



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

## Engaging and Empowering Students to Discuss Literature

I have loved literature for as long as I can remember, and great stories have always seemed like a conversation with a close friend. As an English instructor, I feel blessed when I read stories that give me a glimpse into a world I know little about—from the experiences of an impoverished sharecropping family in William Faulkner's *Barn Burning* to the heroic journey of love made by Phoenix Jackson in Eudora Welty's *A Worn Path*. In these stories, the characters are born in different times and experience hardships that I have not. What I do know, however, is that no matter how different the story's historical, political, social, or economical settings are from my own story, the characters' lives are rife with truths and lessons that are just as applicable today. These stories offer a deeper look at life and show real consequences for choices made by the characters. As these stories are shared and discussed with students, the characters become sage friends advising our students on how to live their own lives.

These discussions offer a way for students to engage in collaborative inquiry and construct knowledge through analyzing texts. They also engage students in critical thinking and critical thought, and perhaps more importantly, they remind students that they are not alone in their life stories. Many students do not always understand the value of examining lives through literature and lack the self-confidence to engage in conversation about what they have read. Thus, English instructors often experience low-level student engagement in literary discussions. This is in large part because students often suffer in their learning experiences because they do not understand the relevancy of the material and spend minimal time on task. Hence, it is imperative that instructors make students aware of the value of literature and its relevance to their lives. Only then can they become truly interested, take responsibility for their own learning, and improve discussion skills.

Teaching literature to students who are unmotivated to learn can be a difficult challenge for any instructor to overcome. First, instructors must show students how to see their realities reflected in texts. When students make personal connections, learning becomes much more authentic, more exciting, and more meaningful for them. Second, instructors need to engage students by

empowering them with confidence. Many students come to class with low self-esteem and even lower perceptions of their academic abilities. This results in a lack of confidence to read a story and then make valuable contributions to class discussions. They either feel they have nothing relevant to say, or they fear that what they say might be wrong. Some students may not read the story at all to avoid having to discuss it in class. Our task as instructors is to instill confidence and motivate students to believe they have something worthwhile to contribute to class discussions.

Students need to be affirmed and valued by their instructors, called by name, and know they will be missed when they do not attend class. Students need to be acknowledged and encouraged to expound upon their thoughts. Through affirmation and prompting, students can work through self-esteem issues, past criticisms and hidden biases, to form their own concrete understanding from an informed perspective. As instructors, we must meet our students where they are in their lives and take them a step further. As we teach what we hope will be illuminating lessons, we must understand that we have no real idea what experiences our students have endured, and which of these experiences may have silenced them from speaking. We can only hope that we build an environment that periodically reminds them that the classroom is a safe place to discuss and to reflect on literature, themselves, and society.

Finally, literature is a powerful tool for learning, discussing, and collaborating in classrooms. Rich, meaningful discussions of literature can encourage students to define problems, ask questions, participate in dialogue, and learn through self-reflection. When students read, comprehend, and respond to good literature, they develop far more than literacy skills. They participate in the human experience, becoming more compassionate and tolerant of the lives around them. Instructors have the responsibility of providing an environment that engages and empowers students to find their own voices.

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