice *leading a group discussion*. Pedagogies have been selected to fit novices' likely level of experience as they are first introduced to a new practice, then prepare to enact it, enact it, and analyze their enactment (McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanaugh, 2013).

The cycle presented here, designed as a first experience with the practice of *leading a group discussion*, zeroes in on the work of *launching* and *orchestrating* discussion along with developing content knowledge for teaching. These areas of work are prioritized for several reasons: Content knowledge is a prerequisite to successful discussion and cannot be easily scaffolded. Orchestrating is perhaps the most demanding area of work because of its largely extemporaneous, responsive character. Launching is a natural starting point that is easily and productively folded in. *Enabling* and *closing* are no less important to good group discussion, of course. While both are introduced in this cycle, they remain scaffolded throughout in order to allow novices to focus on developing the aforementioned skills prior to recomposing the practice. The skills of enabling and closing are somewhat less complex and productively overlap with other teaching practices such as instructional planning and *implementing norms and routines for classroom discourse and work* and so can be addressed either in a second cycle on *leading a group discussion* or layered in as novices continue to practice discussion while being introduced to other high-leverage practices.

The cycle culminates with novices leading two group discussions of “How to Transform an Everyday, Ordinary Hoop Court into a Place of Higher Learning and You at the Podium” by Matt de la Peña with groups of middle- or high-school students. Work on content knowledge for teaching is structured by the Reading for Teaching framework (Alston & Barker, 2014). Focusing on a single rich text throughout the cycle allows in-depth work on content, which in turn ensures that the discussion is a positive learning experience for both novice teachers and the students who participate.



The activities listed in this cycle need not be enacted in order, though it may make sense to go through the four quadrants sequentially. The most time-consuming of these for novices will be the field assignment where novices model for small groups in their classroom.

Anchor Text

The text used throughout the cycle is the short story, “How to Transform an Everyday, Ordinary Hoop Court into a Place of Higher Learning and You at the Podium” by Matt de la Peña. De la Peña’s story is written in accessible and engaging language while raising complex questions, dilemmas, and insights about adolescence, portraying complex characters, and illustrating the author’s craft. Identity, family, aspirations, and the struggle to belong figure centrally in the text, and issues of social power including race, ethnicity, and policing are woven throughout. The narrator is complex, and he is clearly shaped by his interactions with others, offering an opportunity to meaningfully analyze a trajectory of character development. Finally, the text invites questions and sets up literary puzzles centered on, among other things, its use of second person point of view and its intriguing title.

The text is not included here for copyright reasons. It was published in the 2017 anthology *Flying Lessons and Other Stories* edited by Ellen Oh and published by Crown Books. A free audio version is available from Penguin Random House Audio on SoundCloud.

INTRODUCE

Overview: The introduction to *leading a group discussion* begins in familiar territory for most novice English teachers: a literary discussion. It is designed to prepare them to shift from the point of view of a student participant to that of the teacher who is leading the discussion. This shift is addressed in terms of both content knowledge for teaching and the work of leading a discussion.

Activity #1: Model Discussion, “How to Transform an Everyday, Ordinary Hoop Court into a Place of Higher Learning and You at the Podium”

Prior to class, novice teachers need to have read de la Peña’s story and analyzed it using the Reading for Teaching framework (Alston & Barker, 2014). The teacher educator facilitates the discussion with special attention to highlighting key features of the practice of *leading a group discussion*. At the conclusion of the discussion, novices are invited to “pop the hood” and identify facilitation techniques that helped the discussion work and to consider how such techniques can serve as levers for equity in the classroom.

Resources:	<i>Sample lesson plan</i> <i>Slide deck</i>
Handouts:	<i>Reading for Teaching framework</i> <i>Character interaction chart</i> <i>Text: “How to Transform an Everyday, Ordinary Hoop Court into a Place of Higher Learning and you at the Podium” by Matt de la Peña (not provided)</i>
Homework:	The small group activity on “discussion as a lever for justice” included in the slides (#11-14) could be adapted into an online discussion or extended as an at-home writing prompt.

Activity #2: Analyzing Video of Text-Based Discussion

Novices are introduced to the practice in its entirety, using the decomposition as a tool to identify key features and techniques of *enabling*, *launching*, *orchestrating*, and *closing* a discussion in several clips of a teacher launching, orchestrating, and closing a discussion. They continue to identify the ways that strong facilitation techniques support equitable opportunity and access in the classroom.

- Resources: *Slide deck: Analyzing video of leading a group discussion*
- Handouts: *Decomposition of leading a group discussion*
Norms for analyzing classroom video
Observation tool
- Video: *“Vonck (Class 2)/Grade 5-6/Discussion about The Giver.” In HLP Video Examples Collection (Leading a group discussion). Teaching and Learning Exploratory.*
- Homework: Novices could view the video in its entirety or re-view particular clips, adding to their notes in the observation tool.

Activity #3: Analyzing Transcripts of Discussion Launches

Two transcripts serve as artifacts for in-depth consideration of the purposes and techniques of a discussion launch. In addition to identifying and analyzing the techniques themselves, the group considers the effect that different approaches have on the subsequent engagement, tone, and focus of the discussion.

- Resources: *Decomposition of leading a group discussion*
Transcripts: Launching a discussion
- Homework: Debriefing of the jigsaw activity could be adapted into online discussion or at-home writing.

Analysis of the *orchestrating* portion of the transcript, supported by their notes in the observation tool from activity #2, could be completed independently or via online discussion outside of class.

PREPARE

Overview: Preparation focuses on the discussions of “How to Transform an Everyday, Ordinary Hoop Court” that novices will lead with students during the field task (activity #6), providing support and coaching as they plan and then rehearse that discussion. The preparation activities (activities #4 and #5) call attention to the content knowledge needed to provide entry points for diverse students and to coordinate multiple strands of student thinking, to the nature and complexity of multiple in-the-moment demands the practice makes on the teacher, and to other parts of the work of leading a discussion. By addressing issues and questions as they arise, the teacher educator provides just-in-time feedback in the authentic teaching context of planning a lesson.

Activity #4: Co-Planning a Text-Based Discussion

Planning the discussion highlights the importance of content knowledge as novices work to determine multiple access points into the text for students. Co-planning offers scaffolding to support developing content knowledge, preparing for elements of a literary discussion that can be pre-planned as well as those that require in-the-moment decisions, and making other instructional decisions about enabling, launching, orchestrating, and closing a discussion.

Resources:	<i>Overview of the activity</i> <i>Planning template</i> <i>Prompts and question stems for orchestrating group discussion</i>
Homework:	Novices could practice their launch with a partner, offering feedback using the observation tool from activity #1, or could film themselves practicing their launch and analyze it themselves.

Activity #5: Rehearsal of Orchestrating a Text-Based Discussion

Rehearsing the discussion they have planned—specifically the work of *orchestrating*—allows novices to practice and refine particularly difficult, semi-improvisational parts of leading a group discussion in a sheltered environment with expert coaching prior to trying the practice with actual students.

Resources:	<i>Overview of the activity</i> <i>Sample lesson plan</i>
Handouts:	<i>Overview of the rehearsal for novice teachers</i> <i>Rehearsal roles</i> <i>Anticipating student thinking template</i> <i>Observation tool</i> <i>Student profiles 1-3</i>

ENACT

Overview: Novices lead and film the group discussion they have planned with two different groups of students, drawing on the content knowledge and facilitation techniques they developed to enable, launch, orchestrate, and close a discussion that engages all students in collaborative interpretation of the text focused on the instructional goal of analyzing character development. In doing so, novice teachers will experience the simultaneous demands of eliciting and coordinating student thinking, monitoring opportunities to participate, and focusing on the learning goal. Film of the discussion will be used to analyze and learn from their practice.

Possible supports: If some or all novices would benefit from additional support at this point:

- A mentor teacher could coach and/or observe one or both discussions in person.
- Novices could view all or part of their first video with you prior to enacting the second discussion.
- Novices could be paired to observe each other live or to view each other's first discussion video using the observation checklist.

Activity #6: Field Task—Leading a Text-Based Discussion

In their field placements, novice teachers lead two group discussions of “How to Transform...” After leading a small group discussion of the text, they will individually reflect and adjust their approach before leading a second discussion with a whole class (or a larger group) which they will film for more in-depth analysis.

Resources: *Field task assignment sheet*

Also required: *Camera or phone to film discussion*
Platform for video sharing
Copies of the text for students

ANALYZE

Overview: To conclude the cycle of work on *leading a group discussion*, novices will analyze the full video of their discussion with reference to the decomposition of the practice before identifying a short clip to share with the group. Groups will use the decomposition to notice and name features of the practice in the clips and to surface overarching insights and dilemmas related to the practice, which they will draw on to articulate next steps in refining their practice.

Activity #7a: Individual Reflection and Annotation

Using the observation and annotation tool, novices will identify and describe moments in the video of their practice that reflect specific parts of the work of *leading a group discussion*. They will identify both successes and areas with room for improvement, and they will choose a ten-minute segment to screen with their group. Note that the observation tool includes a column for the teacher educator to comment on the novices’ clips and/or annotations.

Resources: *Novices’ video from their field task (second discussion)*
*Reflection and annotation tool**

*Note: this tool could be adapted for use with an online video annotation platform.

Activity #7b: Group Analysis and Debrief

In triads, novices will view one another’s ten-minute clips using the observation and annotation tool. They will identify patterns across the three videos, surfacing discoveries and dilemmas that will be shared in a whole class debrief of the practice.

Resources: *Group video analysis handout (norms, protocol, and observation tool)*
Novices’ 10 minute video clips
Laptops or tablets for small group video viewing

Possible directions for future work

Using information about novice teachers' performance in the cycle, particularly their enactment and analysis, plan to continue the careful work on content knowledge, launching and orchestrating discussion on which this cycle focused. In addition, novices' practice of *leading a group discussion* could be developed through subsequent practice that might include a focus on:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Learn and practice a range of techniques for enabling discussion | This could occur partially in the context of <i>implementing norms and routines for classroom discourse and work</i> . |
| 2. Introduce and practice selecting "discussion-worthy" texts | Each of these skills could also be addressed in the context of <i>designing single lessons and sequences of lessons</i> . |
| 3. Practice identifying instructional goals for discussion | |
| 4. Practice developing open-ended, text-based questions for discussion | |
| 5. Practice closing discussion | |

References

Alston, C.L. and Barker, L.M. (2014). Reading for teaching: What we notice when we look at literature. *English Journal*, 103, 62-67.

de la Peña, Matt. (2017). How to transform an ordinary, everyday hoop court into a place of higher learning and you at the podium. *Flying lessons and other stories*. Ellen Oh (Ed.). New York: Random House.

Lampert, M., Franke, M. L., Kazemi, E., Ghouseini, H., Turrou, A. C., Beasley, H., Cunard, A., & Crowe, K. (2013). Keeping it complex: Using rehearsals to support novice teacher learning of ambitious teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 64(3), 226-243.

McDonald, M., Kazemi, E., & Kavanagh, S. S. (2013). Core practices and pedagogies of teacher education: A call for a common language and collective activity. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 64(5), 378-386.

Teacher Education by Design. (2014). University of Washington College of Education.

Video: "Vonck (Class 2)/Grade 5-6/Discussion about The Giver." In HLP Video Examples Collection (Leading a group discussion). *Teaching and Learning Exploratory*.

Further reading

Alston, C.L., Danielson, K.A., Dutro, E., Cartun, A. Does a discussion by any other name sound the same? Teaching discussion in three ELA methods courses. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69, 225-238.

Michaels, S., O'Connor, C., Resnick, L.B. (2008). Deliberative discourse idealized and realized: Accountable talk in the classroom and in civic life. *Studies in the Philosophy of Education*, 27, 283-97

Zwiers, J., & Crawford, M. (2011). *Academic conversations: Classroom talk that fosters critical thinking and content understandings*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

