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Discussion in Class Found To Boost Students' Literacy

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Discussion-based approaches to instruction, coupled with challenging academic demands, are positively related to students' literacy performance, a recent study has found.

The study examined the way English classes taught literature and assessed the performance of students through written tasks. It was conducted by researchers from the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement at the State University of New York at Albany.

"Past studies tended to focus on very particular techniques or were done on a smaller scale," said Arthur Applebee, one of the authors of the report in the Fall 2003 issue of the *American Educational Research Journal*. "We sought in this study to investigate the relationship between discussion-based instruction as it plays out in a wide variety of classrooms and student achievement in literacy."

The study included 64 English classes from 19 middle and high schools in five states, which were selected to represent a range of achievement levels. Researchers observed each class four times over the course of the school year, using a computer-based data system to identify signs of discussion-based teaching.

Researchers focused on open-ended questioning and discussion, the nurturing of multiple perspectives on a text, and continual class conversations about literature to determine if classes were using discussion-based approaches.

To figure out the level of academic rigor, students were surveyed on the amount of homework they were assigned and on how many revisions to assignments they typically completed.

Students then completed one written task in the fall and two written tasks in the spring to assess their literacy development during the course of the school year.

"We found a significant effect for discussion-based approaches and high academic demands on spring performance, controlling for fall performance and other related background variables," Mr. Applebee said.

"I think the interesting part [of this study] is the broad range of situations in which these approaches were effective—for students of widely varying abilities at both middle and high school, and urban and suburban school contexts," he said.

Lower Tracks Miss Out

Although the discussion-based approach to teaching showed benefits to students across the board, lower-track classes were much less likely to receive that kind of instruction, Mr. Applebee said. He noted that sometimes such an approach is reserved for Advanced Placement and other higher-level classes.

"This does not say that other ways are not important, but that this is important," he said. "And it's important for the whole range of student abilities."

Phillips Exeter Academy, a private school in Exeter, N.H., has long integrated a discussion-based method of teaching. Since 1931, faculty members have used the "Harkness method" to present a range of subjects, including English, through round-table discussions facilitated by teachers. (["Students Polishing Their 'Table' Talk,"](#) June 5, 2002.)

"We value what students have to say," said Tom Hassan, the 1,000- student academy's assistant principal. "I think because they're able to express and refine their thoughts, they understand the material and they work through it. And thus, they really master it."

The study confirms what the school has found through its own emphasis on discussion-based teaching, he said.

"Students who are fully engaged in conversation about the subject matter own it and are excited by it, and master it in ways that are difficult when you are sitting passively receiving it," Mr. Hassan said. "So I'm glad to see the studies have shown what we have experienced."