

Inviting Conversation: 2005

Dr. Rebecca G. Taylor
Gustavus Adolphus College

Before the conversation begins:

- Identify your goals. What do you hope will ensue? *Any* conversation? *Good* conversation? *Lively* conversation? *Intelligent* conversation? What's the difference? How do you define these kinds of conversations? How do we know when we've achieved them?
- Map a pathway through the discussion. This might involve generating sample questions yourself (yes, write them down!); identifying passages that you find interesting/troubling/provocative/important (yes, use a sticky note!); planning specific discussion activities or ice-breakers to get people talking.
- Remember: good conversation often occurs in "stages." Participants may need to talk about personal, gut responses before they're able to make insightful comments about characters, themes, or the writer's skills. But try not to get mired in one particular stage. It's not helpful to spend 45 minutes hearing what everyone hated or loved about the book. But it can be useful to identify moments that were really tough to read or really joyful and then talk about why those moments are important! What do they say about our values as readers? Our beliefs as human beings? Our experiences as people born or not born in the United States? And so on.

Once the group meets:

- Preview what's going to happen in the session; let your participants know what they can expect or what you hope will happen during the conversation.
- Ask genuine questions—ones you really can't answer. People can spot a canned question a mile away ("Do you think the scarlet "A" on Hester Prynne's chest is intended to MEAN something?")
- Ask open-ended questions—ones that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." For instance, "Why do you think Amir was able to summon the courage to help Hassan's son, but not Hassan? What was different the second time around?"
- Invite personal reflection and personal and cultural connections:

"What did you know about Afghanistan before reading this novel? Where did that knowledge come from?"

“If you were going to describe this novel to friends at another college, what would you say?”

“How did the book help you see the country differently?”

“Which character did you identify with most? Why?”

“What surprised you as a reader?”

“What scene was the most difficult one to read? Why?”

“Is this a hopeful novel?” Why or why not?

- Think about a novel as a writer’s attempt to communicate with readers. Try to encourage your participants to think about what the author is trying to say, to whom, and for what purpose.
- Give participants time to think about the questions. Don’t fear “dead air”—a few minutes of silence can be a good opportunity to reflect and formulate ideas.
- Consider time to write briefly—and very, very informally--about the book at the start of the discussion. You might bring note cards or scratch paper and pencils to your session for this purpose. People often feel much less intimidated about talking when they’ve had a chance to formulate their thoughts in writing.
- Try to avoid these conversation killers:

Too little “wait time”—Always give people at minute or two to respond to a question. Don’t fear the quiet—it just means they’re thinking!

Too much evaluation—We’ve all been in a classroom where we know the professor has a “right” answer in mind to her question. Don’t make comments to signal that one of your group members is “right” or “wrong” when s/he speaks.

Too many yes/ no questions—“Didn’t you feel awful when Amir didn’t do anything to save Hassan?” ‘Nuff said.

Too many “symbolism” questions—“Why was the kite’s tail blue?” Readers want to make connections, try to understand the experiences of others, and question the moves a writer makes.

When it's time to end the discussion:

- Give your participants a chance to look ahead to their future at Gustavus. Ask them to reflect on how reading this book might change their actions, choices, or beliefs in the coming weeks.
- Allow participants to reflect on what was valuable about the discussion; allow them to talk about what wasn't valuable, too.
- See if you can make a connection to the classroom experiences that will soon take place. How was this discussion like/ not like the discussions they might have about literature in other places on campus?
- Say thanks. Let them know you appreciate their willingness to talk to one another and to you.