Literature in the Classroom

Literature plays an important role in the lives and learning of students in many classrooms. In these classrooms, teachers read aloud good stories and interesting informational books, they provide regular independent reading time along with rich classroom libraries, they structure opportunities for students to share their responses to books with one another, and they explore works of literature with their students as part of the instructional program. Some teachers implement a literature-based reading program in which high-quality literature serves as the basis of reading instruction, and others supplement published reading programs with works of literature or integrate literature into other areas of the
The fortunate students of all these teachers benefit in many ways from the literature-rich experiences and environments their teachers provide; chief among these is that they experience the joy and satisfaction of reading.

Kiefer, Hepler, and Hickman (2006) stated that the intrinsic value of literature alone should be sufficient to give it a place in the curriculum. However, there is considerable evidence that it contributes to literacy development as well. Literature, for example, facilitates language development in both younger and older students (Chomsky, 1972; Morrow, 1992; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985). It promotes reading achievement (Cohen, 1968; DeFord, 1981; Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1986; Galda & Cullinan, 2003; Morrow, 1992). It positively influences students’ perceptions of and attitudes toward reading (Eldredge & Butterfield, 1986; Hagerty, Hiebert, & Owens, 1989; Larrick, 1987; Morrow, 1992, 2003; Morrow, O’Connor, & Smith, 1990; Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989). It also influences writing ability (DeFord, 1981, 1984; Eckhoff, 1983; Lancia, 1997) and deepens knowledge of written language and written linguistic features (Purcell-Gates, McIntyre, & Freppon, 1995). Further, it has been suggested that the use of literature in the content areas (such as social studies and science) results in greater student understanding of and engagement with the content (Bean, 2000; Morrow & Gambrell, 2000; Saul, 2004).

When we examine what we believe are the goals of literacy instruction—to develop students’ ability to learn with text; to expand their ability to think broadly, deeply, and critically about ideas in text; to promote personal responses to text; to nurture a desire to read; and to develop lifelong learners who can use text information to satisfy personal needs and interests and fully and wisely participate in society—the value of literature becomes obvious. How are teachers to stimulate minds and hearts without good literature? How are students to explore ideas, come to understand the perspectives of others, grow in their thinking, and develop a love of reading without good literature? Literature nurtures the imagination, provides enjoyment, and supports the understanding of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. Without authentic and compelling texts and meaningful instructional contexts, quality literacy instruction cannot happen (Raphael, 2000) and we cannot achieve the goals that we hold dear.

Literature-based instruction is influenced by three theoretical perspectives: reader response, cognitive-constructivist, and sociocultural. Reader-response theories had their beginnings with I. A. Richards (1929) and Louise Rosenblatt (1938). Prior to the work of Richards and Rosenblatt, literary theory focused primarily on the author and then on the text and largely ignored the role of the reader. Reader-response theories emphasized that what the reader brings to the reading process matters just as what the author brings to the process matters and that, without a reader, texts are merely marks on a page. The reader’s experiences, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge all influence his or her reading of a text and are, in turn, influenced by the text.

Authorities identify several groups of reader-response theorists, but it is Rosenblatt who has had the greatest influence on teachers, although it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that her ideas gained a wide audience. In Rosenblatt’s view, a transaction between the reader and the text occurs during the reading process. The transaction is influenced, in part, by the stance that a reader assumes during reading. The reader can take a predominantly aesthetic stance or a predominantly efferent stance. When taking an aesthetic stance, the reader focuses on feeling states during the reading, the lived-through experience of the reading. Emotions, associations, ideas, and attitudes are aroused in the reader during an aesthetic stance. You probably take a predominantly aesthetic...
stance when reading a mystery novel—you are curious about who committed the crime, you worry about the safety of the hero or heroine with whom you may be identifying, your heart beats a little faster at the climax, and you are relieved when the mystery is solved. In contrast, an efferent stance is one in which the reader attends to information that he or she wishes to acquire from the text for some reason, either self-imposed or imposed by others. You likely take a predominantly efferent stance when reading directions for setting up a new gadget in your home. Your purpose is to gather data so that you can make all the right connections and have a fully operational piece of equipment at your disposal.

It should not be assumed, however, that efferent reading happens only with informational text and that aesthetic reading occurs only with fictional text. Have you ever experienced confusion about a character in a book and flipped back through the pages to remind yourself just exactly what his relationship is with the protagonist? You were engaging in efferent reading. Your purpose was to gather information and to ensure you knew the character’s identity. Conversely, have you responded to an informational text by recalling experiences and feelings related to the topic? Have you ever had a visceral reaction to the content of informational text? If so, you were reading aesthetically.

A reader’s stance falls along a continuum from aesthetic to efferent and changes from text to text, situation to situation, and moment to moment. It is influenced by many factors, including the text, the reader, the context, and—in the case of students—the teacher. When teachers focus on the information in texts, they promote an efferent stance: Students read to gather and remember information. When teachers encourage enjoyment of the reading experience and invite and accept personal responses to the reading; when they ask students to recapture the lived-through experience of the reading through drawing, dancing, talking, writing, or role playing; when they allow students to build, express, and support their own interpretations of the text, they promote an aesthetic stance. Unfortunately, teachers often use activities with their students that evoke only efferent responses (Beach, 1993). Although gaining information from texts is important, reader-response theorists argue that students should also have many opportunities to respond aesthetically to literature.

Teachers who are influenced by reader-response theories understand that readers bring different backgrounds, experiences, understandings, and attitudes to their reading. These educators believe that reading is an experience accompanied by feelings and meanings and that responses resulting from a transaction between the reader and the text are dependent, in part, on the stance a reader takes and the opportunities for response that teachers provide. They foster students’ aesthetic responses to literature. They respect different interpretations of text, rejecting the notion of one correct response, and they support students in reflecting on and revising their interpretations by prompting them to revisit the text and discuss their ideas with peers.

Like reader-response theories, cognitive-constructivist views of learning emphasize the importance of the reader in the reading process (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2004). According to cognitive-constructive views, readers are not empty vessels or tabula rasas but, rather, bring complex networks of knowledge and experiences with them to a text. They use their knowledge and experiences as they construct understandings of a reading selection, and because different readers bring different backgrounds, experiences, and purposes to their reading, no two readers construct exactly the same understandings. Cognitive-constructive theorists emphasize the active nature of reading. Meaning making is the result of cognitive work, with more complex or unfamiliar texts requiring more
work if understandings are to be constructed. Teachers who are influenced by
cognitive-constructivist views of reading provide time and opportunities for stu-
dents to think about what they already know and to extend their knowledge net-
works in a variety of ways, including learning from those around them. They
appreciate the subjectivity of the reading experience. They engage their students
in activities that require them to actively process the text, for example, by con-
sidering ideas, organizing information, and making links among ideas in books
and with their own lives.

The third group of theories relevant to the rich use of literature in the class-
room are sociocultural theories. Based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), who
asserted that children learn through language-based social interactions, socio-
cultural theorists believe that learning is fundamentally a social process and
that interactions among learners are crucial. These notions are clearly germane
to students’ interactions with text. In fact, many reading researchers maintain
that deep-level understanding of text occurs only through interactions with oth-
ers (Morrow & Gambrell, 2000). Teachers who understand that it is through
language exchanges that students organize thought and construct meanings
provide many opportunities for students to work together. They structure their
classroom environments and learning experiences to promote student interac-
tions. They ensure that students engage in discussions and negotiate their
evolving understandings and interpretations of text with peers.

Discussion is a mainstay of learning in a sociocultural perspective. Traditionally, classroom discussions have been highly centralized—the teacher
decides what the students will talk about and facilitates the discussion. A
more decentralized view of discussion—one that deemphasizes the role of the
teacher—has been advocated by many educators for some time (Almasi, 1995,
1996; Au, 2003; Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2006; Langer, 1995;
Wiencek & O’Flahavan, 1994). In this view, discussions are led by students and
guided by their responses to a book. Small student-led group discussions pro-
vide students with opportunities to attain social and interpretive authority and
may increase participation from students who are reluctant to speak in teacher-
directed situations (Raphael, 2000). Unfortunately, although widely promoted in
the professional literature, peer-led discussions are rare in classrooms (Almasi,
O’Flahavan, & Ayra, 2001).

Computer-mediated discussions are a recent alternative to teacher-led and
student-led discussions. In these on-line discussions, students build their un-
derstandings of and share their responses to books with students from other
schools, states, and even countries. These discussions provide all students
with the opportunity to respond to the comments of peers and may allow stu-
dents who feel marginalized to more fully participate in a discussion (Gambrell,
2004). All three forms of discussion—teacher-led, student-led, and computer-
mediated—have a place in the classroom, and the value of each depends on the
particular and varying goals for discussion.

The purpose of this book is to assist teachers in providing their students
with meaningful experiences with literature. We offer a variety of activities that
are rooted in reader-response, cognitive-constructive, and sociocultural perspec-
tives. The activities honor the readers by acknowledging that their backgrounds,
knowledge, and experiences influence their transactions with literature and by
inviting them to respond both efﬁerently and aesthetically. Additionally, the ac-
tivities honor the active engagement required for meaning making by prompting
thoughtful interactions with text. Also, they honor the crucial role of social
interaction in the construction of meaning as they stimulate discussion and
collaboration.
In the next section, we describe key responsibilities of teachers as they share literature with their students. Then, we identify questions that guided our thinking as we selected activities to include in this book.

**Teacher Responsibilities**

1. **Know children’s literature.** Familiarize yourself with a wide variety of children’s literature, and keep abreast of newly published works. Spend time in libraries and bookstores. Browse websites that provide lists of award-winning literature, reviews of children’s literature, and ideas for using literature. Visit author websites. (Several interesting sites are listed in the Appendix.) Ask your students and their families to share their favorite titles and authors. Talk to colleagues about books and consider establishing book clubs at your school site. It is difficult to share great literature with students unless you are familiar with it yourself.

2. **Provide students with access to a wide variety of children’s literature.** Develop a rich classroom library that includes selections reflecting a wide range of interests, topics, and difficulty levels. Make available a variety of genres, including informational books, which are a scarcity in many classrooms (Duke, 1999; Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Research has revealed that the availability of reading materials in extensive classroom libraries and opportunities to choose books are key factors in motivating students to read (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Palmer, Codling, & Gambrell, 1994; Worthy, 2000, 2002).

3. **Provide time for reading and talking about books.** The best-stocked classroom and school libraries mean little if the books are never removed from the shelves. Students must be given time to read. And, as we noted earlier, they must be given opportunities to talk about books. Not only are understandings socially constructed, but talking about books motivates students to read (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Be a reader yourself, and share what you are reading. Teachers who are highly engaged readers create students who are highly engaged readers as they model their enthusiasm and strategic thinking about texts (Dreher, 2003).

4. **Plan for whole-group, small-group, and individual experiences with literature.** Whole-class experiences with literature contribute to the building of a community and offer opportunities for scaffolded instruction and guidance. Small-group experiences provide students with greater opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning. Individual reading of self-selected books respects student interests and choice and helps students develop independent reading strategies that underlie lifelong reading.

5. **At those times when you choose to provide group experiences with a work of literature, be sure to read the book.** Simple as it may seem, it is very important that prior to engaging students in a literature experience, you read the entire book yourself. It is not possible to plan meaningful experiences or respond to students’ explorations without being familiar with the book.

6. **Identify themes, topics, or compelling issues in the book.** The themes, topics, or issues you identify will guide the experiences you plan for your students. Be prepared for the possibility, however, that during the course of discussion other ideas may emerge from the students that will take precedence over the ones you selected.
7. **Plan activities for three stages of exploration: before, during, and after reading.** Prereading activities should set the stage for personal responses to literature, activate and build relevant background knowledge and language, help students set purposes for reading, and spark students’ curiosity. During-reading activities should support students’ active engagement with the text, fostering comprehension and prompting personal connections and responses to ideas in the text. Postreading activities should encourage students to respond to the literature in personally meaningful ways and to think deeply about and beyond the literature.

8. **Establish an atmosphere of trust.** Students will honestly communicate their feelings, experiences, and ideas only if there is an atmosphere of trust in the classroom. You can promote trust by listening actively to the contributions of your students, respecting all student attempts to share, and allowing for a variety of interpretations of the meaning of a selection as long as the readers can support their ideas on the basis of the language in the text or their own experiences. Disagreements among students should be used to lead them back to the book to conduct a closer analysis of the author’s words or to prompt them to identify and elaborate on their experiences and knowledge that may differ from those of their peers.

**Rationale for Selection of Activities for This Book**

The following questions guided our development of and search for activities to include in this book.

1. **Will the activity promote grand conversations about books?** “Grand conversations” can be best described by contrasting them to the “gentle inquisitions” that take place in many classrooms (Bird, 1988; Edelsky, 1988; Eeds & Wells, 1989). During grand conversations, students are encouraged to think, feel, and respond to ideas, issues, events, and characters in a book. They are invited to express their opinions, and their opinions are valued. Personal involvement with the ideas contained in the book is encouraged, and individual interpretations are permissible as long as they are supported with data from the text. Grand conversations are similar to the discussions that occur in adult book groups in that the focus is on topics that are meaningful to the participants, and everyone is encouraged to contribute.

   During “gentle inquisitions,” on the other hand, the tone of the classroom interaction is one of “checking up” on the students. The teacher asks questions, and the students answer them. Although it is appropriate to assess students’ comprehension, studies have revealed that a great deal of reading instructional time is spent asking students questions for the purpose of assessing their comprehension (Durkin, 1979; Wendler, Samuels, & Moore, 1989), and that higher-level reasoning activities, such as discussing and analyzing what has been read, are not routinely emphasized for students (Langer, Applebee, Mullis, & Foertsch, 1990). Allington (1994, p. 23) agrees that children “need substantially less interrogation and substantially more opportunities to observe and engage in conversations about books, stories, and other texts they have read.”

   The activities provided in this book can be used to stimulate grand conversations. They provide teachers with structures for encouraging students to
express their ideas honestly and share their thoughts and experiences with their peers. Thus, they provide an alternative to the traditional question-and-answer discussion format that usually focuses on correctness, can discourage meaningful conversations, and often limits participation to the most verbal children in the class.

2. Will the activity activate and/or develop background knowledge? According to reader-response and cognitive-constructivist theories, what the reader brings to a work of literature influences his or her interaction with the literature. In fact, research reveals that a reader’s experiences and knowledge provide the basis for comprehension of ideas in a text (Willingham, 2006, 2006–07; Wolf, 2007). Comprehension is said to occur only when a reader can mentally activate a schema—that is, some relevant organized knowledge of the world—that offers an adequate account of the objects, events, and relationships described in the text (Anderson, 1984). The following sentences illustrate this phenomenon:

   Jones sacrificed and knocked in a run. (Hirsch, 2006)

   The notes were sour because the seam split. (Bransford & McCarrell, 1974)

If you are a baseball fan or player and bring rich knowledge of the sport to your reading, you will have no difficulty understanding the first sentence. However, note the wealth of familiarity with the sport that the sentence takes for granted. In order to make sense of the sentence, you must have sufficient world knowledge to infer that it is about baseball and that Jones is at bat. You must further understand that baseball consists of innings and outs, that players run around bases on a field, and that the sacrifice Jones makes is one of getting out so a teammate can run to home plate and score a point. If you do not have that knowledge about baseball—and some readers don’t—you no doubt had difficulty understanding the sentence.

   Now, reread the second sentence. Observe that the vocabulary is not difficult and the sentence is short, yet you may not understand it. You might possess the appropriate background knowledge, but the authors have not triggered that knowledge for you. If we provide the clue that the sentence is about a bagpipe, do you now understand it? You probably do. Your knowledge of bagpipes likely accounts for all the elements in the sentence: the split seam, the sour notes, and the cause-effect relationship between the two. Failure to activate, or call to mind, an appropriate schema results in poor comprehension. An effective teacher promotes comprehension in his or her students by providing experiences that encourage them to access relevant knowledge prior to reading a text. If students do not have the relevant background knowledge, the teacher helps the students acquire the appropriate knowledge through real-world experiences, other text or media experiences, or interactions with peers.

   Many of the activities described in this book, especially those recommended for use before reading, are ideal for activating and building background knowledge. They prompt students to think and talk about experiences they have had or to articulate their opinions on topics about which they will subsequently read. Students with limited background knowledge on a topic will benefit from listening to the comments of peers.

3. Will the activity prompt students to use comprehension strategies? Good readers engage in numerous strategies as they read (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2002). They identify goals, preview texts, and construct hypotheses. They check—and often change—their hypotheses as they read, make inferences,
monitor their reading, and evaluate the text. They integrate their prior knowledge with material from the text, selectively read and reread, reflect on and summarize text, and consider the usefulness of the text. Good readers are active.

A great deal of research has demonstrated that children can be taught to engage in the strategies that good readers use and that instruction in these strategies results in enhanced comprehension. Specifically, research supports teaching students to make predictions and activate prior knowledge (Duke & Pearson, 2002), monitor their comprehension, use text structure to organize understanding and recall of text information, construct visual representations, summarize text information, answer questions about text, and ask questions about text (National Reading Panel, 2000; RAND, 2002). Additionally, evidence suggests that teaching students to coordinate use of these strategies in a collaborative, engaging context is particularly effective (Brown, 2008; Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson, 2005).

To teach students strategies, literacy experts recommend a model of instruction that involves a gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the student (Roehler & Duffy, 1984). The teacher begins by providing an explicit description of the strategies, including when and how to use them. Then, the teacher models the strategies, thinking aloud for the students as he or she reads. Next, the teacher and students engage in the strategies together, and the teacher provides feedback as the students make attempts to use the strategies. The teacher gradually releases responsibility to the students, providing less instruction and feedback as the students become more independent. Finally, students use the strategies independently, with cuing and prompting from the teacher until they autonomously apply the strategies they are learning.

The activities in this book prompt students to utilize comprehension strategies. As students participate in the activities, they actively engage with text. They make predictions and read to confirm or reject their predictions; they monitor their comprehension, noting whether they are understanding the text and identifying where clarification may be needed; they use text structures such as story elements to organize their understandings of a text; they construct visual representations to depict relationships among ideas, events, and concepts; they summarize information in a variety of ways; and they answer self-posed questions and those asked by others. Further, the activities provide numerous opportunities for students to integrate the strategies as they work with their peers in building understandings of and responding to text.

4. Does the activity promote higher-level thinking? Many teachers are familiar with Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives, a hierarchical classification system that identifies levels of cognitive processing or thinking. As originally conceived, the levels of the taxonomy from lowest to highest are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Recently, the taxonomy was revised in significant ways (Anderson et al., 2001; Forehand, 2005). First, the new taxonomy is two dimensional and includes knowledge categories as well as cognitive processes. The knowledge categories are factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive knowledge. Second, the original cognitive processes were reconceptualized, reordered, and phrased as verbs rather than nouns. They are remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create. The higher levels are considered the most important outcomes of education (Krathwohl, 2002), and attention to them is critical. Indeed, one of the characteristics of teachers whose students excel in reading is that they promote higher-level thinking (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2004).
Analyses of educational practices, curricular objectives, and test items conducted in the decades following the development of the original taxonomy revealed a heavy emphasis in schools on the lowest level of thinking (Krathwohl, 2002). According to Bloom (1984), many students spend considerable time engaged in recognition or recall of information. Taylor and colleagues (1999) reported that a very small number of teachers in their national study asked higher-level questions about reading selections, and that when discussions occurred, which was rare, they primarily focused on facts. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007) found that only 31 percent of fourth-graders and 29 percent of eighth-graders scored at the proficient level or above in reading. These levels require higher-level thinking such as extending ideas in text by making inferences, drawing conclusions, making connections, generalizing about topics in a reading selection, demonstrating an awareness of how authors compose, judging texts critically, and giving thorough answers that indicate careful thought.

The activities included in this book facilitate higher-level thinking. They provide opportunities for active interchange among students as they negotiate meaning. They encourage students to ponder, talk, and write about ideas that they have or will confront in the reading selection. They require students to compare and contrast characters and books, analyze relationships, support their opinions with examples from the text, and make connections with their lives or other texts. Many of the activities promote creative responses to literature.

5. **Will the activity provide opportunities for talking and writing?** Students’ understandings and appreciation of a work of literature transform and expand when they listen to the perspectives, interpretations, and relevant experiences and knowledge of others. And, when students work to organize and articulate their own thoughts and reactions to a text, their understandings and appreciation change and deepen. Thus, providing students with plentiful opportunities to talk with one another as they engage with literature enriches the literary experience. Students learn as they talk.

Likewise, when students write—formally or informally—in response to literature, they reflect on impressions and ideas, reconsider initial reactions, discover faulty reasoning, gain perspective, and find language to give voice to their understandings. They formulate ideas and organize their thoughts. The very process of putting words on paper (or keying them into a computer) supports their thinking. They more closely examine and engage with the literature as they work to express themselves. Like talking, writing in response to literature enriches students’ transactions with text.

The activities described in this book provide myriad opportunities for students to talk with one another before, during, and after engaging with literature. None is intended to be reproduced on paper, independently completed by silent students, and submitted to the teacher for a grade. Rather, the activities serve as springboards for discussion and are designed to inspire students to articulate their ideas and listen and respond to the ideas of others. Writing to explore and express ideas may precede, accompany, or be a natural outgrowth of literature experiences.

6. **Are the activities appropriate for a broad range of readers?** Few would argue with the notion that all students should have the opportunity to engage with good literature. Unfortunately, however, in their efforts to meet the needs of low-achieving readers, some teachers limit these students to short prose and to worksheets and activities addressing only low-level cognitive skills. These
students often have neither the opportunity to share in rich literature experiences nor the opportunity to participate in the grand conversations about books that other students enjoy. Indeed, several decades of research reveals that students in low-ability groups typically receive less instruction and qualitatively different instruction than students in high-ability groups (Allington, 1980, 1984, 1994; Anderson et al., 1985; Au, 2002; Bracey, 1987; Walmsley & Walp, 1989; Wuthrick, 1990). Yet, research suggests that instruction involving the use of high-quality literature can make a significant difference in low-achieving students’ literacy development and that these students need opportunities for higher-level thinking and discussions about books (Li, 2004).

Similarly, the most advanced readers are often not well served and are given tasks that leave them bored and unchallenged (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Tomlinson et al., 2003). These students, too, need access to high-quality learning experiences that address their potential and maximize their opportunities for growth. Activities that emphasize thinking, exploration, problem solving, and decision making, and that allow for creativity are appropriate for these learners (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2007). Like all learners, advanced students need a curriculum that stimulates and inspires (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008). They need opportunities to engage with increasingly complex and abstract content that demands higher-level thinking.

One of the advantages of the activities presented in this book is that they can be easily and successfully implemented with a broad range of readers. Students with different levels of academic preparedness can participate in and be challenged by the activities.

7. Will English learners benefit from the activities? More than five million school-aged youth in the United States are not fluent speakers of English (NCELA, 2006). Unfortunately, like low-achieving readers, many English learners receive instruction that focuses predominantly on word identification and low-level skills. Some become adequate decoders but because opportunities to actively, thoughtfully engage with rich text have been limited, comprehension is a significant problem (Au, 2002).

Although the educational community still has much to learn about supporting the literacy development of English learners, there are several key understandings that can guide teachers as they support students’ interactions with literature as well as their English language development. These include the importance of comprehensible input, the crucial role of social interactions in low-anxiety settings, the distinction between conversational and academic language, and the value of culturally familiar literature.

English learners will have the greatest opportunity to participate fully in classroom learning experiences, while simultaneously building proficiency in the new language, if teachers make the content and language of instruction more accessible—in other words, if they provide “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1982). Comprehensible input can be provided through the use of realia (real, concrete objects), models, visuals such as photographs and drawings, hands-on activities, and graphic organizers. In addition, comprehensibility can be increased when content is familiar (August & Shanahan, 2006). You read previously about the role of background knowledge in reading. This notion is significant as you work with English learners (Droop & Verhoeven, 1998). Students are more likely to understand text if they already know something about the content or if it reflects their experiences and lives. The more familiar the content of a work of literature, the fewer are the demands on students’ linguistic
abilities. Thus, activities that draw on or build students’ background knowledge prior to reading support the comprehensibility of the text.

In addition to providing English learners with comprehensible input, teachers should ensure that English learners have many opportunities to interact with others. Social interaction, fundamental for all learners, is crucial for English learners. Goldenberg (1996) noted that small-group settings stimulate active engagement from English learners, particularly when students are involved in what he calls “instructional conversations”—conversations that focus on joint meaning making, involve questions that have multiple responses, and encourage elaboration. Students have more frequent opportunities to talk, clarify language and ideas, and negotiate meaning in small groups. Language use is purposeful and authentic. Active interplay among participants who listen, respond verbally and nonverbally, and elaborate on one another’s comments supports language and cognition. However, this active interplay will not happen unless teachers have created a nonthreatening, low-anxiety atmosphere, one in which students are willing to take risks as they experiment with language in order to communicate. Additionally, activities that spark students’ interest and that value varied responses are more likely to invite participation.

Teachers who work with English learners need to be aware of the fundamental distinction between conversational and academic language (Cummins, 1994). Conversational language is used in informal social interactions. It is generally contextualized language, occurring in familiar face-to-face settings and supported by gestures, facial expressions, intonation, and the immediate communicative context itself. English learners typically develop conversational language, or basic interpersonal communicative skills, fairly quickly. On the other hand, cognitive academic language proficiency—communication that depends heavily on language, demands greater cognitive involvement, and is much less supported by interpersonal or contextual cues (i.e., it is decontextualized language)—takes much longer to acquire (Cummins, 1979; Goldenberg, 2008). Teachers who understand the distinction between conversational and academic language will appreciate students’ conversational abilities while recognizing that they may not have the academic language that will allow them to engage in thoughtful interactions with content without support. Teachers who understand the difference between conversational and academic language scaffold instruction in such a way as to facilitate students’ understanding and, at the same time, attend to the development of their academic language.

As important as comprehensible input, social interactions, and teachers’ support of academic language are, many argue that unless students find “themselves” in books, they may experience “aesthetic shutdown” (Athanasas, 1998, p. 275). Reading about people who share the same cultural and ethnic background facilitates personal connections with books and contributes to positive attitudes toward reading (Al-Hazza & Buchar, 2008; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Meier (2003, p. 247) noted that “not every book used in a multilingual, multicultural classroom needs to represent people of color or to incorporate linguistic diversity, but if bilingual children and children of color make up the majority of the class, then the majority of books used in the class should reflect that fact.” Furthermore, teachers should use materials that present diverse cultural groups in an authentic manner.

The activities in this book support English learners’ interactions with literature in that they contribute to comprehensible input by including nonlinguistic elements and drawing on and valuing students’ background knowledge, provide opportunities for social interactions that motivate meaningful communication as
students share their ideas and understandings, and acknowledge the difference between conversational and academic language by providing scaffolds for thinking and talking about books and extending academic language. Many of the examples throughout this book are drawn from multicultural literature, and the Appendix shares relevant websites.

English learners should not be excluded from opportunities to engage with literature. Literature provides exposure to rich language and powerful ideas that are worth thinking and talking about. And, shared literature experiences can contribute to building a classroom community where all members feel comfortable participating in the conversation.

8. Are the activities appropriate for a differentiated classroom? One of the joys of teaching is interacting with a wide range of students who have different backgrounds, strengths, needs, interests, and preferred ways of learning. Every class is a mix of learners, and each new academic year brings a new set of individuals. What an exciting profession teaching is!

As teachers embrace the diversity in their classrooms they recognize the need to differentiate instruction in order to best serve their students (Tomlinson et al., 2003). Differentiation refers to teachers’ efforts to provide meaningful and appropriate instruction for the full range of learners in their classrooms. In differentiated classrooms, teachers consider who their students are—their readiness, interests, and approaches to learning—as they select and recommend literature, plan different ways for students to interact with and make meaning from text, and prepare experiences that help students demonstrate and extend their understandings. Teachers utilize flexible grouping strategies so students participate in a variety of group structures and with different classmates and for various purposes (Tomlinson, 2001).

What does differentiated literature instruction look like? If some students in a second-grade class are ready to read a chapter book independently, the teacher ensures that these students do so. If some fifth-grade students would benefit from more purpose setting and background-building activities, the teacher provides plentiful and appropriate prereading experiences for these students. If some eighth-grade students need more opportunities to think about character traits and others need more opportunities to explore themes, the teacher develops different prompts for their journal writing. Students read books that allow them to be successful but that challenge their thinking. They engage in activities that address their particular needs. They respond to books in ways that match or extend their interests and learning preferences.

The activities in Literature-Based Reading Activities are ideal for the differentiated classroom. They may be used with a range of literature. They represent a variety of ways to process literature before, during, and after reading, and they prompt the development of diverse products that expand and deepen students’ thinking and that represent students’ cognitive and affective responses to text.

The Role of New Literacies

We live in a time of rapid change. In a very small number of years, we have transitioned from a world of paper, pencils, and books to one of a variety of information and communication technologies. Many students today are comfortable with e-mail, text messages, blogs, web browsers, presentation software, video editors, and much more. They use these tools to seek out information; to
communicate with classmates, teachers, and others; and to share their learning with their immediate classroom community as well as larger—even worldwide—communities. We cannot imagine the technologies the next generations of students will experience and how these technologies will impact their literacy needs.

These new technologies are redefining literacy and literacy instruction (Leu, Kinzer et al., 2004). Students need new reading comprehension skills, for example, to effectively search for information on the Internet. They must be able to identify and utilize search terms appropriate to their goals, sort through large amounts of information to determine what is relevant and what is not, navigate from link to link, critically evaluate websites, and integrate information across sites (Henry, 2006). Teachers must broaden their conceptions of literacy to include the skills needed to locate, read, and analyze multilayered information on the Internet, and students must be supported in their efforts to communicate and gain information using new technologies. The term new literacies is used to describe the skills, strategies, and dispositions that are required for participation in a technological world.

New technologies and the new literacies that are required to fully exploit them have the potential to expand students’ interactions with literature in powerful ways (Castek, Bevans-Mangelson, & Goldstone, 2006; Leu, Castek et al., 2004). One contribution made by the Internet is in the area of book selection. The Internet is a remarkable resource for locating books to read because students and teachers have nearly instantaneous access to lists of books. If students have enjoyed Newbery Medal and Honor Books, they may wish to check past and current winners by typing “Newbery Award” into a search engine and selecting one of several links that pop up. Students peruse the electronic list, and if a title looks interesting, they can search the title of the book and find a synopsis and, often, reviews of the book. Similarly, if students have a favorite author, they can search the author’s name and find titles of other books he or she has written as well as information about the author. Some sites allow students to search databases of award-winning books by age of the reader, genre, and other categories. Access to information about books is literally at students’ fingertips! Some websites share streaming videos of actors reading aloud favorite books and others provide free access to digital texts. Several of these sites are listed in the Appendix.

The instant access to information that the Internet provides can expand and enrich students’ understanding of a book they are reading by allowing them to quickly learn more about the content, setting, or issues in the book. If students are reading a book about the building of the Great Wall of China, for example, they may wish to search for information about the wall. The increased knowledge they bring to the text will enhance their understanding of it and may deepen their appreciation of the hardships faced by the people who built the wall. Or, what they learn may answer or raise questions about the authenticity of the author’s depiction of the times or region. A story set in a southwestern United States desert may prompt questions about the temperature, wildlife, and vegetation in the region. Students can turn to the Internet to seek answers to their questions and learn more about the harsh environment in which a character lives.

The Internet also gives students access to larger and more diverse audiences for their work and the capability to communicate and collaborate with students beyond their classroom. Students can publish projects related to literature on a classroom web page for family members to view. They can participate
in virtual book clubs and share ideas with groups around the globe, becoming exposed to new perspectives that may result in new ways of thinking about a book. They can use blogs as interactive journals and engage in on-line literature discussions. They can utilize *wikis* to create, comment on, and revise collaborative projects. They can present reviews of or commentaries on literature by creating podcasts.

Additionally, new technologies provide students with ways to respond to literature. Students can download images and video into multimedia presentations. They can utilize interactive whiteboards or digital video technology to share understandings, dramatizations, interpretations, and extensions of literature.

The possibilities for the use of technology to enrich students’ interactions with literature before, during, and after reading are nearly endless. We provide suggestions throughout this book for capitalizing on information and communication technologies. At the same time that these experiences enhance students’ understandings of literature, they also support their development of new literacies.

**CONCLUSION**

Literature should be at the heart of our literacy programs. Not only does it support many aspects of literacy development—language, comprehension, writing, attitudes, and perceptions—but it also provides an excellent context for deep thinking and personal response. Literature inspires us and informs us; it nurtures our imaginations; it moves us to laughter, to tears, and to action. In the remaining chapters of this book, we provide activities that support students’ rich interactions with text.