



Talking About Texts

Facilitation for Maine Humanities Council Discussion Projects, wherever they happen, involves texts.

Texts serve as a group's common ground, whether they are book-length or barely half a page, whether they are made-up stories or historical accounts, whether they are words alone or words with pictures or pictures alone.

The group has gathered in order to discuss the text – to reflect together on what another person has taken great care to say. In the course of discussing a text, people very often bring to bear their own life experience, other things they've read or heard or seen, and their own ideas about the world, in order to figure out what's going on in the text. They may take up and respond to others' ideas. The focus of the conversation, what gives it weight and specificity, is the text.

The facilitator's role is to foster this kind of discussion, by inviting people to articulate their understanding of the text, and by giving them room to reflect on how or why they understand it this way.

In over twenty years of offering facilitated reading and discussion programming – all over the state, in all sorts of settings, with all sorts of people, we have found that the surest way to foster rich, reflective discussion about a text is to draw attention to specific parts of it, to ask simple, open questions about it, and to keep drawing attention back to it.

Be the bowl.

Hold the discussion, the way a bowl holds water.

Firstly,

Be the bowl.

The goal of our book groups is for the people participating to have room to think, to develop and articulate their own interpretations of complex texts, and to engage with their fellow participants in rich discussions about those texts.

The facilitator's role is to set the conditions that allow such a discussion to unfold, without quite being a part of the discussion themselves. The facilitator *holds* the discussion, the way a bowl holds water.

In practice, this often means staying quiet even though there are many interesting and relevant things you feel you could say.

When the text is compelling and the conversation is lively (or when it feels stalled), it's easy to want to share your own ideas about the text, or your own way of understanding it, or an experience of your own that the text calls to mind for you – but be cautious. A facilitator's interpretation can, without meaning to, make other people hesitate to try out their own or listen fully to others'.

It's also easy, especially at the beginning of a series or session, to feel responsible for responding directly to every participant's observation. Here too, be cautious. Responding to or paraphrasing participants' comments too often can prevent participants from responding to each other, and thus, again without meaning to, prevent a full, rich discussion from developing.

Attending closely to the discussion without quite joining it; asking the right open question at the right moment; inviting people into their own thinking without leading with yours ... *holding* the discussion the way a bowl holds water takes a great deal of warm, interested attention and surprisingly few words.

Choose particular passages...

It's impossible to discuss every poem in a collection, or every element of even a short narrative or essay, in a single hour-and-a-half session. And it's easy for the discussion to veer and loop from one favorite poem or character or incident to the next, or to wander off into generalities.

Grounding the discussion in a particular section – a single poem, a few important paragraphs, the cover or a single illustration – can help to focus the group's attention. This focus often enables people to raise issues and cite passages from elsewhere in the text with greater ease, and to reflect with greater clarity about why they have done so.

...and read them aloud.

Having someone in the group read the poem or passage that the group is about to discuss out loud underscores that this passage, these words, are now a common experience, available to everyone in the group for discussion.

Sometimes it's helpful to hear the same section more than once, in different people's voices.

Or try having the section read out once or twice, then suggest: "as we hear this part again, pay attention to which words and phrases stand out to you, or notice how you react to it ...". Then have it read again.

Or have one person read it, then discuss it a little, then have another person read it again, then discuss it some more, and so on until the group feels finished.

Ask simple, open questions.

Simple, open questions about the text invite people to interpret what they read on their own terms. Such questions afford people the opportunity to bring their own experience to bear in making their interpretation – without obliging anyone to divulge anything they feel to be private.

What is going on in this poem?
in this part of the story?
in this passage?
in this picture?

What else do you notice?
about this passage?
about this character?
about this place?
about this poem?

Questions about the particular characters, situations, and places in a text can also be asked in this open, simple way.

Why did this character do this?
What else could this character have done?
How did this situation get to be how it is?
Why is this place this way?
What do the characters think about this situation? this place?

It may be that the poem or passage or picture raises some big concepts to talk about. Questions about big concepts can be kept simple and open in this same way too.

What is hope?
What is community?
What is the difference between shelter and home?

Keep going back to the text itself.

What makes you say that?
What in this poem / passage / picture makes you say that?

It can be easy to get lost talking about memories or ideas or current events that a passage has brought to mind.

‘What makes you say that?’ is one good follow-up question that invites people to look again, or more closely, at the text itself, and brings the group’s attention back to this particular author’s words. Often, this is the question that most clearly requires reflection, and that most effectively makes room for people to really think about *how* they understand the text. Here is where, as they say, the rubber meets the road. As a facilitator, it may sometimes feel difficult, or superfluous, to ask ‘what makes you say that?’ ... but try it anyway. See what happens.

Different genres do different things – but we don't have to.

Whatever kind of text it is, choosing a particular piece, asking simple open questions about it, and bringing attention back to it again and again ... works.

Poems often put people off at first: 'I don't do poetry.' 'I can't understand poems.'

But starting in with 'what do you notice?' or 'what's going on here?' can sidestep it.

Illustrations that accompany a text are often an excellent starting point for a discussion.

And starting with 'what's happening in this picture?' and 'what does this picture tell us about the story?' can keep the momentum as discussion moves to the text.

Stories, short or long, can catch people up in assessing whether an event is plausible or not, or derived from the author's own experience or not, or whether they like it or not.

But 'what makes you say that?' can invite people to refine these surface, binary, notions.

Non-fiction texts, in which an author is sharing their own past, or an account of historical events, or their research about some aspect of the world, sometimes leave people feeling that there's no room for them to think: 'The author is an expert, so I can't say.' 'That research makes no sense.' 'What's the point of digging up that history.' 'That can't have happened.'

But people writing about themselves, the past, and the world are still just people trying to say things they find important. Starting from and returning to the text itself can help the group focus on what this particular text is actually doing, and give people time to see how they *can* think about it: 'what do you notice about this passage?' 'what is going on in this passage?' and, over and over, 'what makes you say that?'

Prepare, prepare, prepare.

The facilitator's familiarity with the texts is, of course, fundamental to the whole endeavor.

Choose more passages than you will need.

Know which one you plan to start with, and have in mind a rough sequence of passages – but be prepared to alter your sequence, if need be, as the discussion unfolds.

Prepare lots and lots of simple, open questions.

It can be difficult to frame simple, open questions on the fly. It's easier to ask leading questions, or yes/no questions, or questions about people's lives. Have a large store of simple, open questions about each text so that you never feel at a loss.

Be able to provide necessary context.

Sharing one or two crucial pieces of information about a text can help a group understand and engage with it more deeply: an important fact about the time or place of writing, the events depicted, or the author, say. The trick, of course, is to give only crucial context that illuminates the text. Providing too much can accidentally eat up the group's time, or distract people from the goal – their own discussion of the text itself.

MHC will provide some basic materials, but we encourage facilitators to provide the context that seems appropriate to them, for this text, for this group, at this time.

Invite your group to prepare too.

Reading in advance of each session is a vital part of the group's experience. Inviting them to pay attention to a particular character or question, or to note passages that they find striking, can help people read with greater attention and participate in the discussion with greater confidence. Ask, sometimes, whether someone in the group has in mind a passage for discussion – and start there, or move there next.