



July 15, 2015

ISSN 1094-5296

Haroutunian-Gordon, S. (2014). *Interpretive discussions: Engaging students in text-based conversations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

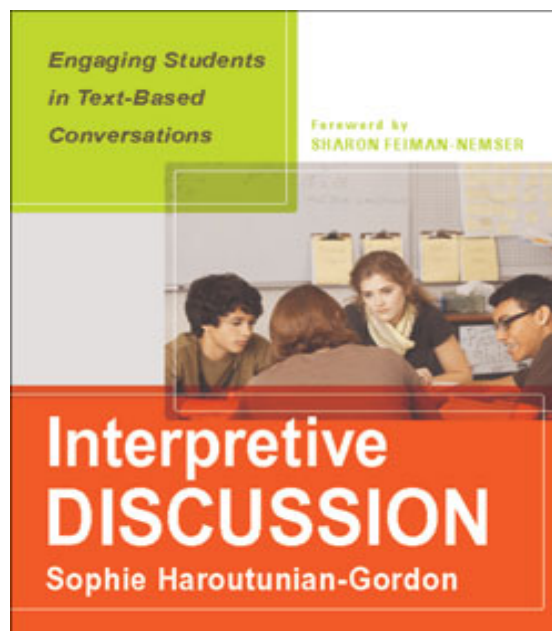
Pp. xi-230

ISBN: 9781475805284

Reviewed by Lisa Rose Johnson
Mississippi State University-Meridian
United States

Prior to the development and implementation of Common Core State Standards, classroom teachers facilitated discussions by encouraging students to share their experiences while attempting to make connections to what they have read. These ineffective question and answer sessions, relied on the students to use their prior experiences or included simple comprehension questions. These free flowing discussions did not allow students to acquire skills that would lead to a deeper understanding of what the students had read. In order to make discussions more meaningful, teachers need training on how to construct interpretive discussion questions. This is where Haroutunian-Gordon (2014) *Interpretive Discussions: Engaging Students in Text-Based Conversations*, can assist teachers. This is Haroutunian-Gordon's third text on the subject matter of using interpretive discussions. This book is a step by step guide with annotated examples to show how teachers can immediately develop interpretive questions for any text and from any academic discipline. The books shows how to develop, deliver and reflect on the process of leading an interpretive discussion.

It is well known that all teachers engage in asking questions, however not all questioning



methods allow students to gain a deeper knowledge of texts while interacting with classmates about the content they have read. Currently, 43 states the District of Columbia, Guam, U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa and Northern Mariana Islands have adopted Common Core State Standards. Common Core State Standards require all students enrolled in K-12 classrooms to interpret what they have read and engage in what is called a close reading of a text. As a result of the adoption of these standards, teachers must construct lessons where students must find the deeper meaning that is embedded in the text. One effective method to assist students in this process is for teachers to develop effective interpretive discussion questions and facilitate a discussion that uses these questions. The goal of these interpretive discussions is to help students to think for themselves and to draw meaning from any type of media that they consume. Haroutunian-Gordon (2014) also states that the key to using interpretive discussion questions, is to guide students by asking leading questions during the classroom discussions. This can be accomplished through a three part process that is outlined in the book.

In order for interpretive discussions to be effective, teachers must use texts that are ambiguous. Haroutunian-Gordon's book itself is anything but ambiguous, the book is divided into 3 main sections (preparation, leading the discussion and reflection) and also includes an appendix that includes all of the questions used during the sample discussions. Additionally a unique feature of this book is that example interpretive discussions are built around a poem, an essay and a lecture. Haroutunian-Gordon chose to use poem "Schoolmaster" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the essay "Rats" by Konrad Lorenz and finally Toni Morrison's "Nobel Laureate Lecture." Using these texts above Haroutunian-Gordon guides the reader on exactly how to engage students in interpretive discussions that truly allow the students to become deeply engaged in the texts that they read.

In order to understand the rationale for using interpretive discussions the reader must understand the current educational climate. When preparing students for college and career readiness, which is the aim of Common Core State Standards, students are expected to become proficient in thinking for themselves. The Common Core State Standards also

ask teachers to prepare students who can form educated opinions, based on the literature and or media that they are exposed to. Interpretive discussion as defined Haroutunian-Gordon, enable both the students and the teachers to focus on rather than ignore what they do not understand, and to address points of doubt the meaning of objects by questioning, scrutinizing, speaking, listening and reasoning (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2014, p. 3).

Teachers need to keep in mind that the purpose of using interpretive texts is to allow students in a democratic society to develop skills related to success across multiple academic disciplines (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2014, p. 5). Additional there are four benefits of using interpretive discussions that are discussed in the text. The first benefit of interpretive discussions is to allow the teacher to act as a facilitator who leads the students on a journey of collaboration, by having the students clarify and expand on what their classmates are saying. A second benefit is that interactive discussions help students to engage in active listening. By increasing active listening skills the students can grasp the intended meanings of their classmates (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2014, p. 6). The third benefit is that students will have the opportunity to practice their skills in forming sound arguments based on textual evidence. The fourth and final benefit is that using interpretive discussions allows students to form cooperative groups that work towards both individual and common goals (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2014).

In the second chapter, Haroutunian-Gordon discuss how to select texts. Teachers must understand the importance of using texts that have ambiguity. The book explains the selection criteria for choosing texts that are appropriate for the students who will participate in the discussion. The major takeaway from this chapter is the importance of knowing the difference between the suitability versus discussability as it relates to text selection (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2014, p. 45). When it comes to selecting a text, teachers need to follow rules that will allow a text too meet both of these criteria.

After selecting a text that has ambiguity a teacher much then work on preparing a cluster of eight questions. Chapter 3 outlines the process of writing these “leading questions.” Haroutunian-Gordon states that effective leading questions should

be written down and include a page number (or line number if it is a poem) to make it easier for the facilitation to take place during the discussion.

Leading questions should be written from the *angel of pursuing the point of genuine doubt* (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2014, p. 52). If the questions are about places in the text that show ambiguity or doubt, the facilitator can assist students to draw conclusions based on what they have read. Additionally, this chapter has tables that provide clarification on how to properly write and revise questions.

After the questions have been developed and written it is time for the teacher to act as facilitator. The next part of the book (Part Two, Leading the Discussion) shows exactly how Haroutunian-Gordon took on the role as a facilitator in each setting. The text explains how Haroutunian-Gordon went into three different classrooms with students who were not her own and completed the discussions. As stated before, the job of the facilitator is to guide students using leading questions that were developed during the planning phase. For example, the discussion that was led using the poem “Schoolmaster” included sophomores enrolled in an honors English class in a suburban independent high school. The essay “Rats” took place during a science lesson and included student participants who had never engaged in an interpretive discussion before. Finally the participants who completed the interpretive discussion on Toni Morrison's Nobel Laureate Lecture, were seniors in a high school in a low SES area. These discussion were transcribed and an annotated examples is provided to allow the reader to see exactly how the students interacted with the facilitator and each other. In addition to the annotated dialogues, Haroutunian-Gordon explains the challenges and provides guidance on how to assist students without getting in the way of students constructing their own meaning.

The next part of the interpretive discussion process is presented in Chapter 7 Reflecting on the Three Interpretive Dialogues. In this chapter, Haroutunian-Gordon includes actual transcripts from all three of the discussions that she led. The transcripts and the analysis of the transcripts shows what was effective and perhaps not so effective based on the responses of the students who participated in the discussions. This type of direct text analysis is crucial for all teachers to see if their teaching methods

are effective. All teachers need to be reflective practitioners and when something is implemented for the first time it is important to take note of what has worked and not worked so that adaptations can be made in the future. It is also important that teachers continue to develop questions and reflect each time they engage in any lesson and are not quick to abandon new techniques if the lesson does not go as planned after implementation. Create effective lessons using this strategy will take time and lots of practice.

The concluding chapter of the book (Conclusion: Using Interpretive Discussions in the Classroom) includes direct observations from educators who have integrated interpretive discussion into their own curriculum. These teachers reflect on the usefulness of the discussions and also discuss pitfalls such as finding time to go through the process of writing the 8 questions. Like all good teaching pedagogy implementation, advanced planning and finding time during the day for this to occur is a necessary. It is important to know how long to have for this kind of lesson, one teacher stated that her interpretive discussions could take up to three days for a single topic. Three days may be excesses for some teachers, so teachers will need to establish their own rules with regard to how to use this method. An additional argument that was included in the book related to finding texts for subject areas such as math. Finding appropriate texts may be difficult, so teachers may need to rely on texts that utilize STEM and include those as opposed to finding articles that singularly apply to math. Math teachers may also find collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines as an effective way to find appropriate texts to use in their classrooms. The chapter also discusses how to assess these interactions. Some teachers relied on rubrics or rereading their notes from the discussion to calibrate grades. In addition to the other concerns listed above, teachers who use this interpretive discussions may need to work on changing the expectations of their students. Many students may experience discomfort and a general fear related to not answering questions correctly (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2014, p. 158). In addition, students may lack patience with this method of instruction. For some students who have not been challenged in the past, this may be the first time students are asked to answer questions that have no

direct correct or incorrect answer. Teachers also need to be sure to provide an adequate level of facilitation, so that students can build sound arguments while not losing their patience or focus while the discussions are taking place.

As a teacher educator who comes from a constructivist paradigm, this book truly exemplifies what it is to be a facilitator in classrooms where the emphasis is on students deriving their own meaning when they read a text. After reading *Interpretive Discussions: Engaging Students in Text-Based Conversations* I now have a better understanding of how to use interpretive discussions. I appreciated how the author ends the book by telling the reader it is now their turn to start using interpretive discussions. I also found the appendixes to be a helpful tool that should be consulted when developing questions. All teachers (regardless of the grade levels that they teach) need to establish routines that allow for students to be engaged in their own learning. All teachers will benefit from the content of this book as it provides clear guidance on how to write and ask interpretive discussion questions.

About the Reviewer

Lisa Rose Johnson

Assistant Professor


Mississippi State University-Meridian

Lisa Rose Johnson Ed.D. is an assistant professor of Special Education at Mississippi State University-Meridian. Prior to joining the faculty at MSU-M she spent over ten years as a classroom teacher in Louisiana and New Jersey. She taught students with high incidence disabilities and students who required English as a Second Language (ESL) support. Her work focuses on helping classroom teachers meet the needs of all learners, and increasing awareness of the specific needs of Generation 1.5 students.

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