DATA-DRIVEN
Shakespeare

Enhance literature classrooms by using writing to drive conversation.

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo

When it comes to teaching English, Shakespearean sonnets reflect both our deepest hopes and our greatest fears. We hope that these poems will give students rich opportunities to think critically and independently. But we fear that the challenging content will frustrate students who struggle with comprehension and critical reading. How can we set the bar high, but also help students clear it?

Imagine two different middle school teachers working to meet this challenge. Both of their classes are studying a complex text, Shakespeare's Sonnet 65. To develop their students' close reading skills, both teachers have asked students to pay special attention to the first quatrain of the sonnet,

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,

But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,

How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,

Whose action is no stronger than a flower?

and its final two lines,

O, none, unless this miracle have might,

That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

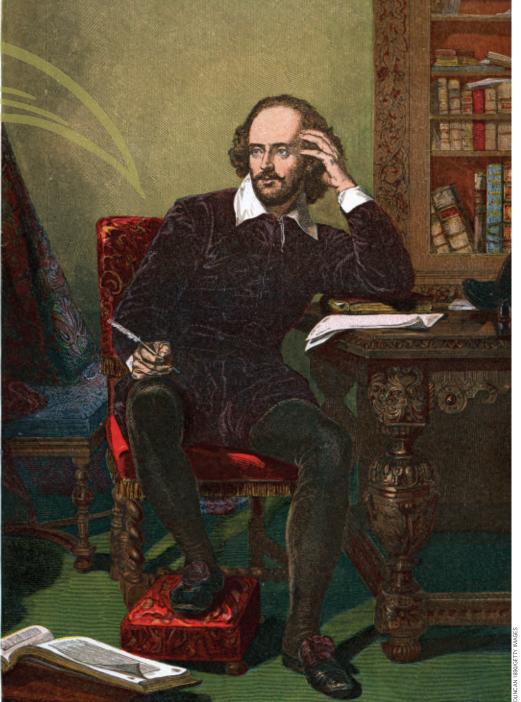If you listen in on the students' discussion in both class-rooms, you might think the lessons were equally rigorous and invigorating. As each class discusses how Shakespeare's use of figurative language helps convey the theme of his sonnet, the students contrast the poet's association of beauty with a delicate "flower," and his use of "brass," "stone," "earth," and "boundless sea" to depict strength. Students also connect this language to the broader theme of the poem—that art, and writing in particular, can give beauty a chance to survive time. A few students make insightful comments that draw the conversation to a powerful close. All in all, it's a rich, engaging conversation.

Yet if you later assess how well the students in each class analyze a different sonnet in writing, one class will significantly outperform the other. What will make the difference? The teacher of the higher-performing class—Hadley Roach, who teaches at North Star Academy in Newark, New Jersey—has transformed a great literature discussion into deeper learning by skillfully incorporating an under-utilized technique: She asks her students to write before they speak.

Integrating writing into the daily work of language arts instruction can be one of the most powerful tools for improving reading achievement, according to a recent study by Chandra L. Alston and Michelle T. Brown.[1] These researchers compared two groups of students—a group that made remarkable gains on standardized tests and another whose scores improved much less significantly—and considered what kinds of writing tasks the students in each

DUNCAN 1890/GETTY IMAGES

a student to initiate the conversation, Hadley asks every student to write an answer to the prompt, *What is the purpose of the imagery in these lines?*

Write first, talk second—it's a simple strategy, but one that's underused in literature classrooms. Students tend to formulate their ideas more thoughtfully and precisely in writing. And when they write first, *all* students get an opportunity to verbalize their thoughts—not only the most extroverted students, who might normally dominate the discussion.

In a traditional class, **as soon as students finish** reading the poem, **the class discussion begins.**

In traditional classrooms where discussion occurs first, by the time students are asked to write, they can generate an answer on the basis of what other students said rather than on their own comprehension. Thus, the final essay becomes an exercise in listening comprehension, not text analysis. Teachers can walk away with the false impression that their students have comprehended the material independently. In contrast, writing first gives a clearer picture of what students really understand so that the teacher can better respond to their true needs.

group had experienced. The results were dramatic. Students in the higher-achieving group were far more likely to have been assigned rigorous writing prompts in class and to have received feedback on their responses.

How can teachers make in-class writing a daily reality in their classrooms? Here are four simple instructional moves that Hadley Roach uses.

1. Write First, Talk Second

Let's go back to the beginning of the class discussion. In a traditional class, as soon as students finish reading the poem, the class discussion begins with either student reactions or a well-formulated question by the teacher. But in Hadley's class, the first thing that happens, before any conversation takes place, is writing. Instead of calling on

2. Spar with an Exemplar

Although the initial responses to the writing prompt are not graded, students will eventually be asked to write an analysis that shows what they have learned. Most of us who teach literacy have grappled with the difficulty of grading student essays objectively. When you have 30 papers before you, how do you decide what constitutes a high-level response versus a mid-level or low-level response? A rubric

is a helpful starting point, but applying a numbered list of criteria to a fully fleshed-out essay is still a challenge. What does a good answer really look like for this particular prompt?

The solution: When you create your final writing prompt, write not only the question students are to answer, but also an exemplar response for your own information. For example, here's an exemplar Hadley could use to set the bar for her students to respond to her pre-discussion writing prompt about Sonnet 65:

Sonnet 65 and also compares notes with other educators teaching the poem. In this way, she gets a clear sense of what a deep understanding of Sonnet 65 would look like, even for someone who has interpreted it differently than she has.

This sparring greatly enhances Hadley's own understanding of the poem and prepares her to manage students' multiple interpretations. It can also unearth common areas of focus (for example, she notices that all the critics focus on the words "shines bright" in

to get something down on paper. Then she moves on to students who write more slowly, thus giving them some extra time to formulate the beginning to their own answers so that she can respond meaningfully.

Use symbols to give feedback. The second obstacle to giving efficient feedback is the amount of time it takes to interact with each student. Hadley plans a few specific symbols she can routinely use to give feedback on students' writing. Here are some of the symbols she uses as she circulates:

> Feedback is one of the most important drivers to improve critical reading and writing. So **why limit feedback to summative essays** at the end of a unit?

Shakespeare engineers a contrast between beauty and time in his first quatrain. He offers up the concrete images of "brass," "stone," and "boundless sea" only to remind the reader that they will be destroyed by time despite their apparent strength. When he compares beauty to a "flower" in line 4, that flower seems so weak in comparison to the metal, rock, and sea used to represent time's strength that beauty's doom at time's hands seems a foregone conclusion. The imagery in these lines shows how hopeless the narrator believes beauty's fate looks at the beginning of the poem.

Why spend the time writing an exemplar when students will complete their own analyses and we don't want to steer them to only one correct answer? Because you really can't do justice to their analyses without thinking through the desired response in advance. In fact, many excellent teachers do more than just write their own exemplar—they "spar" with other exemplars. In preparing her writing prompt, Hadley reads up on the most important critics who have analyzed

the sonnet's final lines). In the process, Hadley has become a better student of Shakespeare herself, which makes her a better teacher.

3. Give In-Class Feedback on Students' Writing

Feedback is one of the most important drivers to improve critical reading and writing. So why limit feedback to summative essays at the end of a unit? Hadley gives students feedback on their writing every day. Here are three key actions that help her find the time.

Create a monitoring pathway. Most teachers who circulate the classroom to give feedback gravitate toward the students who usually struggle or those who raise their hands for help. The cost of this approach is that few other students receive support. To prevent this problem, Hadley monitors students' writing in a pre-set, strategic order, which she calls her *monitoring pathway*. Perhaps counterintuitively, she goes to her fastest writers first because they're typically the first ones

■ M=meaning. The student's basic understanding of the text is off. He or she needs to re-read.

■ A=argument. The student's main argument is off.

■ E=evidence. The student needs more or better evidence.

■ Z=zoom in and then zoom out. The student needs to zoom in on each piece of evidence, unpacking words and phrases, and zoom out to explain how this evidence achieves the author's purpose.

Rather than spend 20 seconds explaining that a student needs to look for better evidence, Hadley gives that feedback with a simple code written in the student's page. Twenty seconds shaved off each student interaction translates to reaching more students in a 10-minute span. More students have a chance to improve their answers even before the class discussion begins. Hadley's ability to deliver coded feedback quickly is also greatly enhanced because she already has an exemplar response in hand. Because

she knows what she's looking for, it is easier for her to identify the gaps.

Identify the patterns. By using a monitoring pathway and coded feedback, Hadley can more easily identify the patterns of errors that are occurring. On her way through the classroom, she makes notes about overall trends in student understanding, writing the same simple coding on her own paper that she uses for her students. For example, she notices that "E" (lack of high-quality evidence to support an argument) is a weakness in more than half of the students' written responses. During the following discussion, she draws students' attention back to the text and encourages them to cite evidence for the ideas they articulate.

4. Drive the Discourse to What Students Need

By including pre-writing in the lesson, Hadley identifies areas of confusion even before the conversation begins. She can now drive the conversation to what students need to learn, not what they already know.

After students write about Sonnet 65, Hadley calls her class back together. "Students," she says, "we have some solid analyses of the poem, but we're missing some key evidence. I want us to look back at certain lines." She follows by asking targeted questions to clarify the meaning and significance of key words that students misinterpreted or overlooked. "What does 'o'er-sways' mean?" she asks. After a student infers that it means something like "to overtake," Hadley follows with, "So what does it mean that mortality overtakes their power?" At that point students grasp the concept of these seemingly strong and permanent things (brass, stone, earth) being defeated. With that concept solidified, she turns to the last line: "You all noticed that 'black ink'

refers to Shakespeare's own writing. But why use the phrase 'shine bright?' What analogy is he making?" Slowly but surely, the students unpack the big idea that a star is heavenly in a way that brass, stone, and sea are of the earth.

As the discussion builds from word meaning to thematic interpretation, Hadley then spurs conversation further by having students analyze one of their peers' responses. "Let's look at Lia's answer," she says, showing the writing

Write first, talk second—it's a simple strategy, but one that's underused in literature classrooms.

When we use student writing to inform literary discussion, **we can meet our students exactly where they are** at every minute of every class.

sample on the projector. "Do you agree or disagree with her argument? Darius?" Hadley already knows that Darius gave a different answer in his written response. Healthy debate has begun.

Her familiarity with the students' written responses enables Hadley to use the following strategies during the conversation:

■ *Start from the point of error*. Hadley doesn't waste class discussion time on the analyses that students have already done adequately in writing; instead, she uses that time to dive into their errors. This is data-driven discussion at its best: students use discourse to challenge one another to improve their thinking.

■ *Show-call*. By showing examples of student responses and asking the class to react to those answers, Hadley makes it the students' job to unpack misunderstandings so that they build off one another to get to a deeper understanding. She can also leverage strong responses to push the class forward.

■ *Prompt strategically*. Hadley doesn't stop there, though. Rather than just making sure that students are the ones leading the discussion, she monitors *which* students are doing the talking and when. She asks questions of students she knows are struggling with particular challenges, not students who already know the answers. The conversation is dominated by the

students, but it now responds to *all* students' needs, not just the needs of the extroverted few.

A Data-Driven Cycle of Improvement

Think about the benefits of putting writing first. Although discussion without pre-writing often produces a rich conversation, discussion *with* pre-writing is more likely to produce meaningful, rigorous learning, in which 100 percent of students grapple with the text and improve their ability to read deeply.

Implement these steps in your classroom, and you've adapted traditional discussion-based learning in a way that will enhance every student's literary understanding. You've increased what each student can do individually, but you've also increased what students can do as a team. The end result is a powerful, data-driven cycle of improvement for literacy: read, write, revise, discuss, revise, and read even more.

When we use student writing to inform literary discussion, we can meet our students exactly where they are at every minute of every class. When we know how far they've already come, we have a great opportunity to help them go even further. ᴇʟ

[1]Alston, C. L., & Brown, M. T. (2015). Differences in intellectual challenge of writing tasks among higher and lower value-added English language arts teachers. *Teachers College Record, 117*(5), 1–24.

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (pbambrick@ uncommonschools.org) is HS Chief Schools Officer at Uncommon Schools. He is the author of *Leverage Leadership: A Practical Guide to Building Exceptional Schools* (Jossey-Bass, 2012) and, with Aja Settles and Juliana Worrell, of *Great Habits, Great Readers: A Practical Guide for K–4 Reading in Light of Common Core* (Jossey-Bass, 2013).