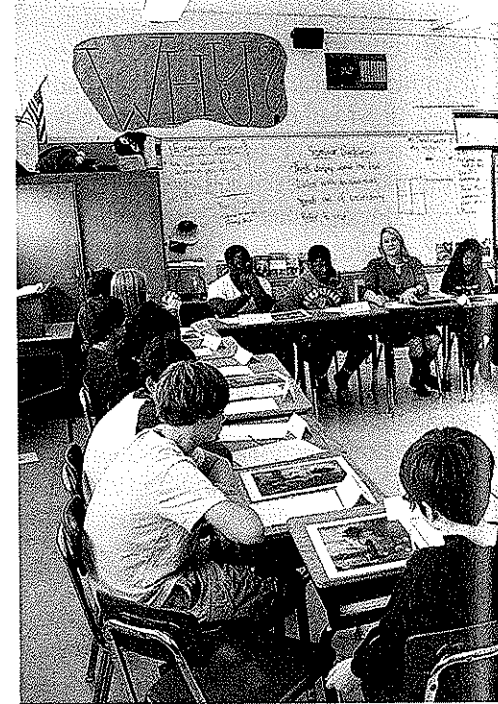


# “Think Like a



*The speaking and listening skills promoted by Paideia seminars are also the key to engaging students in more rigorous reading, writing, and thinking.*

## **Laura Billings and Terry Roberts**

**T**he Common Core initiative calls for implementing fewer, tougher standards for literacy instruction. Seen from a student's perspective, the standards ask a lot in terms of effort and focus. As educators, we have to ask ourselves, How can we motivate students to care enough about what they read and write to put in the hard work necessary to meet these higher standards?

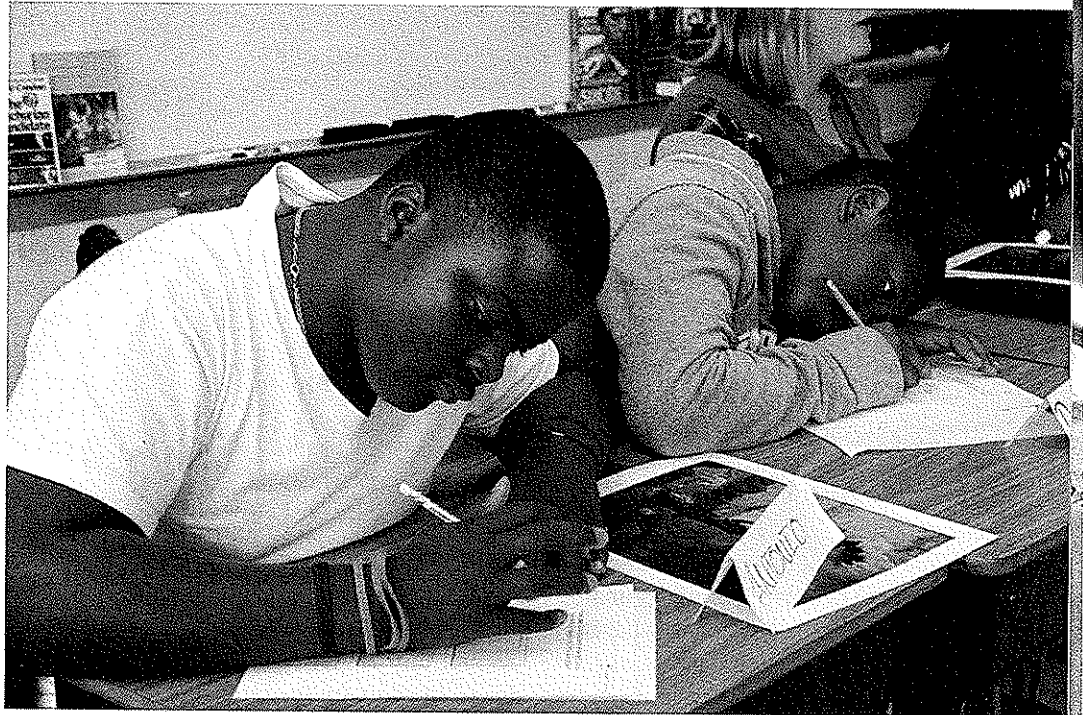
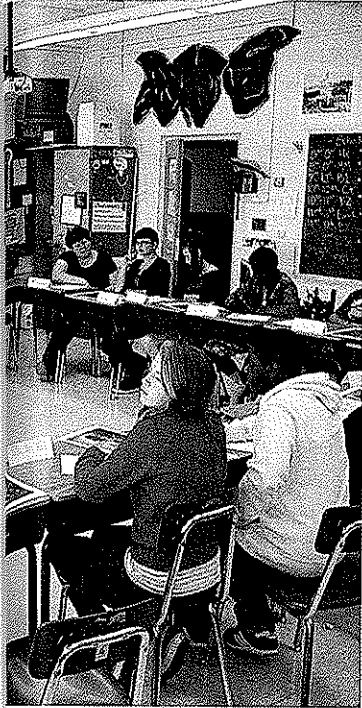
Spoken dialogue offers one key. This point was brought home to us in 2010 when we interviewed Melissa Hedt, the literacy coach at Asheville Middle School in Asheville, North Carolina.

Melissa had been piloting 6th grade Common Core instructional units that we had developed in partnership with the Literacy Design Collaborative.<sup>1</sup> The units featured a Paideia seminar—a formal, text-based dialogue—as well as extensive practice in close reading and the writing process. As Melissa told us,

We're asking our students to read very difficult texts and then throwing equally demanding writing tasks at them. Many of our students would struggle to succeed without talking about the text in a seminar. [Typically] we ask for a paragraph, and we're lucky to get a sentence. We ask for an essay, and we get half a page. But if they've participated in a seminar and discussed the text at length, then we can jump-start the writing process by having them write about what they heard and said in seminar.

Our conversation with Melissa gave us new insight into the role of formal discussion in classrooms that help students meet the standards. Because the Common Core standards include explicit anchor standards for speaking and listening (see p. 70), we had already been arguing that faithful implementation of the standards must include formal classroom dialogue. Now, we began to realize that practice in speaking and listening might also be the key to engaging students in more rigorous reading and writing. That's why we are working closely with a variety of educators through the Literacy Design Collaborative to pilot Common Core-related units of study built on a consistent instructional plan: (1) multiple

# Seminar”



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close readings of a text that is rich in ideas, relevant to the curriculum, and open to interpretation; (2) formal discussion of the ideas embedded in the text; and finally, (3) planning, drafting, revising, and editing student essays in response to the text.

## The Paideia Seminar

Participating in classroom discussions of challenging texts gives students the freedom to express their own thoughts with their own voices through the powerful prisms of their own personalities. Such discussions enable students to reach a deeper level of understanding, which can then inform their writing. Almost always, the result is more authentic writing and better academic performance.

In the dozens of Paideia schools across the United States, the opportunity to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations is standard

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practice, most notably in the form of the Paideia seminar—“a collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about a text” (Adler, 1982, p. 29). Formal seminar discussion is intended to teach speaking and listening skills in a way that promotes critical thinking. When the seminar model is fully implemented, students participate regularly in a variety of structured discussions in every academic discipline, including math and science.

The discussion does not happen in isolation, however. To produce the greatest benefits for student understanding, it is combined with extensive, close reading of a challenging text (before the seminar) and the full writing process (after the seminar).

## How Paideia Seminars Support the Anchor Standards

Dialogue in a Paideia seminar is closely related to the Common Core anchor standards for speaking and listening. To illustrate, let’s visit a 6th grade science classroom in which we worked with Melissa and an experienced science teacher to pilot a unit on the nature of science as a way of knowing. The primary text, excerpts from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, was supplemented with biographical sketches of several prominent scientists. The essential question driving the unit was, What do scientists do to understand the natural world?

In preparation for the seminar discussion, we worked with the teacher to lead her students through several close readings of the text, focusing on helping students develop an understanding of Shelley's vocabulary. This experience primed the students to discuss the big ideas of *creation, nature, power, and science* while continually referring to the text to explain their thinking.

The students' fascination with what happened when Victor Frankenstein used science to create a monster led them to discuss a central ethical question of scientific research: Just because we *can*, does that mean we *should*? The 20-plus students talked freely about their ideas, asked questions, and took notes on their classmates' comments. One quiet young man told us later that he only talked during seminar (and not during regular class discussions) because "during seminar, other people actually listen to what I have to say."

The first anchor standard for speaking and listening requires that students "prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively." In the *Frankenstein* seminar, as in all true Paideia seminars, the students built on one another's ideas enthusiastically. They eventually decided that scientists often wield power without considering the implications of their actions, and they saw many parallels to Victor Frankenstein's monster in contemporary life. One student mentioned the atomic bomb (they'd been studying World War II in social studies), and another brought up cloning.

Anchor Standard 3 asks that students be able to "evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric." Discussions like the one on *Frankenstein* provide a natural setting for developing this skill. In pre- and post-seminar sessions, students are coached to agree and disagree

## The Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

### Comprehension and Collaboration

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

### Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Source: From *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (p. 22). Copyright © 2010, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers. All rights reserved. Retrieved from [www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI\\_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf).

respectfully as they synthesize their ideas. In addition, the seminar questions themselves are designed to require that students support their statements with frequent references to the evidence and rhetoric within the text (Billings & Roberts, 2009). Open-ended questions prepared by the teacher facilitating the *Frankenstein* seminar included the following:

- Is the narrator's "ardour" for "natural philosophy, and particularly chemistry" a curse or a blessing? Refer to the text.
- The narrator is haunted by an essential question: "Whence . . . did the principle of life proceed?" In essence, what is he asking? How does he answer the question?
- The narrator tells us "how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world." What does he mean by this? Do you agree?

The teacher also inserted spontaneous questions as the discussion developed. For example, at one point in the

seminar she responded to a student's comment with the following:

Stephen is saying that Victor Frankenstein was right to build the monster as an experiment; his mistake was in losing control of the experiment once it came to life. Based on the text, do you agree? Why or why not?

To make a claim during a seminar discussion, students know they have to refer to the text in detail; one student told us that "you have to have facts to back up your argument." For example, in responding to Stephen's assertion, one student referred to the text in arguing that Victor Frankenstein had no right to create something he should have known he couldn't control. A second student agreed, quoting the text to illustrate Frankenstein's fear of the monster.

Paideia seminars require students to consistently practice presenting "information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning," as described in Anchor Standard 4. Students are coached to participate in formal seminar

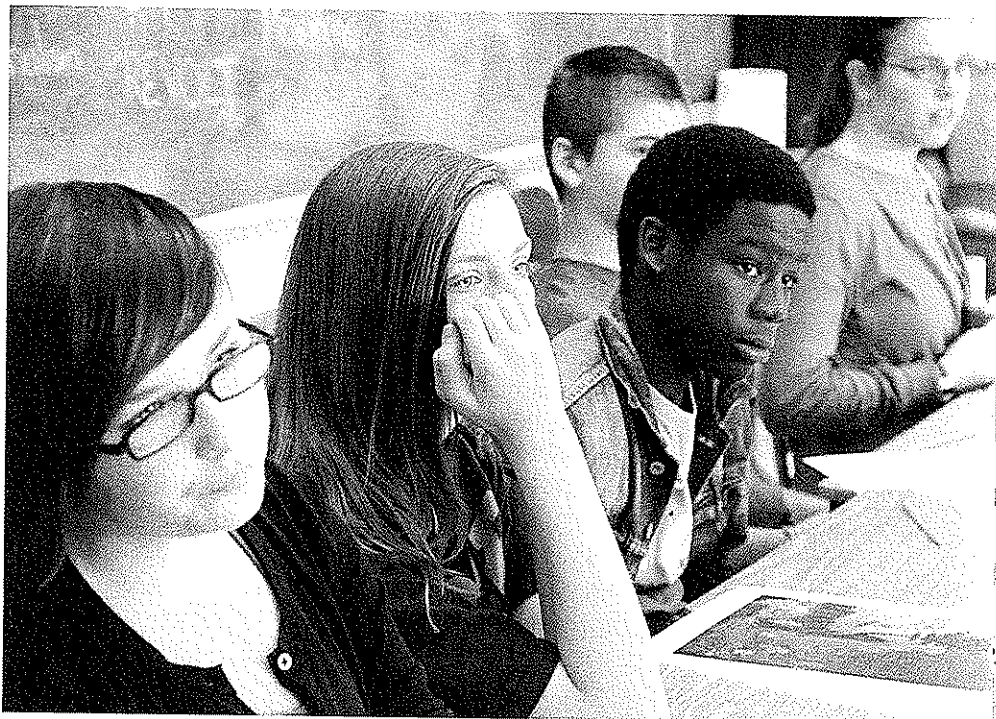
discussions in an appropriate way: agreeing and disagreeing (tactfully) by providing evidence from the text; listening carefully to others without interrupting; and thinking before speaking.

For example, when the two students in the Frankenstein seminar argued that Victor Frankenstein had no right to create something he couldn't control, a girl who had been listening attentively through much of the seminar respectfully disagreed, contending that Frankenstein could not have known in advance what the monster's strength would be like and therefore couldn't have anticipated his own fear and loss of control. It was obvious that she had carefully considered the preceding arguments in formulating her own ideas. The first two students responded that if Frankenstein couldn't predict the monster's power, he never should have created him.

As the seminar went on, other students joined both sides of this argument—always in a civil manner, taking care to think before they spoke. In this way, the seminar experience trains students for the myriad of other conversations they will experience both in the classroom and in life, from group work to job interviews, in private conversation as well as public discourse.

Anchor Standard 6 asks students to “adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.” The Paideia seminar commonly incorporates a variety of communication contexts. Teachers often use it in conjunction with small-group discussions and even assign partners for the seminar circle itself, so that students can alternate between talking with one or two others and addressing the whole group. In addition, seminar participation prepares students for a variety of other formal and informal conversations in the classroom: debates, interviews, teacher conferences, and team assignments.

Although using formal English is not



## Text-based discussion is simply an extended form of close reading.

a requirement of seminar participation (correcting student grammar would interrupt the flow of the discussion), students learn correct usage through practice, especially as they revise their original spoken statements during the writing process. In other words, students first learn fluency and then, through comfortable and consistent practice, learn the conventions of formal English. Years of consistent seminar experience help even shy students adapt much more quickly to making formal speeches and presentations. Ease and fluency in one setting are transferable to other settings if students are given enough opportunities to practice these skills.

### From Speaking and Listening to Reading and Writing

Clearly, the Paideia seminar is a natural way to teach the Common Core anchor standards for speaking and listening.

What might be less obvious—and what has become clear to us through our work—is the intimate connection between reading, discussion, and writing. Although the Common Core standards don't mention this connection explicitly, it is implied throughout. As Francis Bacon wrote more than 400 years ago, “Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man” (1601/1942, p. 207).

If we attempt to teach the Common Core standards for reading, speaking, listening, and writing as separate activities, we are making a fundamental instructional error. Text-based discussion is simply an extended form of close reading, and writing is a means of documenting the rewards of thoughtful conversation. Indeed, the Common Core standards demand text-based writing at the highest level, which requires students to consistently cite textual evidence in support of their claims—a habit of mind that students practice regularly in seminar discussions.

Every Paideia unit we have developed for the Literacy Design Collaborative over the past several years includes a

build in Transition to Writing phase in which the teacher introduces the writing process and discusses the specific writing task in detail. This transition phase comes immediately after the seminar so that teachers can help students transfer the richness of the discussion into their notes, grabbing ideas before they get away. Students begin the writing process with a wealth of things to write about—their own ideas and those of other seminar participants, often synthesized into something much more sophisticated than any one student would have produced working in isolation.

During the 2011–12 school year, Melissa Hedt and a group of seven teachers at Asheville Middle School formed a working group to conduct a yearlong exploration of the connection between dialogue and writing, and the use of both to meet the Common Core standards.<sup>2</sup> In their final report, the group documented what it had discovered:

Preliminary results from a range of data sources show a positive impact on student learning and teacher growth. . . . Several data sources show a quantifiable increase in student understanding and making connections with complex texts and high levels of engagement during the seminar discussion. Through interviews, students have expressed enjoyment and engagement with Paideia seminars. Student writing samples exhibit a quantifiable increase in understanding of complexity and nuance of ideas, as well as increased ability to express their ideas in writing. (Hedt & Melville, 2012, p. 3)

Although this is only a preliminary study (of approximately 300 6th, 7th, and 8th graders), it illuminates the power of what happens when teachers teach close reading, seminar discussion, and formal writing in concert rather than as disconnected, occasional activities.

### Final Destination: Thinking

Eventually, of course, the goal is that students learn to read, think, and write

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about complex topics independently, and that too comes with time and practice. As one high school student told us, "you learn to think like a seminar," first considering multiple points of view and then merging them into something much more complex. The entire seminar or literacy cycle—close reading, formal dialogue, and exact writing—is, in fact, a thinking process that requires all three ingredients to produce clear, sophisticated understanding.

Although the Common Core approach doesn't denigrate academic content, it gives the starring role to skills—college and career-level reading, speaking, listening, and writing. These skills are generative in nature, meaning that they are intended to generate understanding and construct knowledge, not just replay known facts and assumed truths. Seen in this light, perhaps the most significant paradigm shift that teachers need to make in response to the Common Core standards is moving from a knowledge-

driven, authoritative curriculum to a skills-based, constructivist curriculum. This reorganization of the curriculum changes the role of teacher from authority to coach.

In other words, the Common Core standards assume that teachers are ultimately teaching students to think—the most difficult and important literacy skill of all. ■

<sup>1</sup>The Literacy Design Collaborative is a loose organization made up of curriculum and instruction specialists charged with designing model Common Core units of study ([www.literacydesigncollaborative.org](http://www.literacydesigncollaborative.org)).

<sup>2</sup>The group included Melissa Hedt (literacy coach), Amanda Swartzlander, Jeff Dewhirst, Jen Doherty, Nadeen Rolfe, Betsy Ray, Nick Rogowski, Jesse Pitt, and Celia Melville (a researcher from Western Carolina University). Their work was funded in part by a grant from the Asheville City Schools Foundation with support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation.

*Editor's Note:* Information about the National Paideia Center and about becoming a Paideia Partner or Affiliate School is available at [www.paideia.org](http://www.paideia.org).

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## EL Online

For more examples of how teachers can promote thinking skills while implementing the standards, read the online-only article "The Right Climate for the Core" by Janet Angelis, Karen Polsinelli, Eija Rougle, and Johanna Shogan at [www.ascd.org/el1212angelis](http://www.ascd.org/el1212angelis).

