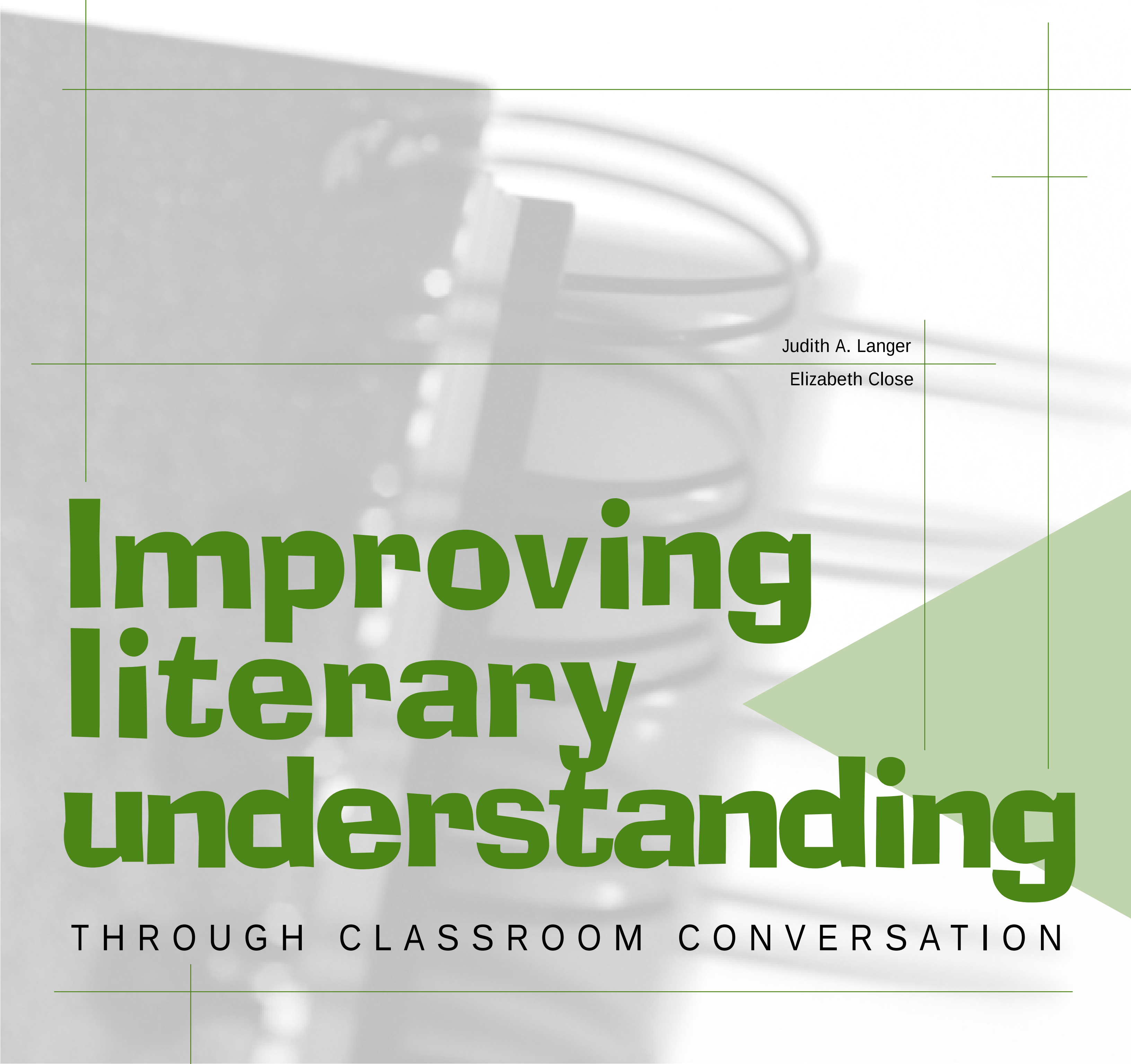

Judith A. Langer

Elizabeth Close

Improving literary understanding

THROUGH CLASSROOM CONVERSATION

Research reports
and newsletter
articles about this
and other Center
work are available
at this site.

http://cela.albany.edu

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USING THESE FINDINGS

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Why is it important to teach literary understanding? It is through reading, thinking, and discussing literature that students find alternative ways to gain knowledge and solve problems. Through sharing of understandings, they learn not only important content, but also cognitive, critical, and social strategies needed for success in academic courses, work, and life. Living through a literary experience involves exploring meanings, interpretations and perspectives while maintaining an openness to future possibilities.

From 1987 to 1995, Judith Langer and a team of field researchers took a close look at what happens in classrooms that help students engage in deep understandings of literature. They worked with teachers of grades 1-12 and the first year of college to learn more about how readers think when they read and discuss literature and how teachers can help students use discussion to think more deeply. Students were also partners in the research, with selected students meeting with researchers to share their understandings of both the literature and their classroom discussions.

As a result of the study, Langer was able to describe the processes involved in literary understanding as well as the instructional environments, activities, and interactions that support it. The results of this research are shared in a set of research reports by Langer, the field researchers, and the teachers (see page 22 for a partial list), as well as in Langer's book, *Envisioning Literature.* In addition, Maryland Public Television, with a grant from Annenberg / CPB, has prepared a series of professional development programs based on this work.

Improving literary understanding through classroom conversation

INTRODUCTION

The authors' collaboration began in 1988 when Betty was a seventh-grade English teacher and Judith, a university researcher investigating the teaching and learning of literature. During the next seven years the collaboration involved dozens of teachers across all grade levels as well as a group of field researchers from the university.

We all worked together both in the classroom and out, with some of the teachers attending weekly seminars at the university to reflect on what we were learning, share ideas, consider research relevant to our concerns, and participate in literary discussions. And many of us wrote about our experience and what we were learning in articles that appeared in the professional literature.

We have prepared this booklet for teachers and administrators, drawing on the findings of the original study and the many publications it produced.

We begin with several short sections that provide background about the conclusions of the study and mention some potential classroom strategies. The second half of the booklet is devoted to actual classroom examples accompanied by explanations of how they illustrate the findings and the strategies.

Judith A. Langer

Judith A. Langer is director of the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement.

Elizabeth Close

Elizabeth Close participated in the original study as a seventh-grade classroom teacher and is now director of educational outreach for the Center.

BUILDING ENVISIONMENTS

Envisionments are understandings — the wealth of ideas that people have in their minds at any point in time. Envisionments include related ideas and images, questions, hunches, anticipations, arguments, disagreements, and confusions that fill the mind during every reading, writing, speaking, or thinking experience.

There is no best map for coming to understand any literary piece, whether fiction or nonfiction. However, people orient their minds differently when they read for literary understanding as compared to when they read for information. They build envisionments in both orientations, but the strategies they use to build them and the kinds of understandings they develop are different. They read for and expect different kinds of information, and thus, engage in somewhat different reading experiences.

Reading for literary understanding: Opening horizons of possibilities

When readers seek to make sense of a literary work, they engage in an exploration; they are open to many possibilities for meaning. At any given point a reader is developing ideas, or envisionments, of events, characters, and meaning while anticipating what might be ahead. Readers recognize that some future experience — a development in the work, an interaction with friends or fellow students — might change their thinking. Thus their reading is guided by inquisitiveness.

Literary envisionments — thoughts about what is being read or discussed for the moment and thoughts about the whole (e.g., theme, meaning, eventualities) — constantly inform each other because a reader's sense of what the piece is "about" is always open to change. We call this *exploring the horizons of possibilities*. For example, as readers explore relationships between characters, they understand not only the characters and their actions, but they also develop ideas about how the piece might end. As their understandings of the characters change, so, too, do possibilities for the ending, and vice versa. When readers share their thinking with others, they consider more possibilities for meaning.

Reading for information: Maintaining a point of reference

When readers are primarily concerned with gaining information, they work to develop a sense of the topic by *maintaining a point of reference*. Their envisionments are shaped by their questions and explorations that bring them closer to the information they seek and that help them to better understand the topic. As people read, they use the content to narrow the possibilities of meaning and sharpen their understandings of the information. Using information gained along the way (combined with what they already know) to refine their understanding, they seek to get the author's point or understand more and more about the topic. Here, unlike literary thinking, their questioning is guided by their sense of the whole (e.g., the topic or the point of the argument and the ideas, issues, and arguments related to it). Although readers may revise their current understandings, rarely do they change their sense of the whole or what the entire piece is about. New questions and ideas about the topic may develop, but the point of reference remains the focus around which they build their envisionments.

Readers can move in and out of literary and information orientations depending upon their purposes for reading. Both are essential for effective reading, thinking, and problem solving. This booklet will focus on exploring the horizons of possibilities for literary understanding.

Enriching literary understanding

Being out and stepping into an envisionment

Imagine a student arriving at a new school. Perhaps she has come from a rural setting to an urban one. At first, she will be concerned with getting to know her new environment, the people in it, and the way the culture functions. She will have many questions and often be confused by her new experiences. Interested in learning all about her new school and based on what she knows about school from her past experiences, she will "step into" this new setting and begin to build an understanding — or envisionment — of it. At first she will pull together any "clues" about the school she can find — who the students are and how they are like or different from herself; who her teachers are and their expectations; where her classes are located and how each is organized. She will begin to build her envisionment of this new environment, rethinking or adding to her understanding of the school as she encounters something new.

In a similar way, readers making initial contact with a text may focus on the genre, content, structure and language of the piece and use their prior knowledge and experiences to begin to construct an envisionment. As they step into this envisionment, they pick up "clues" to become acquainted with the characters, develop a sense of the setting and story line, or determine what the text will be about. They may return to this stance again whenever they encounter new, confusing or conflicting ideas. For example, when readers come across unfamiliar terms, they may stop, reread, and rethink what they know before continuing.

Being in and moving through an envisionment

As the student tests her initial understandings of her new school and becomes immersed in its culture, her new experiences as well as her past understandings about school life help her to know the students and teachers, how they behave, and what they expect from her. She develops friendships and is comfortable finding her way around the building. She continues to add to her understanding of how this new school world works as she becomes involved in her classes and school activities.

In much the same way, readers move in and through their envisionments. They become immersed in their understandings of the story, become familiar with the setting, develop expectations for the characters, and anticipate events. They use their personal experience and knowledge as well as the text to advance their understandings, and they continue to elaborate on and connect ideas as they build envisionments.

Stepping back and rethinking what one knows

As the student comes to know her new world, she may step back to think about how what she is learning connects to what she knows from previous experience. For example, she may observe that some students have developed strong friendships that exclude many of their classmates, making her think about how this limits their friendships and her ability to get to know them better. She may also then think about how she might have treated a student at her old school in a more open and understanding manner.

As readers develop their envision-

Our research identified four stances employed by readers. These stances occur, reoccur, and co-occur as readers attempt to build and round out meaning.

Moving through the stances enriches literary experience. The stances are not very different from the ways people approach any new situation:

- Being out and stepping into an envisionment
- Being in and moving through an envisionment
- Stepping back and rethinking what one knows
- Stepping back and objectifying the experience

AaBbCcDdEeFfGgHhIiJjKkLlMmNnOo

Teachers who ask questions based on the four stances help students to think from a variety of perspectives. They also provide students with models to use in posing their own questions.

Questions to help students move to different stances

For example:

- What do you think this story will be about? (before reading)
- What questions do you have?
- What do you wonder about?
- What would you like to discuss?
- What were you thinking as you were reading?
- How did your understanding of the characters (or plot or action) change during/after the reading or discussion?
- What did this remind you of in your own life? How did it differ? Why do you think it did?
- What do you have to say about the writer's style?
- What would you ask the writer if you had a chance?
- How might others (e.g., colonial settlers, women) interpret the piece?
- What other pieces/books does this remind you of? Why?
- Does anyone see this piece from a different perspective? What perspective and why?

ments, they can also step back from the text world to consider what they understand from the reading and how that influences what they already know. After reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, the story of a young African-American girl living in Mississippi in the 1930s, students might think about how serious the consequences of segregation are and how little they really understand its effects. They may think of their own neighborhoods, their own past inactivity in developing better relations, and ways to become more involved in social and political issues. Their literary envisionments thus enrich their understandings of the real world.

Stepping back and rethinking does not occur as frequently as the other stances, but it can have powerful impact. It is one of the reasons we read literature — to help us think about and sort out our own lives and places in the world.

All of these stances are available to readers as their envisionments grow. Understanding comes through the stances taken — becoming acquainted with the text, using meaning to build meaning, gaining insights, and taking a critical view.

Stepping back and objectifying the experience

As she builds her envisionment of the school environment, the student often steps back to consider her experience from a distance. Initially she may have been angry or frightened by the idea of attending a new school, but now and then she is able to take a more analytical look. She may think about the additional opportunities this experience has provided (e.g., more sports options, more electives) and may be able to make judgments about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two school experiences.

So too, readers can become objective about their reading experiences and use these to reflect on the text and the reading experience itself. They distance themselves from their envisionments as they make judgments, focus on the structure of the text, or comment on meaning.

A WORD ABOUT SCAFFOLDING

Questions students and teachers prepare for classroom literary discussions can play an important role in providing scaffolding to support students as they learn to apply the stances in their reading and discussions.

Paired reading or think-aloud Students read together, stopping to discuss concerns, questions, and ideas as they occur.

Note taking to capture ideas while reading Students use sticky notes to record their ideas, or they record ideas on a copy of the text.

Quick-write Students write ideas, feelings, and questions immediately after completing a reading.

Question sharing and selection Students bring questions and concerns to small groups where they select the ones that need to be brought to the whole class for discussion.

For more about scaffolding and other instructional strategies, see pages 15.

SOME STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT ENVISIONMENT BUILDING

Small group discussions

- Have students focus on their concerns as well as their understandings about the literary selection (e.g., bring questions or ideas for discussion to group meetings).
- Have students work together to share envisionments and prepare for whole class discussions (e.g., discuss issues of concern for the small group).
- Provide support (scaffolding) for students to employ the four stances (teacher-designed guides to focus their small group discussions).
- Gradually remove scaffolding as students learn to assume responsibility for moving the discussion forward (e.g., students learn to agree, disagree, build on each others' ideas).
- Have students bring questions and concerns from these meetings to large group discussions.
- Move from group to group, providing assistance and nudging the students to think more deeply or broadly when appropriate. Help them explore the horizons of possibilities and enter the stances by asking questions for them to discuss.

Full class discussions

- Make understanding the literary work(s) the heart of the discussion.
- Come to class prepared with possible questions but make students' questions, concerns, and growing ideas the focus of discussion.
- Expect students to come to class prepared to discuss their ideas, questions, and concerns.
- Provide scaffolding in ways to discuss and think (see p. 15).
- Require students to support their responses using the text, experience, research, etc.

Writing activities

- Ask students to write before sharing their thinking aloud to help develop and focus their envisionments (e.g., quick-writes).
- Ask students to write during the experience to explore, rethink, and expand their envisionments (e.g., journals, written conversations).
- Ask students to write after a discussion to reflect on ideas and to reconsider possibilities for changed or new understandings (e.g., response journals, pieces written from a character's point of view).
- Encourage students to use talk as a way to try out ideas and sharpen thoughts for writing.

Supporting envisionment building

In envisionment-building classrooms where students have mutual support systems from teachers and other students, they are given the room to form their own understandings and to use interaction with others to explore horizons of possibilities. Our research revealed principles of practice that are at work in learning communities where envisionment building is at the core.

In envisionment-building classrooms, students and teachers…

See themselves as lifelong envisionment builders

Teachers treat students as thinkers who have interesting and coherent ideas about a piece of literature. Students and teachers participate in a community that invites them to further develop their envisionments by sharing their understandings and building on the understandings of others. Students take ownership of their ideas and responsibility for developing and refining their envisionments.

See questions as essential components of literary experience

Students and teachers know that raising questions is an important part of coming to understand. They see having questions as a sign of being good readers and as a means to further understand and explore horizons of possibilities.

Use class meetings as time to develop understandings

Students and teachers know that their ideas about a particular piece may change as they engage in a discussion. Class time is an opportunity to share thinking, rework understandings, raise questions, and use the stances to explore the horizons of possibilities.

Use multiple perspectives to enrich understandings

Because teachers help students realize that there is no one or “best” interpretation of a literary work, they are open to listening to others’ perspectives and come to appreciate why and how others may have different envisionments from their own. They are able to view the piece from varying critical and cultural perspectives and from the various perspectives of the characters within the piece.

Some strategies that support struggling readers

1 Involve all students in all aspects of class discussion.

2 Help students focus on ideas by providing guiding questions that will deepen the discussion (avoid questions with yes, no, or one-word answers).

- What might you do in a similar situation? Why do you think the character did it his way?
- What is the character feeling? How might this affect his actions?
- How does the setting help you understand the character's feelings?
- If you were telling this story, how might you end it? Why?
- How might this story be different if it happened in another time period?

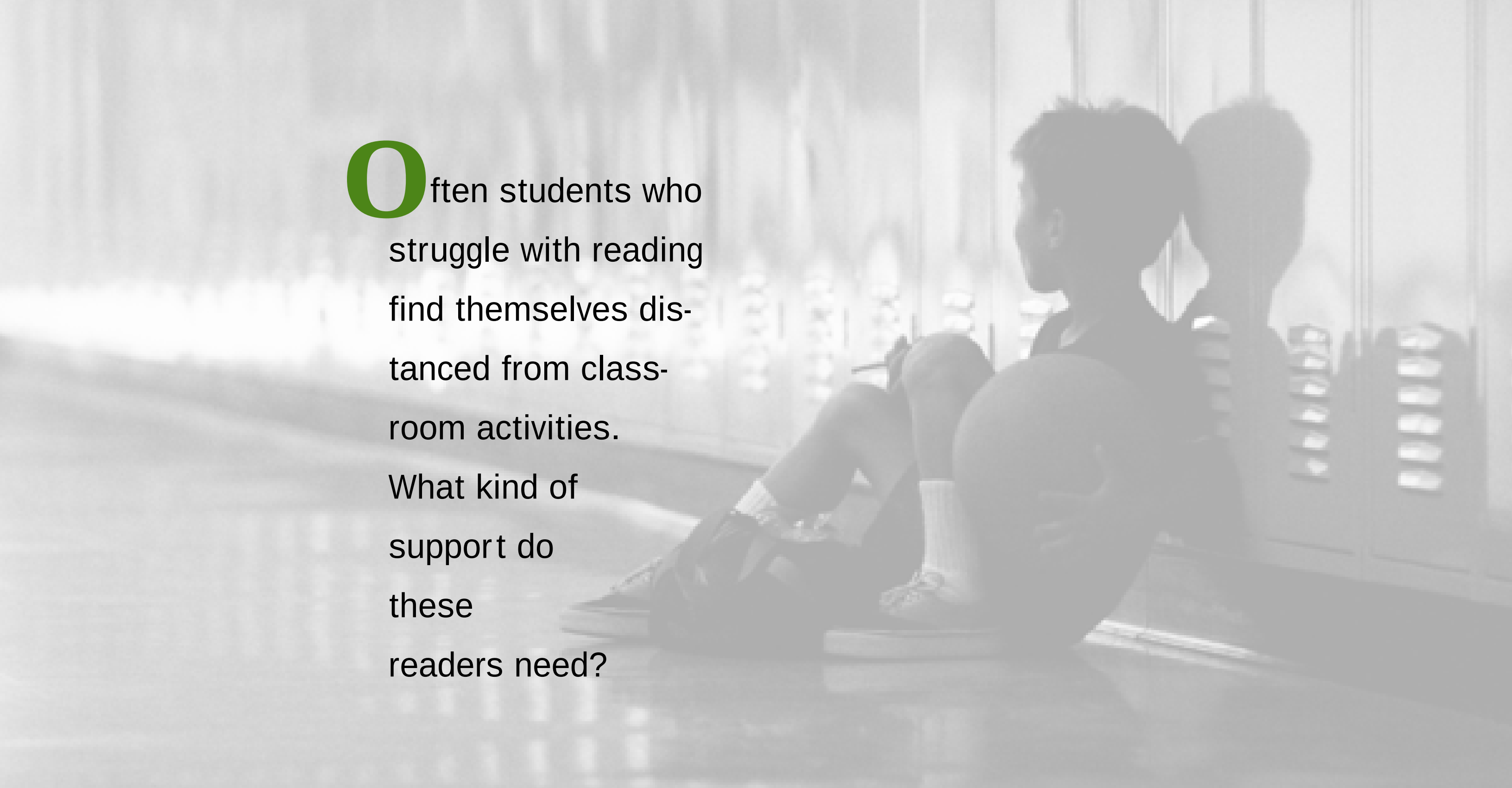
3 Provide direct instructional scaffolding with guided activities that help students develop envisionments.

- Design activities to support students' ideas and questions.
  - Paired readings where students read together, stopping to share thoughts and questions.
  - Note taking while reading to capture ideas (e.g., writing on copies of the text, or using sticky notes).
  - Journal writing to record thoughts and possible insights.
  - Quick-writes at crucial points in the narrative or at the end to help students focus.
- Provide alternative ways to access material (e.g., books on tape).
- Ask questions that help students make connections with the full text, with their own experiences and other readings.
  - Can you tell about another book where the character was like this one?
  - Describe a similar experience you've had. What feelings did you share with this main character? What feelings were different? Why?
- Encourage students to listen to and respond to the ideas of others.
  - Does anyone agree or disagree with Damien's idea? Why?
  - What other ideas do you have about why the character behaved this way?
- Provide opportunities for students to engage in related activities in multiple formats that make the thinking of their peers visible and develop their understandings of the work (e.g. role play, think-aloud, dramatic presentations, fish bowls, art representations).
- Provide individual copies of guiding questions (e.g. bookmarks, sticky note reminders).

INCLUDING STRUGGLING READERS IN AN ENVISIONMENT-BUILDING CLASSROOM

Often students who struggle with reading find themselves distanced from classroom activities. What kind of support do these readers need? Throughout the study, researchers observed that all readers engaged in the envisionment-building process, but there were differences in the quality of envisionments. Struggling readers are less aware of their purposes for reading (literary or discursive). Their envisionments are often thinly developed and easily shatter when they are puzzled or when they lack or don't use background information or prior experience. Struggling readers are more likely to lose their envisionments and to have more difficulty returning to them. Because they lack an understanding of the kinds of knowledge they are after, they rarely look for connections to what they have read and understood earlier, and they have difficulty hypothesizing about where the piece might go. They tend to treat their growing envisionments as collections of ideas rather than cohesive and ever-changing wholes.

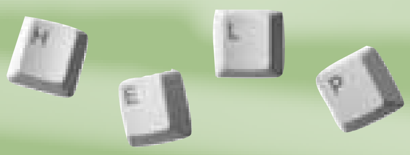
Yet, when less proficient readers engage in thought-provoking literary discussions, they perform more like proficient readers because the thinking of their peers is visible to them and they have models for building understanding. Through participation in envisionment-building discussions, they gain reading strategies, e.g., models for ways to think about reading purposes, literary content, possibilities for meaning. They learn what counts in the discussion and use that knowledge to develop their envisionments. They see their classmates working together to explore the horizons of possibilities, sometimes puzzling together over meaning, and they learn not only that puzzling and questioning are normal but also that their experiences, perspectives, and knowledge add important understandings to the discussion.



Often students who struggle with reading find themselves distanced from classroom activities. What kind of support do these readers need?

Instructional scaffolding for thinking and discussing

Students need support before, during, and after they participate in a literary discussion. Teachers can do many things to help students develop their envisionments. Beginning on page 16, we offer samples to illustrate activities that are effective.



Helping students move in and through various reading stances

Learners often need support when facing new or difficult tasks. When appropriate support (or scaffolding) is not provided, they may go off task, lose interest, or give up completely. Teachers can use the four reading stances to help students explore horizons of possibilities and thus develop their literary understanding. For example, if students are spending much of the time in one stance, the teacher can help them extend their thinking by asking a question or modeling thinking in another stance. Effective instructional scaffolding also allows students to develop skills for supporting, challenging, and shaping thinking.

Teachers need to be careful listeners and observers so they can determine when and what kind of support students require at any given time. As students internalize the process, scaffolding can be decreased and finally eliminated. Two kinds of instructional scaffolding are particularly helpful as students learn to think more deeply about literature: scaffolding ways to discuss and ways to think.

Scaffolding ways to discuss

- **Tapping understanding**
  Ask questions that invite students to express ideas, e.g., “What were you thinking as you finished reading?” “What questions would you like to bring to the discussion?” “What part of the story was most powerful? Why?”
- **Seeking clarification**
  Ask for clarification or restatement, e.g., “Can you say more about that idea?” “I’m not sure that I understood. Are you saying …?” “Can you say that in another way?”
- **Inviting participation**
  Show students how to enter a conversation, e.g., “What questions do you have?” “Does anyone want to respond to Willie’s comment?”
- **Orchestrating discussion**
  Show students how to converse, agree, disagree, connect and extend ideas, e.g., “Sam, you’ve had your hand up for awhile. What would you like to add?” “Devon, do you want to go back to something Maria said earlier?” “Talk to one another, not just to me.”

Scaffolding ways to think

- **Focusing ideas**
  Help students focus and narrow in on concerns, e.g., “You’re saying that it wasn’t what the children did then?” “What was the character’s purpose for doing that?”
- **Shaping arguments**
  Help students shape their ideas into tighter presentations, e.g., “I wonder whether your idea is limited to just one character or whether the idea works for other characters as well?”
- **Linking concerns**
  Help students use other ideas from the discussion, from the text, or other readings to develop their own interpretation, e.g. “Listen to Henri. He says that there are two ideas in the poem. See if you agree or disagree.”
- **Upping the ante**
  Provide new and less obvious ways to think about their ideas and concerns, e.g., “How is the view of the characters in this play different from our modern view?” “Who agrees that it’s a good idea to forget and start over? Why?”

Easing access before reading

Before students tackle a new reading, it is important that the teacher create the context. These preparations can be elaborate or simple and often include signals that students are about to engage in a literary experience. What is essential is that teachers provide ways to invite students into the experience and to encourage them to explore horizons of possibilities as a way to develop their own interpretations.

Excerpt

Girl Who Owned a City by O.T. Nelson

Middle school students are preparing to read *Girl Who Owned a City* (O.T. Nelson). At the beginning of this novel all adults in the world are dead and only children under the age of thirteen remain. All public services are gone, and the children are forced to rely on their limited skills to survive.

As preparation for reading, the teacher asks students to imagine a world with no adults and to individually list the advantages and disadvantages of this situation. The students bring their chairs into a circle. Desks are moved out of the way and unrelated books and papers remain outside of the circle. The teacher and students sit so they can see and respond directly to one another.

Candy: I couldn't find any strong points and it made me realize how much I like my parents.

Teacher: Okay, what did you see as a problem?

Candy: Well, first you'd think like great, no school, but then you think, geez, we'd all be pretty dumb.

Barbara: But you wouldn't have to listen to anyone.

Candy: But there'd also be no one to give you advice. Would you listen to a six-year-old?

Lily: Candy is true. The strong points are all really weak points. Who would make food? Who would care for you?

Al: The strong point that I have is not having to answer to anyone, not having to tell them like a D on your report card or coming home late.

Excerpt

The Mud Pony by Caron Lee Cohen

The teacher is preparing to read *The Mud Pony* (Caron Lee Cohen) to a first-grade class. She opens the windows to bring in fresh air as the students gather on a rug that defines their story and discussion area. She then lowers the lights to set the mood for the reading. Taking a seat with the children, she holds the book up and introduces it.

Teacher: This story is called *The Mud Pony* and it's by Caron Lee Cohen and the illustrations are by Shonto Begay. Shonto,that's an interesting name. *The Mud Pony.*

Students: Mud Pony.

Teacher: This is a story that has been told by a group of Native People called the Pawnee.

Students: Pawnee.

Teacher: And they've been telling the story for a long, long time. And the author decided to write the story in words that we could understand.

Juan: Did it say adapted or the other one in the front?

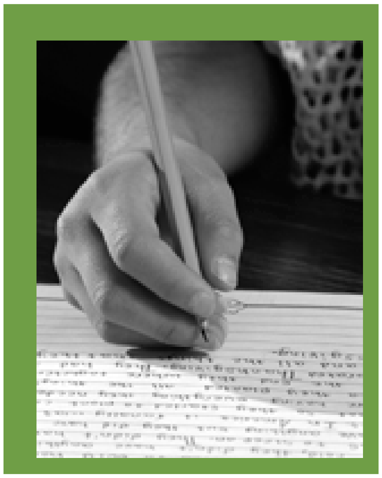
Teacher: It doesn't say adapted and that's a very good question.
So this author doesn't do what Terry Colin does. This author said retold. I'm very glad you brought that up, Juan, because this author said that she retold the story which means she is telling it very close to the real, real original story. Now Terry Colin adapted her stories and that means that she didn't quite make them exactly like they've been told.

Inviting initial understandings

Tapping what students are thinking at the end of a reading but before a discussion puts student concerns at the center of the discussion. These initial understandings are always subject to change and are often incomplete, but they provide ways to begin an exploration.

Examples of things to say at the end of a reading (short story, selection, chapter) to invite students' initial understandings:

- Jot down what you were thinking as you finished the piece.
- List the questions we need to talk about.
- Write about what bothered (concerned, interested, delighted) you at the end of the story or tell your partner about the part that stands out for you.
- Draw a picture of what you see.
- Circle words or phrases that seem important or puzzling.



Supporting the development of interpretations

Teachers can help students develop and extend their envisionments by questioning and building on their current understandings. To do this they encourage students to think about possible explanations for actions, events, or emotions and to reflect on changes across time. They support students as they consider multiple perspectives from within the reading and from their own experiences. In this way students learn to use differing views from the discussion as ways to explore, refine, and challenge their own ideas and the ideas of others.

Excerpt

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

A high school teacher helps students develop and extend their envisionments of *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald). Note how the teacher keys in on their concerns and encourages students to build on others' thoughts to develop their own understandings.

Teacher: Christie, why don't you start us off? *inviting*

Christie: One thing I wrote down was I wasn't exactly sure why he was invited to Gatsby's party. Why was he invited?

Teacher: Not why Gatsby, why Nick? *clarifying*

Christie: Right.

Teacher: Okay. Do you have any guesses? Any ideas at all? *tapping understandings*

Petal: They said that Miss Baker, she didn't know Gatsby, right? 'Cause it seemed weird that out of that crowd, that Gatsby like took her aside and told her some secret. I didn't think she knew him at all, only knew who he was.

Audra: When he met her, and he met Miss Baker at Daisy's, I thought she said something about Gatsby, and he was curious because he didn't know anything about it, but he never got a chance to ask her about it.

Petal: So he did.

Teacher: She did. We don't know what the connection is, but she first mentioned Gatsby at Daisy's house. Has your question been answered Christie? Why [was Nick invited]? There are two possibilities. One is that everybody goes to the Gatsby mansion. *orchestrating, shaping*

Christie: But he got invited by invitation.

Teacher: Aha. That's your question. Okay, your suggestion is that he is a next-door neighbor. *focusing*

Pablo: Yeah, and maybe that Gatsby just wanted another acquaintance, a different kind of acquaintance. Now all of a sudden he wants to tell him something.

Teacher: Yeah, we get the sense that these other folks are regulars. What is it that amazes you? This is a word I've heard come out of your mouths. What is it that amazes you? *shaping, upping the ante*

Audra: It seems so elaborate that he goes, that these parties are regular parties, but they seem so elaborate and so huge, and so like things that you have to dress up for. People drunk and running all over the place, and people don't even know him.

Teacher: Jess?

Jess: In a way though, what Audra said about everybody doing it. Because when he finally meets Gatsby and asks, Gatsby is like, "You don't know who I am." It was, you know, everybody should know who he was. *linking*

Pablo: They knew who he was, but they never really met him . . . .clarifying

Ron: Yeah, it seems like these people were in a fog.

Inviting students to take a critical stance

To help students step back from their envisionments, take a more objective look, and analyze their understandings, the text, and their experiences, teachers ask students to examine related issues and alternative perspectives and to explore textual features and literary concepts.

As students respond to these sample questions, ask them to explain and provide support for their thinking.

- How does the way this piece is written (language, literary devices, style, etc.) affect your understanding?
- If a psychologist (reporter, lawyer, historian, etc.) were to look at this character, what might she say?
- How do the roles of the characters in this story connect with current news events?
- If these characters were to face this same conflict today, how might the story be different?
- What does the author say about the culture in this story? What is your view?

Stocktaking

It is important for students to understand that envisionments can develop beyond class meeting times. By concluding a discussion without shutting off thinking, the teacher helps students to continue to consider ideas and issues. Teachers can close sessions by summarizing key ideas, noting changes in ideas, and pointing to concerns not yet adequately expressed. This leaves room for further exploration of possibilities and envisionment building.

Girl Who Owned a City

Teacher:

I have to do something. I have to stop you. Tomorrow we still have a question about realism. Kent brought it back again. We have a question about changing. We still haven't finished that. And if there's anything anyone else wants to say about the ending of the story. We've talked about the ending, we've talked about change, and we've only touched on Jimmy's issue of realism.

The Mud Pony

Teacher:

Aha. Well, I think your question is something worth thinking about. I think we will all give that some thought, and I thank you for your question. Maybe later we can talk about that question: Why was this boy the only one at the beginning of the story who didn't seem to have a pony and who got teased?

"All Summer in a Day"

Teacher:

We haven't talked about William and we really haven't talked about Margot at all. And so that is one of the things I'd like you to think about as you do your quick-write tonight. I'd like you to think about the writer's style, but I would also like you to think about what a science fiction story should do for you. Can you, as Nick said, ignore the setting or is there a problem for you? Then I'd like you to think about why the author selected this setting. You don't have to answer all of these questions, but I'd like you to think and write about at least one of them tonight.

More about strategies to improve literary understanding

Throughout this booklet we have mentioned a number of strategies that help students develop their envisionments of literature. In this section we say a few more words about five of these strategies and provide some classroom excerpts that illustrate them. The strategies are written conversations, response journals, discussion guides, think-aloud or paired/shared readings, and quick-writes.

Strategy

Written conversations take place between pairs of students. Sharing a sheet of paper, they communicate their ideas and ask one another questions by writing their thoughts. They are able to converse on topics of concern to them while capturing their thoughts for further consideration.

Excerpt

Middle school students' written conversation about *Girl Who Owned a City* (O.T. Nelson).

Dear Barbara,
I'm sort of behind in GWOAC, so don't ruin it for me, okay?

Sally,
I like the book but I don't like Lisa because she is very bossy and she sort of yells at the kids when she talks. What page are you on so U know? I am on 128.

Barb,
I'm only on 103. I guess I agree with you that Lisa is boss but it seems as though everyone is letting her be bossy which I don't like because even in a horrible situation like that I don't see how everyone can do whatever Lisa says.

Strategy

Response journals can take many different forms depending upon student needs and teacher goals. Essentially students use them to respond to their reading. Teachers might suggest questions students can consider as they write or ask students to record and respond to their own questions. Students may use a double entry format so that they can return to earlier responses and reflect and comment upon them or exchange journals and respond to classmates' entries.

Excerpt:

Double-entry journal *Canyons* (Gary Paulsen)

My response	My reflections (several days later)
I think that the spirits really did take Coyote Runs. I think that Coyote Runs is a spirit communicating to Brennan. Brennan awoke with a pain in his head and leg, that is where Coyote Runs was shot. I think Coyote Runs will help Brennan in Brennan's life. I think Brennan is all reacted to the skull. I think Brennan's dreams have to do with the Indian tribe that Coyote Runs belongs to.	I think here I was really thinking and guessing really well. I was right about a lot of things. I'm still wondering about the dreams Brennan had. I really don't get the snake dream because it doesn't fit in with the others.

Strategy

Discussion guides provide the support necessary for learners to develop more sophisticated envisionments. As they internalize the information and processes necessary for deeper understanding, students need less guidance and become increasingly more independent. For example, a teacher may provide guiding questions from the perspectives of the various stances as students learn to think more deeply about their reading. As students begin to ask their own questions, the guiding questions become more complex or are removed completely.

Excerpt:

This guide was designed to move middle school students through the stances and to deepen their understandings of a poem. Members in each small group facilitated discussion and recorded the responses on the guide and later shared them with the whole class. *The responses from one of those groups are in green.*

English Group members: U, K, L, H, A
Poetry Interpretations
Title: Taught Me Purple
Author: Evelyn Tooley Hunt

Possible interpretations:
K – Her mother could tell her how to feel about life and could never show her how to go about it.
U – The color purple symbolizes the rules of life and how to go about using them. The golden color represents the beauty of life and nature.
A – Her mother wanted her to have everything she never had. The color purple also symbolizes the hardships of life.

Techniques:
The poem has an A,B,C,D...etc rhyme scheme.

Discussion questions:
- Why couldn't her mother teach her pride?
- On line 11, what do they mean – who knew so much of duty?
- Why does the poet use the color purple?
- On line 5 and 6, what do they mean – Her mother taught her golden, and held her up to see it?

Strategy

Think-aloud or paired/shared readings ask students to read aloud in pairs or groups, stopping whenever a thought, question, or concern occurs to any of them. Sharing makes thinking visible.

Excerpt:

Discussion following a think-aloud about "All Summer in a Day"

Teacher: Did anyone do anything before you started to read?

Some student responses
- I wondered what the title meant. Can summer happen in one day?
- I thought that I had read something before by Ray Bradbury. He writes science fiction, I think.
- I looked to see how long the story was.

Teacher: As you were reading, most of you stopped many times along the way. What caused you to stop?

Some student responses
- I wanted to know why Margot was so sad.
- We both had trouble understanding some parts. Why did he have so much description?
- There were some words I didn't understand.

Teacher: When you finished the reading, what did you talk about? What were you thinking?

Some student responses
- We talked about why we didn't like the ending. Was Margot dead? We can't decide.
- We wondered why the teacher didn't miss Margot when they went outside.

Strategy

Quick-writes capture ideas quickly and make them available for further discussion. The writer focuses on thoughts, questions, and concerns. Because this writing is used as a way to collect ideas, it is not assessed for grammatical accuracy or spelling.

Excerpt:

Halfway through the story, "All Summer in a Day," students were asked to capture what they were seeing. This is Ivan's response.

I see Margo as a very sad and small girl who can't defend herself against the others in her class. I see the other children in the class as very mean. They all probably don't hate Margo but because they go along with what their classmates are doing I think they are equally as mean.

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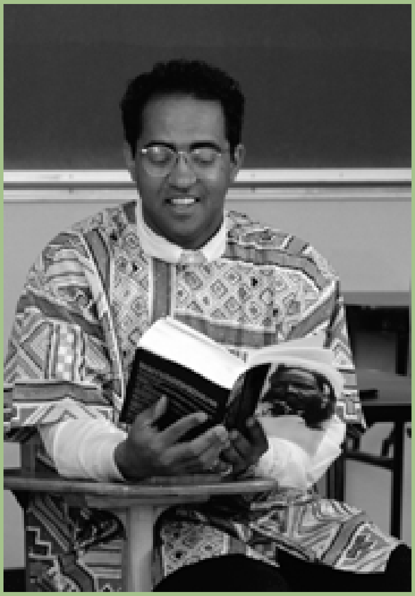


This booklet can only provide a brief overview of some of the findings from the work of Langer and other researchers at CELA. Additional information is available on the CELA website; from Langer's *Envisioning Literature: Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction* (Teachers College Press, 1995); and *Conversations in Literature*, a progam of Annenberg/CPB.

Related reports available:

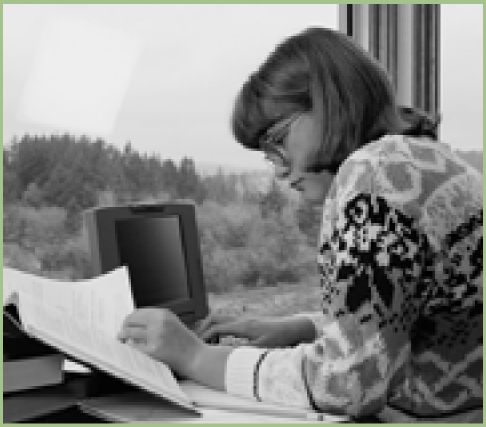
Thinking and Doing Literature: An 8-Year Study (Langer, 1997) Report 6.8

A Response-Based Approach to Reading Literature (Langer, 1994) Report 6.7

Approaches Toward Meaning in Low-and High-Rated Readers (Langer, 1993) Report 2.20

Supporting the Process of Literary Understanding: An Analysis of a Classroom Discussion (Roberts and Langer, 1991) Report 2.15

http://cela.albany.edu/publication/envisionment.htm



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