

## ABSTRACT

What Do You Think? Applied Research in Class Discussion Communication

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The purposes of this study are to investigate non-credentialed English teachers' experiences facilitating class discussions and analyze the information communicated in extant discussion facilitation resources targeted towards non-credentialed English teachers. The study created themes from semi-structured interviews with 29 non-credentialed English teachers and eight resources of multiple modalities. First, the study reviews relevant literature related to dialogue, class discussions, and applied research in education. Second, the study methods are discussed. Third, the thematic findings from both research questions are explained. The themes that emerged from interviews include *experiences with student participation level*, *experiences with student participation quality*, *experiences with student buy-in*, *experiences with student benefits*, and *experiences with resources for discussions*. The themes that emerged from the resource archival analysis include *discussion philosophy*, *discussion preparation*, *discussion questions*, *discussion strategies*, and *post-discussion assignments*. Fourth, the findings are discussed in relation to implications for teacher practitioners, resource developers, and teachers. Study limitations and future directions for research are also discussed.

*Keywords: instructional communication, class discussions, dialogue theory, applied research*

What Do You Think? Applied Research in Class Discussion Communication

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Communication

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## DEDICATION

To the English teacher.

Credentialed or non-credentialed, paid or unpaid, new or experienced... you are a gift to  
our world.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Teachers without formal credentials constitute a situated community that is valuable in academic studies. Such teachers are commonly employed at private and charter schools (which often do not require credentials of their instructors) as well as nontraditional learning communities such as homeschool groups and educational “pods.” Non-credentialed teachers can also be found in small numbers scattered across America’s public schools as substitute teachers, employees with provisional certification, etc. This latter setting of public schools has merely 1.7% non-credentialed teachers compared to traditionally credentialed teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). However, non-credentialed teachers are highly desired in multiple learning communities, and their value to parents has only skyrocketed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic began in 2020, the number of homeschooling students has dramatically risen. Around 3–4% of students in the United States are now homeschooled, and the statistic increases annually (ThinkImpact, 2021).

Homeschooling parents and communities often outsource classes such as English classes to teacher vendors (e.g., using funds from state-funded charter schools). Such teacher vendors do not always possess a college degree in education or the subject on which they teach, and this provides a unique opportunity for research that can identify gaps or differences in their knowledge and skills. In addition, many homeschool communities such as cooperative (“co-op”) groups share teaching duties between parents, which creates class-like learning groups. Co-op parents, who teach their children along

with other homeschooling parents' children, are frequently not formally trained in instruction or the subject matter. Thus, there is a need for non-credentialed English teachers to utilize resources and training to facilitate class discussions, a need that is not fully satiated by existing teacher certification programs. Therefore, though often overlooked in academic research, non-credentialed teachers have proven they are vitally necessary for the health of the American educational system—and that they are uniquely positioned to potentially benefit from targeted resources.

Non-credentialed English teachers are a subset of this population. Oftentimes, their classes prioritize discussion and dialogic learning at the core of the curriculum. Thus, these teachers could greatly benefit from personalized resources. After all, the experience of leading class discussions can differ from discipline to discipline; for instance, mathematics teachers face the unique challenge of helping students develop argumentation skills within a context of technical language, formulas, and objective procedures (Walshaw & Anthony, 2008). Class discussion facilitation can also vary depending on if the instructor has participated in a teacher credential program, considering that traditional versus alternative paths to teaching offer different kinds and levels of practical preparation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2001, p.). Furthermore, one can assume that it is helpful for non-credentialed teachers to utilize extant theory and research on dialogue, instructional communication, and class discussions—considering how professional development training on these topics has widely benefited credentialed teachers. However, such information is not always “translated” into accessible forms for non-credentialed teachers and is traditionally (as far as academic journal and book publications) theoretical, lengthy, and kept behind paywalls. Consequently, laying the

groundwork for future theory-laden, practical, and understandable resources is valuable for non-credentialed teachers' professional development. Such future resources will assist teachers in tangibly improving their teaching practices (a major goal of educational research) by addressing discrepancies in non-credentialed English teachers' knowledge, skills, and resources. For instance, many non-credentialed homeschool communities, especially those aligning with the classical education method, are familiar with Socratic dialogue but not with Harkness discussions, Buber's concepts of dialogue's basic tensions, etc. (*Socratic Discussion in the Homeschool*, n.d.; *What Is Socratic Teaching?*, n.d.).

Furthermore, the specific population of non-credentialed English teachers appears to be missing from communication research. However, this group is worth learning about and empowering in order for them to serve students more effectively. Many homeschooled and charter school students take language arts group classes from non-credentialed teachers (who are generally accredited in writing or reading programs, such as IEW [Institute for Excellence in Writing; Institute for Excellence in Writing, n.d.]), and many of these teachers prioritize discussion and argumentation in their curriculum (e.g., the trivium model [Bauer, 2015]). Thus, class discussions are central to many non-credentialed English teachers' instructional ideologies; yet non-credentialed teachers may not possess the same processual knowledge as their credentialed educator counterparts, which poses a gap that can be addressed through additional training. Also, there is a dearth of literature on non-credentialed teachers in general, and most such studies analyze non-traditionally credentialed (e.g., emergency credentialed, professional development schools [PDS] graduate) as opposed to non-credentialed teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2001, p.; Reynolds et al., 2002). Thus, compiling the experiences of non-credentialed

English teachers may help inform how nontraditional educational communities (e.g., charter schools, homeschooling “pods”) train and support instructors.

The present study investigates non-credentialed English teachers’ experiences facilitating class discussions (RQ1) and analyzes the information communicated in extant discussion facilitation resources targeted towards non-credentialed English teachers (RQ2). Both analyses draw upon dialogue theories, class discussion research, and applied communication research in education. Accordingly, the analyses can benefit teacher practitioners’ discussion facilitation skills as well as provide direction for resource developers. In the following chapter, relevant literature is reviewed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### *Dialogue Theories*

Contemporary theories of dialogue owe much to ancient Greece's Socrates, whose concept of elenchus continues to ground myriad teaching philosophies, curriculum, and discussion facilitation strategies. Positing that productive conversation most importantly helps individuals discover truth together, Socrates identified elenchus—"scrutiny" or "refutation"—as a vital means of reaching that goal (Peters & Besley, 2019). In the Socratic method of dialogue, participants engage in constructive questioning and responding. They work to draw out each other's presuppositions, the logical implications of their ideas, and any contradictions that rule out a particular hypothesis. In a typical classroom setting, the instructor guides these discussions and serves as the questioner. But regardless of who the questioner is, they must adopt the equal role of fellow truth-lover rather than definitive source of knowledge. Thus, one can act as questioner without possessing subject knowledge. Note, too, that the Socratic method and elenchus were echoed in the philosophies of Plato—dialectic, or cross-examination—as well as Aristotle—who connected it to rhetoric and argumentation (Peters & Besley, 2019).

Another prominent dialogue theorist is Martin Buber, a German–Jewish “edifying philosopher” who is best known for his typology of human relations in *I and Thou* (R. Anderson & Cissna, 2012, p. 127). The first type, I-It, denotes a subject–object relationship. At least one participant is attempting to influence and act upon the other. The second, I-Thou, refers to the unmediated communion of equal human beings. During



such communions, “the between” space of intersubjectivity begets love, responsibility, and empathy as both participants exist with and give their “whole being[s]” to one other (R. Anderson & Cissna, 2012, p. 134; Gordon, 2011, p. 208). One additional tenet of Buber's philosophy is that I-Thou relations, also called dialogic or interhuman, do not erase individual differences. Participants acknowledge and confirm each other while maintaining their own identities, which involves a dynamic polar tension (Gordon, 2011). They also stay open to adopting the other's reality.

In a similar way to Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of dialogue continues to impact academic conversations about media (e.g., literature, for which his ideas were intended), language, and cultivating dialogic communication in various settings (e.g., organizations; Barge & Little, 2002). Rather than being a distinct or “special” type of communication episode, dialogue according to Bakhtin is a quality of communication inherent to human discourse (Bakhtin, 1981). Language use itself is dialogical, as speakers are always participating in a historic, contextual conversation (bound by space and time [chronotopic]) and shaping utterances partly borrowed from others. In addition, every individual's social reality is embedded with numerous complementary and contrasting voices (polyphony), so it is natural and human to interact dialogically. Next, the meaning of an utterance is determined by the speaker's intention and purpose, the utterance's content and style, and the response or interpretation of an Other. Again, Bakhtin's emphasis on contextually-bound, chronotopic messages is evident. This concept of chronotope also leads to the idea that meanings are never finalized but are fluid and open to further adaptation. Some application practices scholars divine from Bakhtin's dialogical perspective include the following: pursue dialogue constantly (rather

than reserving it for crisis or “elevated” circumstances), holistically prioritize relationships (rather than viewing them as inhibitors to information transmission or even dialogic ends), and consider the surrounding context of a dialogic conversation (e.g., preexisting social relationships) as meaningfully impacting its “flavor” (Barge & Little, 2002, p. 380).

In his frequently referenced book that has drastically shaped pedagogy worldwide, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire outlined his own dialogic theory. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* focuses on how dialogue, an “encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world,” effects liberation (Freire, 2014; original published 1970, p. 88). Rather than indoctrinating students or telling them a single story about reality—“banking”—teachers could use problem-posing in the classroom. Within a problem-posing framework, the teacher and students discuss what they are learning framed as a problem: observing it, questioning it, and contextualizing it in their own concrete “thematic universe[s]” (Freire, 2014; original published 1970, p. 96). The ultimate goal of problem-posing is reflection and transformative action upon the world, which Freire referred to as “praxis.” Freire’s theory of dialogue is often used to uphold social justice and action research, especially that focused on marginalized communities and issues of oppression versus liberation.

A more recent approach to dialogue comes from W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon E. Cronen: the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). CMM informs and overlaps in application with Pearce and Cronen’s Communication Perspective. First introduced to the scholarly conversation in 1979, CMM proposes that communication (i.e., speech acts) creates social worlds, identities, and cultures (Cronen et al., 1979; Pearce, 2007b, 2007a;

Pearce & Pearce, 2004). To study communication using CMM and the Communication Perspective, researchers should examine speech acts and the *processes* of communicating rather than looking “through” them for other data points (Pearce & Pearce, 2004, p. 2). Moreover, effective dialogue according to CMM is a quality, not category, of communication. When engaged in dialogue, participants both assertively share their viewpoints and listen with empathy. Participants’ primary end is to understand and grow, not to dominate or even persuade one another. CMM informs considerable present-day research on public dialogue forums (e.g., Chen, 2004) as well as other venues of meaning-making. In addition, organizations like the Public Dialogue Consortium use its theoretical paradigm and practical strategies to meet corporate and community clients’ needs (Spano, 2006).

The present study operates from the value-laden and frequently advocated perspective that a meaningful education necessitates students interacting with others’ ideas and communicating their own with sound reasoning (Hardman, 2019). Dialogue—distinct from monologue because it invites, learns from, and builds upon others’ speech—is a quality of communication proven to help fulfill this goal (Hardman, 2019; Skidmore, 2019). Different conceptualizations of dialogue tend to agree that the process involves students sharing, building upon, and challenging one another’s ideas while using evidence (Warwick & Cook, 2019). Though the current study acknowledges dialogue’s important role in learning, it does not advocate for one specific methodology (e.g., Bakhtin, Buber) over another. Instead, it takes the pragmatic viewpoint that each offer unique benefits and drawbacks—and may vary in value between individuals and groups.

This flexible paradigm encourages dialogic theory to be applied to data analysis in maximally beneficial, highly practical ways.

### *Class Discussion Research*

Extant research on discussions in the classroom is primarily focused on one of a few major areas, which include analyses of students' test scores, intangible benefits, and communication-focused studies. First, there is substantial literature comparing quantitative score data of students in inquiry-based versus lecture-heavy courses. In general, students whose classes have them engage in discussions earn higher scores on tests, final exams, and the overall course (Dudley-Marling, 2013). Accordingly, students whose classes are discussion-based tend to demonstrate superior recall and comprehension of subject matter. However, some studies have found no achievement difference between the control groups and students in inquiry-based classes (e.g., Eglash, 1954; Hennessy & Davies, 2019). A few even suggest that lecture-based learning is more effective after analyzing students' pre-test and post-test scores (e.g., Garside, 1996). Nevertheless, in these studies, students in discussion-based classes consistently demonstrated better (as compared to control groups) high-level critical thinking skills, capability for argumentation, identification of problems and solutions, and adaptability to create insights and methods of meaning-making (Dudley-Marling, 2013; Hennessy & Davies, 2019). However, facilitating students' critical reasoning processes is not an easy feat. Even with variable participation rates, many students do not appear to surpass low-level thinking skills during discussions (Dudley-Marling, 2013; Rocca, 2010).

Furthermore, class discussion research has also focused on more intangible student benefits. For instance, students who participate in inquiry-based courses often

experience increased motivation, confidence, self-reported level of character, and ability to function well in society (Hennessy & Davies, 2019; Rocca, 2010), as well as domain-specific skills such as argumentation literacy (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Thus, despite different focal points across class discussion literature, discursive activities have proven they can greatly benefit students, especially in areas quantitative analyses cannot capture.

Another salient theme found in the literature is the methodological choice of studying communicative behaviors themselves during class discussions: how inquiry is facilitated and in what speech acts teachers and students engage. Specifically, previous studies consider inquiry facilitation and the use of speech acts among teachers and students (e.g., Boyd & Markarian, 2011). For instance, a teacher's clarity and immediacy behaviors (e.g., smiling, eye contact, encouraging voice) have been positively associated with student interest, engagement, and involvement (Mazer, 2012; McCroskey et al., 2007; Sidelinger, 2010). Additionally, there are identified dialogic “moves” or strategies commonly considered to be helpful during discussions (e.g., eliciting input, connecting others’ ideas, asking for elaboration, etc.; Cui & Teo, 2021). Delineating these discursive strategies is seen as beneficial because a teacher actively participating in a discussion does not always correlate with improved student participation rates (Muhonen et al., 2016). It is also beneficial because multiple studies have discovered vast differences in how teachers identify “discussions,” pointing to wide gaps between student and instructor speaking time percentages (Rocca, 2010). This discrepancy exists even within the dialogic teaching sub-field (Cui & Teo, 2021). Therefore, labeling and studying communication behaviors in class discussions can highlight gaps in perception (from

what a teacher versus observer notices) while offering direct, applied strategies that teachers can utilize to enhance discussion processes and quality.

Dillon (1994) clarified that discussion should be conceptualized as a distinct type of communication. Students and instructors speaking together does not automatically constitute discussion or cause it to emerge. Instead, discussion as a practice means using open-ended questions to develop joint understanding and judgment on a topic. It is primarily focused on developing students' reasoning processes, as opposed to emphasizing content or conclusions (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Furthermore, a productive dialogic discussion necessitates the teacher *and* students co-constructing a discursive space, which goes against traditional classroom roles by positioning all parties as agents (Edwards-Groves & Davidson, 2019; Segal et al., 2017).

### *Applied Communication Research in Education*

An orthodox demarcation of research approaches distinguishes between basic versus applied research. Basic research, or discipline research, aims to produce knowledge by testing and refining existing theory (Arneson, 2009; Kreps et al., 1991). Though a traditional keystone of social scientific methodologies, the basic research approach has been often problematized in recent years. Critics point out that its findings are generally inaccessible to the public (requiring “translation”), and study designs neglect to give back and serve the communities of research (Frey, 2009; see also González-López, 2013).

Applied research, in contrast, focuses on real-world problem-solving. Whereas basic research's goal is to better understand, control, and predict a given phenomenon, applied research seeks to discover solutions to experiential social issues (Arneson, 2009).

This pragmatic orientation towards research shares the methodological freedoms of its theoretical counterpart (Kreps et al., 1991). Applied research can select a variety of settings (commonly field work, but not excluding more controlled environments), tools of inquiry (commonly qualitative, but not excluding quantitative methods), and relationships to extant theory (commonly more interpretive and sensitive to situated experiences, but not atheoretical or excluding research that verifies theory in the “real world” [Arneson, 2009, p. 84]). Moreover, applied research acknowledges that researchers enter into a discourse with preexisting biases (Arneson, 2009); in light of this, methods—though still scholarly and aiming for practical implementation—tend to be value-laden and guided by the researcher’s experiences and beliefs. While applied research includes intervention-based approaches such as action research (Stringer, 2013), it is not limited to them. Some designs maintain the goal of proposing solutions or enhancements to a real-world situation, but they do not put them into practice within the study framework.

Applied communication research in the field of education is abundant and can positively affect all participants involved, “bridg[ing] the gap between lab research and the ‘real world’ of education” (Agarwal et al., 2012, p. 447). In Agarwal et al.’s 2012 study of retrieval practices in authentic classroom environments, teacher participants reported gratitude for their involvement in the project. Participants gained valuable acumen on learning and teaching, much of which they passed on to colleagues, thus broadening the study’s impact. In addition, they grew in confidence and became stronger teachers. One teacher participant stated that “[i]nvolvement with a university study greatly benefits all... If we truly want to reach all students, we need to educate current

and future teachers about research-based strategies that lead to authentic learning” (Agarwal et al., 2012, p. 446).

Narrowing the scope further, applied communication education research has also explored teacher professional development programs and dialogue in the classroom. This type of research skillfully plays with the theory–practice continuum and empowers practitioners. Teacher professional development includes a variety of activities (e.g., a series of workshops) that can range from weeks to years long (De Naeghel et al., 2016; Thurlings & den Brok, 2017). Thurlings and den Brok’s (2017) meta-analysis of fifty-one articles with peer teacher professional development (PTPD) activities found that these community-based learning opportunities were largely advantageous. Some common benefits included the teacher learning about themselves and developing their instructional practices, as well as enhanced student- and classroom-level (and, to an extent, school-level) outcomes. Not surprisingly, Thurlings and den Brok (2017) discovered that these professional development activities were more successful if teachers acted upon learning material, rather than simply thinking about it. Furthermore, one pervasive weakness of the reviewed studies was a lack of theoretical grounding in the Discussion section; about half of the articles failed to reference existing theory while making sense of localized findings. Accordingly, teacher professional development programs, and their corresponding literature, may work more effectively when they combine theory (the “why”) and practical strategies (the “how”). Programs should also encourage teachers to interpret pedagogical tools through their unique individual frameworks, creating ways to “appropriate,” or integrate, them into their instructional repertoires (De Naeghel et al., 2016; Sedova et al., 2016, p. 287).



Applied teacher professional development research is complemented by, and often overlaps with, inquiries into dialogic teaching practices. The wealth of research on dialogic-centered professional development programs finds several common themes. Most programs are highly collective, aligning with applied research's turn from the authoritative researcher voice to more communal approaches (as well as fitting teachers' preferences about professional development activities; Garet et al., 2001). These dialogic programs frequently involve workshops with collaborative discussions, as well as opportunities to co-develop methods of applying concepts (e.g., small group activity, microteaching; Gröschner et al., 2015; Sedova, 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2017). In addition, they conventionally include opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own dialogic practices while viewing recordings of their recent lessons, in groups or with a one-on-one coach (Haneda et al., 2017; Sedova et al., 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2017). Topics covered in these programs tend to fall under several categories: teachers' questions and "uptake" (building on what students have said), students' reasoning, and the quality of "open discussion" that emerges when at least three students engage with one another's talk for thirty seconds or more (Gröschner et al., 2015; Sedova, 2017; Sedova et al., 2016). Outcomes of such teacher professional development programs are largely positive. Yet, as Sedova (2017) observed, a teacher's transition to dialogic practices may be nonlinear (including periods of regression as well as improvement) and difficult to assess in the short term. Also, altering teacher discourse practices brings its own challenges, as teachers may not be open to such changes (Hennessy & Davies, 2019; Juzwik et al., 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2017); after all, instructional implementation must be authentic and relies upon the teacher's preexisting dialogic pedagogical stance (Hennessy &

Davies, 2019). In these ways, research into dialogic professional development programs has posed difficulties along with meaningful opportunities.

Accordingly, two research questions guide the current study:

RQ 1: What experiences do non-credentialed English teachers have facilitating class discussions?

RQ 2: What information is communicated in discussion facilitation resources targeted towards non-credentialed English teachers?

## CHAPTER THREE

### Method

The current study utilized an applied qualitative framework. This research framework seeks to create findings that can benefit real-world situations, not primarily to validate and extend existing theory (as with a more basic research approach; Arneson, 2009). For this study, the goal was to uncover key domains of discussion facilitation experiences and relevant information presented in resources so that future resource developers can create and revise resources that are maximally helpful to teacher practitioners.

This study investigated the experiences that non-credentialed English teachers have facilitating class discussions (RQ1). It also analyzed what information is communicated in extant resources that exist to help non-credentialed English teachers facilitate class discussions (RQ2). Accordingly, RQ1 involved analyzing transcripts from interviews with 29 non-credentialed English teachers. The design choice of interviews allowed teachers to shape and communicate their own experiences orally using everyday, conversational language and storytelling. This provided the study with more in-depth insights, details, and opportunities for clarification and follow-up than other tools such as surveys might garner. RQ2 involved analyzing a variety of resources (eight in total): video transcripts, textbooks, and literature guides. Utilizing a grounded theory thematic analysis was a helpful approach in that it allowed the principal investigator to become immersed in the data through several readthroughs and note naturally-occurring

informational patterns. This chapter covers the research sampling method (which will then include recruitment and participants), data collection, and data analysis of the study.

### *Interviews*

#### *Sampling*

29 non-credentialed English teachers were recruited for the study. To be eligible for participation, teachers had to be current (or recently retired) elementary–high school English teachers who did not possess an English teaching credential at the time of the interview. One participant had obtained a state teaching certificate for English in the past, but they acknowledged that requirements for and training associated with credentialing has changed since then. Two participants had previously held ACSI (Association of Christian Schools International) credentials. One participant had previously held an emergency credential and taught in the public school system.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The principal investigator recruited participants using emails (see Appendices A and B) and phone calls to private schools, homeschool cooperatives, individuals accredited by the Institute for Excellence in Writing (IEW), and several personal contacts who teach or are involved in the homeschool community. Potential participants were encouraged to forward the research request to other teachers who might also be interested. After 15 interviews had been conducted, data saturation was reached. All further interview conversations confirmed the themes that had already emerged in the data. The principal investigator chose to continue completing interviews after this point to add richness and

depth to the analysis, as well as allow every teacher a voice who wanted to participate in the research.

The teachers that participated in this study had experience in a variety of instructional contexts, including homeschool cooperatives/support programs ( $n = 24$ ), private schools ( $n = 13$ ), public schools ( $n = 3$ ), and independently as vendors ( $n = 3$ ). They had taught classes from composition to literature to creative writing. Participants held varying levels of post-secondary education (from some college to doctorate-level degrees) in an array of disciplines such as English, Journalism, Elementary Education, Kinesiology, Management Information Systems, and Plant Science. On average, teachers had been teaching English in group settings for 11.4 years (lowest was 1 year, highest was 35 years); several teachers also spoke of their experience teaching English in the individual homeschool setting ( $n = 7$ ;  $M = 16.6$  years).

### *Data Collection*

The methodological choice of interviews complements open, flexible study designs such as what was used in the present study (Drever, 1995; Horton et al., 2004). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable in that they carve out a space for spontaneous insights created during naturally-directed conversational inquiry. Once a participant agreed to the interview, they completed and emailed or texted their signed consent form (see Appendix C), and the principal investigator arranged a time for a thirty minute—one hour synchronous Zoom or phone call. In total, these interviews resulted in 21 hours, 24 minutes, and 39 seconds of audio recordings. Most calls were roughly one hour in length ( $M = 0:51:23$ ); the shortest interview was 0:21:39, and the longest interview was 1:30:19. Interviews were audio recorded for reference.

Many potential participants were unable to schedule a synchronous conversation due to time constraints. Four participants elected to complete the interview asynchronously over email (see Appendix E for the list of questions) so that they could make it work with their schedule. The principal investigator sent follow-up emails as needed to ask additional questions and make clarifications (e.g., “What modality is the curriculum resource you mentioned, and what is its name?”). All interviews took place between January 27, 2022 and March 16, 2022.

During interviews, each teacher was given the opportunity to shape their own discussion facilitation story by orally processing and responding to ten questions (see Appendix D). The principal investigator asked additional probing and follow-up questions as needed (e.g., “When students did not want to participate, how did you manage that challenge?”). Also, the principal investigator wrote general notes during and after each conversation.

### *Data Analysis*

Following the synchronous interviews, transcripts were obtained via the automatic transcribing features within Zoom and Microsoft Word. This resulted in 374 typed pages of single-spaced transcriptions. Of the twenty-five synchronous interviews, the longest transcript was 25 pages, and the shortest transcript was 8 pages ( $M = 15$  pages). The principal investigator personally corrected all transcripts while listening to the interview audio recordings. Also, the four asynchronous interviews were copied and pasted into single-spaced documents, which were each two pages in length (six pages total).

Participants’ privacy was protected during the analysis process. All research documents were stored on a password-protected computer. In the final analysis and

throughout transcript documents, all participants were given pseudonyms for confidentiality. However, transcript document titles retained participants' real names, as well as field notes that were written and read only by the principal investigator.

The analysis utilized a grounded theory framework, which aims to construct understanding through open-minded, inductive analysis (Strauss, 1987). In contrast, a more deductive approach would use pre-determined theoretically-based categories in the assessment. Though often helpful for theory verification, such strictly top-down analyses may not be as suitable for knowledge creation (Suddaby, 2006). Grounded theory thematic analyses allow for creativity, open-mindedness, and holisticness in studying a phenomenon—expanding a researcher's perspectives rather than restricting them to the existing conversations of their discipline.

Though traditional grounded approaches posit that literature reviews and prior research must only be utilized *after* an analysis, many modern proponents suggest that initial research develops “theoretical sensitivity” and need not compromise inductive procedures (Thistoll et al., 2016). Similarly, Bowen (2006) argues that “sensitizing concepts” provide researchers with further grounding in preparation for qualitative grounded theory analyses. Accordingly, the literature review previously developed for this study provided additional information and possible directions for analysis, but it did not authoritatively inform the process. To begin, the interview data was reviewed thoroughly during two readthroughs. While consulting the data, categories that capture discrete experiences (phrases such as “dominant student” and “students build off each other”), called themes, were developed as part of the open coding phase (Strauss, 1987). Codes were generally assigned at the sentence level, but anecdotes or extended examples

were coded by paragraph. Next, through critical revision (axial coding), the themes were synthesized and re-categorized after the principal investigator had reread all codes and their corresponding data. Attentiveness was paid to connections, or “linkages,” between themes (Strauss, 1987, p. 17). Then, through selective coding, a smaller number of themes that most effectively describe the body of data was finalized. Throughout data analysis, field notes were typed up in a document by the principal investigator. Each dated note described coding decisions (e.g., which codes were combined or renamed), general study decisions (e.g., removing a research question), and the principal investigator’s ongoing thoughts on developing themes and implications.

### *Resources*

#### *Selection*

After the 29 teacher interviews had been completed, eight resources in total were selected as part of the study’s archival analysis. Resources must help non-credentialed English teachers facilitate class discussions. Thus, either they were commonly mentioned by participants or serve as a beneficial—but perhaps less well-known—resource to meet this need. The principal investigator researched every resource that was referenced by participants during the resources portion of the interview, eliminating those that did not directly benefit instructors’ discussion facilitation (e.g., Progeny Press curriculum). Out of these recommendations from participants came the following print resources: *Teaching the Classics*, *A Lively Kind of Learning: Mastering the Seminar Method* and *Leading a Seminar on Homer’s Odyssey* (as Cana Academy was frequently brought up), and *Beowulf the Warrior Teacher Guide, Second Edition* (as Memoria Press was frequently



brought up). Though several participants voiced that they have watched videos on leading discussions, none mentioned specific videos, channels, or individuals from which they have learned. Thus, the two YouTube videos were not specifically referenced by any participant. The videos were chosen because they were relevant and well-watched on the YouTube platform and could usefully inform the study. Similarly, participants generally mentioned using free Teachers Pay Teachers resources but did not give specific examples. Accordingly, the principal investigator selected Weird Sisters Teach's discussion worksheets, which were available at no charge and appeared well-downloaded on the platform. *Everyday Debate & Discussion* was also not brought up in interviews, but multiple participants recommended the publisher Classical Academic Press (which especially targets classical private/homeschool teachers). Moreover, the *Everyday Debate & Discussion* workbook provides direct instruction on leading effective discussions for teachers without a state certification.

### *Data Analysis*

The two video resources were transcribed by the principal investigator and closely reviewed to ensure accuracy. The Weird Sisters Teach worksheet PDF was printed out. All other resources were obtained in the print form. This analysis also utilized the grounded theory thematic analysis method. After immersion in the data through a first read, the principal investigator carefully looked through all resources and marked sections with different colored sticky notes based on what type of information they communicate (open coding). After that, a round of axial coding and then of selective coding were conducted to redescribe, combine, and finalize codes. These rounds of coding involved rereading all codes' corresponding data, creating and confirming fit with

more broadly encompassing themes, and typing up notes (including relevant quotes) on each theme's included data.

This study, though enacted in a conscientious and rigorous manner, posed several methodological limitations. One potential limitation is that the participants who agreed to engage in an interview might have been teachers who feel comfortable in their instructional practices, employ effective time management skills, and are not feeling overwhelmed in their position. If this is true, data may be skewed towards the experiences of highly motivated, competent, and confident teachers, who do not completely represent the non-credentialed English teacher population. Another limitation is that four teachers were only able to participate in the interview asynchronously over email. This significantly limited the length and level of elaboration of their responses to questions, though it did not affect the ability to ask follow-up questions. In addition, a possible study limitation is that only one of the synchronous interviews was conducted in person; every other interview was conducted over the phone or Zoom due to significant geographical distance between the principal investigator and participant. Online interviews and phone calls may inhibit feelings of trust and closeness between the interviewer and interviewee. Overall, the research study's method was potentially limited by several factors. However, the study produced rich results that will be highlighted in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings for RQ1

There are many non-credentialed English teachers who would benefit from improved targeted resources for discussion facilitation. Thus, the present study examined non-credentialed English teachers' experiences in leading discussions: what comes easily, what is more challenging, and how resources have impacted their practices. Knowing teachers' experiences allows developers to create and revise more beneficial resources. The coming chapter describes the themes generated for RQ1, which sought to investigate non-credentialed English teachers' experiences facilitating class discussions. During the initial interview open coding process, the principal investigator identified 99 codes that, through another round of coding, were condensed into five themes. This next round of coding involved rereading all codes and their corresponding data, brainstorming multiple ways to combine and rename codes, and synthesizing and finalizing themes and subthemes that best fit the data and research question. These main themes categorize non-credentialed English teachers' experiences facilitating class discussions and number five in total: experiences with student participation level, student participation quality, student buy-in, student benefits, and resources for discussions. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the themes and subthemes.

Table 4.1. Summary of Thematic Findings for RQ1

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Experiences with student participation level	Types of student participation Barriers to student participation level The teacher's role in student participation level
Experiences with student participation quality	High quality student participation Barriers to student participation quality The teacher's role in student participation quality
Experiences with student buy-in	Levels of student buy-in Barriers to student buy-in The teacher's role in student buy-in
Experiences with student benefits	Social interaction Independent thinking New perspectives Impacted writing skills Character lessons
Experiences with resources for discussions	The teacher's use of resources Types of resources

*Experiences with Student Participation Level*

While recounting their experiences facilitating discussions in English classes, participants identified varying experiences with student participation level, which makes up the first theme of this research question. Students' level of participation is a cogent element of class discussions. First, it is an important benchmark for a majority of teachers. During interviews, participants indicated that lively discussions were some of the most meaningful in their experiences. Describing a "good" discussion memory, many recalled that it was a time when students were speaking a lot (and especially when the whole class was involved, not just a handful of students). Further, according to Sandra

and Evelyn, this was true particularly when the discussion was so active that it eventually had to be cut off. Sarah explained:

Well, I've been having some really excellent ones, uh, in my world literature class right now and... I guess what I like is that I can, kind of, throw out a question. And they pick it up and go with it... when it feels like it's going well, the hands are raising, and they're almost talking on top of each other. They're not because they're polite kids, but... one student comment brings up another one that brings up another one.

Furthermore, student participation is important because when student talk dwindles, it is primarily the teacher's responsibility to keep the conversation going. Then, as many participants noted, the resulting discussion is often more monologic and teacher-centered than would be most beneficial for students' development. Therefore, it is unsurprising that teachers' insights into their discussion facilitation experiences often revolved around students' levels of participation, as well as how they as teachers could act effectively in various situations.

### *Types of Student Participation*

Teachers categorized student participation into several general types. First, teachers spoke of the talkative student. Most classes have at least one "chatterbox," to use Charlotte's wording, who consistently raises their hand and participates in conversations. Teachers found this both beneficial in that it keeps discussions going and challenging in that the quieter students may not get a chance to offer insights. Moreover, study participants attributed this participation level imbalance to a variety of factors: level of confidence, extroversion, external processing, talkativeness, education, affinity for the subject matter, and learning differences such as ADHD. Related to external processing, Darrick mentioned that by utilizing small group activities that transition into whole class

discussions, he was able to give external processor students the opportunity to refine their thoughts aloud before delivering a polished, focused, and “specific version” to the class.

Second, teachers identified the quiet student, who is hesitant or outright refuses to participate during class discussions. Participants acknowledged that such students may understand the material, be paying close attention, and be learning but simply do not want to speak for other reasons. Hazel commented on this phenomenon:

... figuring out how to engage people who are really, really shy, you know, who might be right there with you... they're thinking about what you're talking about and what their classmates are talking about, and they're interested in it, and they're keeping up with you. They just don't want to say anything. Um. And it's important, of course, to make them also feel, you know, like, be included.

Quieter students may be more naturally quiet spoken, introverted, or shy. They also may be insecure about their writing or ideas (and even intimidated by their peers), which, as Daniel and Luna noted, tends to climax around the middle school years and lessen as students reach tenth and eleventh grade. Such students may be afraid of getting the “wrong” answer even though English discussions are not always clear-cut in terms of correct versus incorrect. Evelyn explained how she uses open-ended questions without a right or wrong answer to provide intimidated students a “safety net” in which to participate. Also, teachers said that asking other questions to provide a change of pace may help draw out quieter students.

Several participants mentioned that they share their own personal experiences with communication apprehension and encourage students to face their fears, highlighting their great growth potential. They also use verbal affirmation and patience as students take “baby steps” (using Charlotte’s phrasing) in building confidence. In addition, participants utilize small group activities where quiet students “can’t hide as

much” (Evelyn), but they also are not initially put in the spotlight in an anxiety-inducing way. Most of these small group activities culminate in sharing out with the larger class. Additionally, teachers use wait time to give more timid students the chance to process a question and formulate their thoughts.

Participants emphasized that in their attempts to engage students more equally, it is crucial that they not deflate or shut down the vocal students—or make quieter and shyer students feel put on the spot. To curb dominant students’ comments, teachers call on other students more generally (“Wait, hold on. Who else has a thought?” [Isabella]) and specifically (“Joey, what do *you* think about this?” [Sandra]). Several teachers purposefully call on quieter students to begin discussions. They know that more chatty students will “jump on no matter what” (as Evelyn put it), and if talkative students answer first, the more insecure students might feel like all the “good” answers are gone. Isabella also feels comfortable shaking her head at students, waving them off, or ignoring their raised hands. Before explicitly inviting other students into a conversation, teachers stated that they affirm the value of the talkative student’s response (“Oh, I *really*, I thought those were some great ideas” [Sandra]) or acknowledge their interest about participating (“I know you’re so excited and there’s things you want to share” [Violet]). Also, to set an initial groundwork for more equal engagement, participants emphasized the importance of clear expectations for talkative and quiet students alike. Riley tells students they can only (and, for quieter students, *must*) participate twice during each discussion.

### *Barriers to Student Participation Level*

One observation from participants was that their class size may impact student participation level. When a group of students is too small, the conversation tends to go by quickly, and there are not as many opportunities for students to build upon each other's insights. However, when a group is too large, it is challenging to give each student a chance to participate—and if they each do, it's "just too much," as Nila phrased it. A few teachers identified their ideal class sizes: 6-8 (as well as less than 8), 8-10, and 13-14.

Participants mentioned that student preparation plays a large role in how much students participate in discussions. For English teachers, a near-universal aspect of students' preparation is completing the assigned reading before a class session. Participants reiterated that if students have not done the reading, they are not properly equipped to offer thoughts in discussions, which creates numerous challenges related to participation level. Students may not read for a variety of reasons. The reading might be difficult or confusing for them. Participants mentioned that they adapt reading tasks to students' needs by, for instance, providing an easier version of a text or reading out loud with students during class time and collectively talking through its meaning. Also, in general, teachers select texts that will challenge students without completely overwhelming them. On this subject, Susan said:

I try to engage them by making sure that they, um, are, are being challenged through reading but not completely, what we call in horseback riding, overfaced. Meaning, when you're riding a horse to a big jump, and the horse suddenly is like, "I can't go that much." But you feel like they can, but they feel like they can't.

In addition, teachers claimed that students may avoid too-extensive reading assignments. Thus, they are conscious about assigning a realistic amount of reading to their student groups. Furthermore, if students did not enjoy a book or feel it was relevant



to their lives, they may not complete the reading in preparation for class. Also, one participant mentioned a past problem in her literature class that arose when students read too far ahead and as a result participated less in class because they did not want to give accidental spoilers. To address this issue, she and her co-facilitator emphasized to students why it is important for them not to read ahead.

Another salient aspect of student preparation is conducting research before a class discussion. Participants have assigned students to research background information to get ready to discuss a book/author, as well as find facts to equip themselves for an argumentative debate where they must support their position. In either case, participants have found that discussions are livelier when students conduct their research before class and have a strong foundation on which to expound orally. If students have not completed the appropriate background research, they are often quieter than they would be if they were prepared.

Another barrier to students' level of participation is when students do not feel comfortable or confident engaging in an oral discussion in the classroom. Thus, the final domain of student preparation as relayed by participants is pre-writing aspects. May expressed her reasoning behind such preparation assignments:

I realized how important it is for some people to express themselves by writing. That some people, for a variety of reasons, um, verbal processing and expressing themselves with just verbal class setting is, is not their strength.

May went on to explain that integrating writing elements into the discussion reduces students' social anxiety and places them on the same level to participate equitably. In these ways, she encouraged teachers to "open the doors for them to express themselves and to participate with the author and with each other in ways that are not just

a discussion.” Pre-writing tasks teachers mentioned span a variety of types of assignments: annotating and noting observations (with reasoning and connection to other ideas) of a text, developing text-based questions (and, for some participants, their own answers), answering teacher-assigned comprehension questions, and writing brief essays based on prompts. Most of these assignments were spoken of as being completed before class, but several participants also utilize short pre-writing exercises during class: when a discussion needs to be revitalized, as a springboard to begin a conversation, or so students can take notes that inform a subsequent conversation (e.g., to critique each other’s writing).

Aside from a student’s level of preparation before a class discussion, teachers acknowledged that there are physiological factors that affect student participation level. Students that are easily distracted or are engaging in a discussion to a lesser extent may be hungry, need to use the bathroom, or simply be tired. In the latter case, one participant recalled the different discussion experiences she had teaching the same class in the morning and afternoon; this participant attributed variable participation levels between classes to her 9:00 a.m. students being too fatigued in the morning.

Several participants commented that students have “off days” that affect their level of participation in a discussion. Sometimes students are “just not having it that day” (Violet) for reasons unclear to the teacher and perhaps the student themselves. Participants emphasized avoiding punishment-based responses to students feeling out of it. Instead, they relayed their experiences checking in with students and providing leniency. For instance, Violet stated that the homeschool cooperative context offers flexibility for students to “not have the juice” on a given day. In such situations, she

encourages students to “hang back” and listen if they are not in a place to participate in the class discussion.

### *The Teacher’s Role in Student Participation Level*

While reflecting upon their experiences teaching English, participants shared their discoveries of how *they* impact student participation level in a class discussion. First and most importantly, a majority of teachers emphasized creating a safe environment where students feel comfortable participating. In participants’ experiences, the safe discussion environment encourages students to share a variety of perspectives, knowing that they will not be embarrassed, shot down, or harshly corrected. To accomplish this, participants enforce rules for acceptable responses so that students build each other up verbally.

Teachers and peers may redirect speakers but with kindness and respect. Furthermore, all responses, including “wrong” answers, help the class learn and discover together; thus, Sandra relayed how it is important to affirm students’ voices, saying that “you can still find something that you can be encouraging on, you know, even if they’re, like, totally off the mark and you can just say, ‘Wow, I can see you’ve thought about this,’ you know?” To establish this environment, teachers recalled how they lovingly encourage students in their potential for growth, that participating may feel awkward, but they will grow accustomed to it. Some share their own experiences overcoming insecurities and apprehension, such as Charlotte:

I told the kids, you know, “When I was your age, I couldn’t even look people in the eye, I was so shy and, like, scared to talk to people. And you know, and, um, God’s put me through many circumstances where I can, like, practice, um, putting myself out there, whether it’s in a class or out in front of people, so.”

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of supportive student–student and student–teacher relationships. When students are familiar with one another and have developed trust, they are more likely to participate. Sandra noted that in online classes, she diagnoses participation level issues as a lack of relational trust and opportunities to be goofy together. Some participants also mentioned the importance of allowing flexibility in participation (e.g., giving students freedom to sit back and observe on their “off days” and encouraging students to write down a response and read it out loud if they prefer that). Overall, creating a safe context for class discussions is crucial but can be elusive at times. Evelyn said she rarely cultivates “this safe space where everybody can chip in, and by the end of it, everybody’s besties,” and Emily noted how challenging it is to coach teachers on this skill: “you can’t put that in a curriculum. [laughs] ‘Try to set the stage so that people start really connecting and *then*—’”

Next, teachers recounted how their own participation in a discussion affects students. For instance, teachers reflected on their own talkativeness as both a strength and potential weakness that could shut students down to further participation. Teacher talkativeness can make a class enjoyable for students and foster an environment that encourages them to speak. However, participants explained that they must hold themselves back, especially when passionate about a particular topic, to allow students to get their say. Daniel spoke of an instance where he failed to do so, categorizing this as a discussion with which he is displeased:

I think there are times, you know, um—with *A Tale of Two Cities*, for instance, because I love that book so much and have thought about the book so much myself, there have been times when I’ve taught that book, and I came out of a class discussion and realized I talked way too much, and I didn’t give kids the opportunity to really process their own thoughts. And that was, uh, discouraging

for me only because it felt like I had satisfied my own personal desires but not really met *their* needs.

Also, so that students can develop their own understandings and viewpoints, teachers explained that they withhold their own opinions—at least temporarily—and let students collectively wrestle with learning material. Autumn shared that facilitating this kind of discussion, where students are making their own discoveries rather than primarily hearing her state her pre-formed beliefs, involves “unlearning skills” and “doing less rather than doing more.”

Additionally, teachers identified that their own silence can motivate student participation by cultivating student feelings of discomfort, responsibility, or simply by providing the opportunity for students to collect and share their thoughts. On this beneficial instructional skill, Riley said:

... it's learning to be comfortable with silence. And it's because some people just take a while to process. They have some very profound ideas. It just takes them a while to formulate it. And what I have had to learn how to do during those awkward times is just be very comfortable with one or two minutes of quiet silence in the class, and usually, there will be one student who just can't handle the silence anymore and will speak up.

Other participants echoed this idea of being patient through “awkward silences” (Sandra), stating that wait time encourages students to process the preceding question or insight and come up with an answer.

Teachers also spoke of activities that can encourage students' level of participation. Small group activities were commonly cited (as previously mentioned), as teachers believed they offered quiet students the chance to participate in a lower-pressure environment and long-winded students the chance to orally process their thoughts before sharing a more concise insight with the entire class.

A few teachers commented on participation grades and why they do or do not employ them in their English classes. Teachers who grade students on their discussion participation observed how giving students a numeric score pressures them to get involved. Several participants made it clear that they do not enjoy being “punitive” (to use Sandra’s word) but that this approach has proven effective for them. On the other hand, Evelyn spoke of her experiences with the downsides of participation grades:

I used to try to keep track of participation points, and I felt like I was losing the thread of conversation, because I was looking for names and doing check marks. So if I’m really gonna be intentional, I have to find ways that I can keep track in a much more, uh, organic way, who’s talking and who’s not.

Regardless of participation grades, participants stressed that one key to creating an environment where student participation is normative is establishing expectations. A teacher’s expectations may be communicated at the beginning of a school term, as well as before individual discussions. Participants relayed the participation rules they share with students, including how often students must participate. Some teachers require all students to engage in every discussion activity. For instance, to start off each class session, Riley has students sit in a circle and instructs them to each answer her question of the day. Others have students read their writing assignments to one another. However, one participant expressed discomfort with expecting all students to participate in every conversation. Meg said:

... the week I was out, um, my director had to sub a class for me, and she said, um, they all shared poems they wrote and that, oh, she loved all of them and made every single one share a poem, and I’m like, “Oh, I don’t do that,” like, if there’s one who doesn’t want to talk, I don’t, I don’t force it, like, I don’t know how to [laughs], um, exude that authority without, like, crushing these kids that “you’re going to share whether you like it or not.” Um. I would like to improve that skill, I guess.

Moreover, for online classes, one element of participation Nila stresses is students turning their cameras on to be visually present for a discussion. Expectations also involve the possibility of being called on by the teacher and that such an event is not being singled out or picked on; rather, it is designed to assist students in engaging with the conversation. One participant, Luna, lists in her course description that verbal communication skills will be developed during the school term; this way, students can expect from the beginning that they will participate.

Some teachers explained that they call on students when participation is lacking. They may explicitly call on quieter students or use more random methods (e.g., draw Popsicle sticks with students' names on them or "surprise" students with targeted questions [Emily]). However, Daniel explained that it is often unnecessary to call on students if he gives direct eye contact to students after posing a question; when he uses this purposeful eye contact, someone will feel pressured to speak up.

### *Experiences with Student Participation Quality*

While recounting how crucial student participation level is, participants also emphasized the importance of high quality student insights, which is the second theme of this research question. After all, a talkative student is not necessarily an engaged student (Frymier & Houser, 2016). Also, for true learning to occur, participants explained that students must go beyond surface-level input and wrestle meaningfully with learning material. Their experiences with varying participation quality, as well as their intervening behaviors, are discussed below.

### *High Quality Student Participation*

Teachers identified several domains of what high quality participation has looked like in their experiences, in terms of interaction with learning material and interaction with others. First, there are multiple definitions of meaningful interaction with learning material. Also, teachers often mentioned that they prioritize different goals depending on the class, point in the semester, individual discussion's purpose, etc. Common experiences related to quality of student participation are similar to those noted in Bloom's Taxonomy (L. W. Anderson et al., 2001). Bloom's Taxonomy is a model widely applied to educational learning objectives that—in Anderson et al.'s (2001) revised version—categorizes human cognition into six discrete levels: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create. A few study participants, especially those who teach younger students, brought up “good” experiences where students' responses reflected an understanding of learning material. These teachers also stated that they use comprehension-type questions to assess what students understand, where their weak spots are, and what needs to be clarified. Furthermore, most participants mentioned that the high quality student insights they have noticed are ones that analyze learning material by breaking it down into component parts. Next, it was less commonly mentioned, but several teachers brought up when students evaluate ideas (e.g., critique each other's writing assignments or make moral/evaluative judgments about literature). In addition, about as frequently as “analyze,” a majority of participants cited past discussions where students applied concepts to real-life situations, experiences, and issues. Finally, only one teacher spoke of class discussion as an explicit act of creation. When teaching the Bible as literature, Hazel has students engage in Bibliodrama, where she asks a question not



answered by the literary text, and students must answer in the voice of that character. This Bibliodrama activity is creative in that students must invent extratextual feelings and experiences, but Hazel emphasized that it requires a solid understanding of the text and characters for students to immerse themselves in the character's perspective.

Participants also spoke of student argumentation as creating a high quality discussion. Interestingly, when recounting "good" discussion experiences, myriad teachers recalled that students were disagreeing and stating their views passionately. However, it was not the mere presence of different perspectives that made these experiences worthwhile. Teachers identified that effective argumentation involves students using clear and logical reasoning, strong explanations, and relevant facts. Multiple teachers said they employ debate discussions to accomplish this purpose, but even in non-debate contexts, teachers recalled how students internalize learning material and communicate their own interpretive perspectives. Participants' emphasis on collaborative reasoning is not particularly surprising because it aligns with extant research (Reznitskaya et al., 2009). Furthermore, many participants support the classical educational model (and/or the Socratic method more specifically), which values giving students a voice to persuasively communicate a well-supported argument. To cultivate student argumentation, teachers ask thoughtful questions (especially if they perceive weak reasoning behind a response) and encourage students to support answers with evidence from the learning material.

Some teachers utilize discussions as a low-stakes environment where students can practice concepts or skills. Participants who mentioned this teach writing- and grammar-heavy English classes. For instance, during a class session, the group might talk through

diagramming or creating a sentence together. The teacher might also lead students to work through several homework problems to equip them for their assigned work. One participant also mentioned that in literature-based discussions, students cultivate the “language of literature” through oral participation.

Moreover, in terms of interaction with others during a class discussion, teachers first mentioned that students should relate their ideas back to what others have said. This way, students are not merely sharing unconnected thoughts detached from the conversation’s context. The study’s participants used phrasing like students “bouncing” ideas off each other to indicate a productive discussion. In addition to building off their peers’ responses, students may also mention previously studied texts and make insightful “connections between storylines” (as Judy put it). This more expansive, far-reaching uptake is facilitated by the fact that students who engage in an English class, especially multi-year classes such as several study participants teach, have shared discussion experiences, as well as (in certain classes) literature experiences.

Second, some participants mentioned that in a high quality discussion, students take on co-instructor roles and begin teaching each other. In these cases, the teacher becomes primarily a facilitator, as well as fact-checker when students are unsure about the answers to objective, closed questions.

### *Barriers to Student Participation Quality*

Participants noticed several barriers to the quality of students’ participation. Most participants had not dealt extensively with the issue of disagreeable students, but they identified instances in which a student acted as a negative presence during discussions. For instance, a student might give off-topic responses for shock value and laughter. They

might engage disrespectfully or even angrily in a conversation. In responding to such students, participants said that they calmly reinforced discussion expectations and rules, communicated appreciation while redirecting students to stay on topic, and invited more students into the discussion to “neutralize” (using Evelyn’s wording) and dilute that disagreeable voice. Evelyn also spoke of an instance where she had an individual conversation with a bratty student and brought up how this student’s words might be coming across to her peers, though it was tricky to frame the message for positive reception. Unfortunately, Evelyn did not notice much behavioral improvement after the conversation. Overall, though teachers emphasized they had not encountered a plethora of disagreeable students, they recalled how important it was in those experiences to “wrangle your difficult personalities who make people feel unsafe or unwelcome” (as Evelyn stated).

Furthermore, teacher participants relayed experiences where it was difficult to cultivate meaningful participation from students with special needs (also called learning differences or neurodivergence). Some learning differences participants have experienced in the classroom include dyslexia, learning processing disorders, anxiety and depression disorders, Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), and ADHD. Other differences not traditionally labeled as special needs include military children with educational gaps and ESL (English as a Second Language) students. Teachers in homeschool cooperative contexts especially noticed these challenges. As Violet put it, “homeschooling will often attract kids who, families and kids who don't quite fit into the standard public school mold.” Furthermore, homeschool cooperative teachers who have not been trained in learning and behavioral differences (and lack the structural support of a traditional

school) find it more difficult and at times overwhelming to meet students' needs. Violet highlighted this challenge:

And, you know, and in the public schools, they have, um, specific special ed, um, teachers or people in the classroom to, sort of, be able to assist, and, and, sort of, help with that stuff, and so, like, I'm one mom with an English degree, you know?

Participants reported working with parents to understand and work on best managing individual students' needs, but they noted that this process is time-consuming and tricky. Additionally, teachers spend extra time adapting curricula to fit their students, which generally "assume highly verbal, highly literate, um, highly socially engaged students" (in May's words). Another challenge is how to engage students "when their primary voice isn't Socratic dialogue, um, on the spot," as May remarked, but knowing that every student has valuable insights to offer. Participants explained that oral participation is not every student's strength, so they have sought to use creativity in facilitating discussion activities. However, such participants identified a dearth of resources on modifying discussions for a range of learners.

According to participants, there are some common approaches to cultivating high quality participation from special needs students. These include providing students simplified/adapted versions of texts as supplements so that they feel capable and included. Teachers also work on making the conversation relevant to students' experiences and interests. Moreover, in general, participants explained that they patiently guide students through the activity when they veer off topic or behave inappropriately. When a student has special needs, they and the teacher are "not coming at the material in the same way. We're not coming at talking about it in the same way" (in Judy's words).

Therefore, discussion quality can be impacted based on students' special needs or learning differences.

Speaking to student argumentation, teachers also frequently spoke to “bad” discussion experiences in which students argued unproductively. Whereas productive argument stems from common respect, participants observed that unproductive argumentation attacks another position without listening, understanding, and then debating it. Quieter or less bold students' voices are often alienated during such moments. Riley recounted:

And then there was another one... in *Les Miserables* where I felt like the class ganged up on one student. And as a teacher, I feel like I failed to protect that student from the freedom of expressing his voice.

Negative argument experiences tend to be highly emotional. They may begin when students “hijack” (as Olivia put it) a conversation to centralize and quarrel about hot-button, politically-charged topics, which may or may not tangentially relate to the lesson. Participants relayed that they redirect argument discussions (e.g., through questions that invite students to understand others' perspectives), cut them off entirely, or observe them without knowing how effectively to intervene.

Furthermore, teachers' examples of discussions they have experienced often revolved around what they deemed “rabbit trails” or tangents, when students veer off topic and discuss something not explicitly related to the lesson. (Meg, however, remarked that she is a “babbling” and initiates rabbit trails herself.) Multiple participants recounted such unexpected conversations as their favorites, especially when they are a catalyst for open, honest talk about life and students “start wrangling with these bigger issues, these bigger questions.” (in Evelyn's words). Charlotte said:

... sometimes you get into the classroom, and you have planned for these questions, this discussion, and it goes in a totally different direction. You know, it's a lot of times I've learned that, like, those, those side conversations that happen take you on a rabbit trail that actually leads to, like, gold, like, this is, this was really good. I'm glad I didn't stick to my plan because this was even better.

In a similar way, Evelyn spoke of her memorable tangential discussion experiences:

I also have noticed, uh, things that they think are tangents where they've gotten me off track, that's actually where I'm actually looking, I think that's the best teaching I do. Like, we're reading this piece over here by somebody who, you know, it's in the previous century, doesn't matter what gender, class, race, doesn't matter any of that stuff that, like, why does this person relate, and trying to show them literature applies... and so sometimes that means riffing on, like, life stories, like, telling them, "I have this thing that happened to me once, and it reminds me of this thing that we're reading." And then having kids at the end of the year saying, "I really like your life stories. I feel like those are extremely helpful." And they *think* it's off track. [laughs]

However, teachers also acknowledged that rabbit trail discussions may pose hindrances to quality student participation. Tangents may lead the conversation in an ineffective direction that does not accomplish the teacher's goals. In these cases, the teacher must "make a decision pretty quickly" about whether the tangent is "worth going down" (as Hazel explained). If the tangent seems important and related to the main discussion in some way (e.g., adding layers of new understanding/application for students), teachers generally allow it to continue. To cut off an unhelpful rabbit trail, participants recalled how they affirm and validate the response and patiently remind students of the topic of discussion. Riley also gestures as if reeling a fish in, with which her students are familiar; she acknowledged, too, that it is challenging to get back on topic from such "boondoggle" situations.

Finally, a few participants brought up that the quality of class discussions is at times limited by the learning content. For instance, some books are lighter, more fun

reads and as such do not translate well to rich and in-depth scholarly conversations. Even within a book, Olivia observed that individual chapters relate to specific themes more than others. However, Kris acknowledged that even when studying lighthearted literature, she uses thought-provoking Socratic questions to draw out analytical insights from students.

### *The Teacher's Role in Student Participation Quality*

To garner high quality student participation, teachers disclosed that they ask effective questions. Depending on what they consider meaningful student responses, teachers may ask either questions with a specific answer in mind or more subjective questions. Concerning the former, participants reported using targeted questions to guide students to a particular takeaway or work through conversations with objectively correct answers (e.g., sentence diagramming, critiquing the effectiveness of essay elements). Olivia emphasized the importance of leading students to discover an author's message within a text:

You know, I also try to... help them understand, and I know this is not one of the modern, um, the modern philosophies, you know, they—not every opinion is the same. Like, the author does have a message, and it's our job to figure out what the message is.

This was echoed by Riley, who stated that she asks questions to help students “interpret accurately” what an author is saying without letting their personal feelings distort the reasoning process. Participants ask guided questions (which may be closed or open) and allow students to formulate their own answers before providing them with the one *they* wanted students to generate.

Regarding questions for which teachers do not have a “correct” answer in mind—labeled “what do you think” questions by multiple teachers—participants use them to gauge students’ individualized responses, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of a text. Such questions do not lead to a “clear-cut, definite answer” (in Sophia’s wording). Judy spoke of the value of subjective questions:

And there was a lot of, um, there was more murkiness around, uh, around the story, you know. I think that one of the things that I noticed is sometimes a struggle for kids at that age is that they're often still interested in, like, who's the good character? Who's the bad character? Who's the one we're supposed to like? Who's the one we're not supposed to like? Right? And so, the conversations often got more interesting when it was a little less clear. There was a little more ambiguity.

Moreover, some participants mentioned that “what do you think” questions can be hit-or-miss, as students do not always know what to contribute when the discussion is framed as general and open ended. Emily stated that she does not use these questions at all because “Self-discovery is lovely, but it, but children are, like to self-discover about not things that I want to be teaching.” In other words, she finds that a more directive teaching style ensures that her class addresses meaningful topics; in contrast, in response to open-ended questions, students do not voice such high quality responses. In a similar way, Evelyn asks students their impressions and responses to assigned literature, but she always makes sure to transition into a targeted activity from there. In that way, she makes subjective questioning work for her teaching style.

Furthermore, many teachers mentioned that by providing students with the context around learning material, students have been able to offer insights more profoundly. Trista underscored how important this is:

And then other times just realizing, like, with the literature, they couldn't, uh, they didn't know the background... they couldn't carry on a conversation because they



didn't, they didn't have the context. They didn't have the breadth of knowledge to discuss a conversation about, to have a conversation about something at the time.

Participants both lecture on context when introducing a new text and instruct students to learn (e.g., from a textbook) or research contextual information themselves. Context includes information on a text's author (which may be in the form of biographies as well as interviews): the author's life, influences, purpose, how they interpreted their own works, etc. Also, historical context (which may be in the form of information on relevant events/time periods, maps of places mentioned in a text, why outdated terms were socially acceptable once but not now, etc.) makes literature feel "more real" for students (as Olivia put it) and primes them to better observe allusions and thematic elements. Furthermore, some teachers brought up how other authors throughout history have interpreted texts, as well as what influences a text has had on popular culture (e.g., multi-modal adaptations). All these categories constitute contextual facts that are vital for students to know so that they can participate meaningfully.

Next, pertaining to rabbit trails as well as in general, teachers mentioned that flexibility during a class discussion is essential. Though they prepare a thorough game plan beforehand (Sarah emphasized that a discussion is not a "free for all"), they must also pivot based on in-the-moment student participation. Hazel commented:

... at some point, it occurred to me, it's kind of like doing improv. It's sort of like doing improv, which I would never want to do, but, but, you know, as a teacher, you're up there, I mean, unless you're just doing a straight lecture. But if you're trying to lead a discussion, you don't know what anybody's going to say. And you have to be ready to respond to whatever they say off the top of your head. And sometimes, that means saying, "That's a great question. I don't know the answer. I'm going to look it up and get back to you before next class" or, uh, whatever. But, but you get, you have to be able to respond quickly, and that's, that's part of the fun and part of the challenge.

During discussions, teachers listen actively and evaluate students' receptivity, feelings, and interests on the spot. They then build off students' live insights to continue the discussion (especially if students have changed topic), pivot in a new direction, or transition to a different activity. Multiple teachers mentioned that they try to craft questions and responses from students' input, maintaining flexibility throughout the conversation. In this same vein, Luna recalled how she employs the "toolbox in my head" off the fly based on how students engage.

Teachers also conveyed that encouraging more dialogic and less teacher-led conversations involves them communicating primarily as a guide rather than an authoritative figure. Ideally, according to many participants, their role diminishes as time goes on to "fellow scholar" (May), facilitator, and fact-checker when needed. Their main goal becomes encouraging and equipping students to engage with learning content and one another. One strategy teachers cited was scaffolding discussions so that students were given more responsibility and facilitation opportunities as they became comfortable with the discussion format. Generally, in such instances, teachers only occasionally offer explanations or comments but otherwise allow students to take the reins of the conversation.

### *Experiences with Student Buy-In*

For the third theme of this research question, teachers relayed their experiences with student buy-in. Buy-in, also commonly referred to by participants as engagement, denotes how much students care about a conversation. When buy-in is low, students are unengaged, uninterested, and bored, and they do not participate meaningfully (as buy-in affects both participation level and quality). When buy-in is high, students are motivated

to prepare thoroughly for the discussion and offer their insights. Students are excited to dig into learning content and apply it to their lives.

### *Levels of Student Buy-In*

The first subtheme details how teachers described their experiences with levels of students' buy-in to a class discussion. Sandra recalled varying levels of buy-in according to her experiences:

So there's kind of that whole scale: not interacting at all, being "Meh, I don't care" and, like, "I have a, you know, I've got a dog in this fight and I'm gonna tell you that this is what happened!", right? Or "This is what the author really meant." "No! The author was a feminist!" "No! The author was not—anti-feminist!" You know? And then I'm like, "Yes, talk about this!"

Participants observed that high student buy-in leads to more, higher quality student engagement, as well as improved writing skills post-discussion. Sarah noted that "the ones who are interested, even if they're not on top of it, still get a fair amount out of it through our class discussions." Therefore, students' motivation to prepare for and participate in a class discussion is paramount.

Teachers attributed high buy-in to several factors. When students enjoy reading an assigned text, they are more motivated to be involved in a conversation. Enjoyment may stem from how relevant the text is to their experiences and, in general, how interesting, accessible, and resonant they find it. Students may also be driven by a desire to learn or please their parents. They could enjoy talking in general and about specific topics. Finally, when students are proud of their writing, there is greater buy-in to share it with others during a discussion.

### *Barriers to Student Buy-In*

For the second subtheme about buy-in, participants noted barriers to high student buy-in. If a student does not like, resonate with, or understand the significance of a topic or text, it is difficult for them to maintain interest in a discussion. Also, if students are unphased by the punitive drive of participation grades and are “serving time” by doing the bare minimum (in Isabella’s words), they may let their discussion performance slide. Nila revealed that on Zoom, some of her students want to stay muted and do not want to talk or engage; her insight suggests that online learning poses barriers to student buy-in. Several teachers expressed that student buy-in varies by class period (e.g., it dwindles before/after lunch, before recess).

### *The Teacher’s Role in Student Buy-In*

The third subtheme of buy-in describes what the teacher’s role is in student buy-in. Though it is ultimately up to students to care about a class discussion, participants referenced several areas in which the teacher influences students’ buy-in. In general, if a discussion is interactively designed and students normatively and consistently offer insights, the stage is set for motivated engagement. Also, participants described tweaking lesson plans and reading lists to meet students’ interests and make them feel they can relate to characters (whether they assign classic or modern literature).

During a discussion, when teachers underscore the significance of a topic or text—often through pathos appeals and by demonstrating their own passion—students’ buy-in increases. Teachers employ small group activities (e.g., Pair-Square-Share) and class facilitation opportunities so that students are more invested in the conversation. Furthermore, teachers modify discussions to account for a variety of student learning

styles and needs. They instruct students to move around (e.g., run outside and come back) to break up activities or as part of discussions (e.g., having students walk to a corner of the room to physically “answer” a question). As teachers, they exert energy and move around the classroom to keep students’ interest. Moreover, they utilize visually-pleasing diagrams, charts, videos, and handouts to prompt discussions or “truly cement the idea or topic in their mind” (as Stella put it). They ensure assigned texts can be accessible as audiobooks as well as physical copies. In addition, participants relayed how they use other elements of competition, creativity (e.g., hands-on post-discussion projects), grades, and serious talks with parents. Non-credentialed English teachers employ these elements as driving forces to encourage students to care about a discussion.

### *Experiences with Student Benefits*

The fourth theme of this research question relates to the class discussion benefits participants have observed in their students. After all, teachers’ experiences with discussions go far beyond their own preparation and enactment of the class activity; ideally, they also note positive improvements in their pupils, as well as ways that discussions are healthy and beneficial for them more generally.

### *Social Interaction*

The first subtheme for experiences with student benefits demonstrates how class discussions provide students with the opportunity to engage in healthy, positive peer-to-peer interactions. Teachers also establish relationships and rapport with students through discussions, and both parties get to know one another better. Such interactions, particularly for children who are homeschooled and rely upon cooperative or charter

school classes for socialization, are paramount for students' socioemotional development. Stella said, "In the homeschool co-op setting specifically, I see the value of social interaction as being quite beneficial to students, as they are learning, and I am modeling, the proper social rules and etiquette." Two participants, Kennedy and Sandra, relayed respectively that they have found this element more challenging to achieve online over Zoom or in person when students wear masks. Participants also spoke of social relationships as impacting discussions themselves in a cyclical flow. For instance, Olivia stated, "if I have another personal connection with the kids outside of the classroom, I'm, I'm more easily able to do that in the classroom." In these ways, participants noted how class discussions facilitate their students building authentic relationships based off shared interests and experiences.

### *Independent Thinking*

Aside from the general benefit of socializing with peers, participating in a class discussion cultivates students' independent thinking skills, which makes up the second subtheme of student benefits. As opposed to lecture-heavy or monologic environments where the teacher dispenses knowledge to the class, dialogic discussions cultivate students' sense of agency by inviting them to inquire into, challenge, and decide whether to accept or reject ideas. Riley stated:

I think I value this form of education because it helps the students later on in life learn how to ask questions and look for their own answers as opposed to the idea of being spoon fed, where they're waiting for somebody to tell them what to do.

These thoughts were corroborated by Charlotte, who described the Challenge (high school) program that Classical Conversations offers:

... we're not supposed to do all the talking, that's just not how the program is set up to be. It's supposed to be facilitating, that the kids are asking and answering questions and, um, they're not waiting for us to feed them answers. Like, we're working together and, you know. And the purpose is to build, to lead to discovery of what's true, right? Truth.

### *New Perspectives*

For the third subtheme of student benefits, teachers also observed that class discussions expose students to new perspectives. Research participants explained that new perspectives are discovered through two types of discursive interactions: with the learning material, as well as the teacher and classmates. First, if an assigned text is different from students' lives (e.g., in religious undertone, characters' experiences), they learn to perceive life from other points of view. Second, through conversations with the teacher and peers, students practice navigating interpersonal differences and open-mindedly empathizing with perspectives that are not their own. After all, students are "a mixed bag of people and have different political persuasions and viewpoints about the world" (using May's phrasing). Along this line, Vivian remarked that "if [students are] only exposed to the same people as themselves, and they're in a classroom with different people, they're going to learn different opinions that they never might have been exposed to if they weren't in that class." Additionally, participants spoke of not assuming students' religious beliefs, even in environments where a majority are raised by, for instance, Christian families (e.g., religiously-affiliated homeschool cooperatives and private schools). Helping students stay open-minded to new perspectives also involves the teacher carefully framing certain sensitive or controversial topics, as participants stated.

### *Impacted Writing Skills*

By engaging in class discussions, students' writing abilities are refined, which composes the fourth subtheme of student benefit experiences. Improvement in written communication is most expected in language arts classes where discussions revolve around practicing and refining skills. For instance, these classes might involve outlining a story from three pictures (as Isabella teaches) or reading aloud and critiquing students' original poetry (as Violet teaches). However, even participants who teach less writing-centric classes voiced that they use discussions as launching pads to inform the ideas students put into future writing assignments. Students' essays are shaped by class discussions through the notes they take on questions asked and ideas brought forth. Riley mentioned, too, that students' senior capstone projects are impacted by how they have practiced public speaking skills in class discussions beforehand. Interestingly, Judy does not have students write essays based on literature discussions because she found it to be unsuccessful; but all other participants who mentioned writing projects stated that writing assignments naturally connect to discussion interactions.

### *Character Lessons*

Lastly, for the fifth subtheme of student benefits, teachers noted that in their experiences, class discussions develop students' character or at least expose them to moral and worldview-related lessons. Participants relayed that rather than focusing on knowing facts, they primarily value students developing their moral frameworks. Evelyn stated that "ultimately, I'm trying to train them how to be better people, not just good people who can write well and understand how a text is constructed." She spoke of



several discussions where students have reconsidered their own actions as the class evaluated story characters' decisions:

If they're saying bad kid's a jerk, I say, "Is there any place where you feel like perhaps you've done the same thing?" And a lot of kids going, "Okay, I think, maybe." And I've had a girl, I, one of the biggest ones I have is a girl saying, "I have blown off my parents', um, insistence that I pay attention to my Chinese culture, but now, after reading this book, I think I need to pay better attention."

### *Experiences with Resources for Discussion*

During interviews, teachers talked through the resources that have helped them shape their English class discussions. This makes up the fifth theme of teachers' experiences facilitating discussions. Participants' experiences with resources are categorized into two subthemes: the ways in which teachers utilize resources and the types of resources for discussions.

#### *The Teacher's Use of Resources*

The first subtheme of experiences with resources outlines how participants appropriate resources to fit their own needs. Participants' comments about resources support extant research on teacher appropriation, which describes how educators integrate instructional tools into their practices (De Naeghel et al., 2016; Sedova, 2017). Rather than "copying and pasting," teachers filter resources through their own personal schemas, appropriating bits and pieces accordingly. In concordance with teacher appropriation literature, participants in the current study described their relationship with discussion facilitation resources. Resources provide a helpful starting point for their instruction, but most only share a few tools that work with a teacher's pedagogy and style. The teacher gleans what they can from a resource and then moves on to the next

one. Accordingly, participants' instructional toolboxes are a "composite" (Judy) or "hybrid" (Sandra) from multiple sources. Moreover, even the elements teachers utilize from resources are adapted to meet their methodology and students' progress/needs.

Evelyn compared this adaptation process to customizing a recipe:

I was always irritated with teachers who'd go to conferences and, like, "Well, I could never do that in my classroom." I'm like, "No, of course not. You have to take what you're being handed and either chuck it 'cause it doesn't work or, 'Oh, that'll work if I make these adjustments.'" There's nothing you're gonna read in a book that you're probably not gonna have to put your own—it's like a recipe. They give you the recipe, and you put your own spice, and you put your own, you know, spin on it, um, because, you know what the, what you need for your classroom.

Emily suggested that editable versions of resources would be helpful and streamline her appropriation. Other participants similarly praised resources that can be used as a "springboard" (Stella) and be altered to fit multiple teaching styles, rather than narrowly telling teachers, "Say this. Now say that" (as Peyton put it). In the same way, Charlotte's Classical Conversations training and curriculum did not dictate smaller details such as which questions to ask, but rather provided a "map" of scheduled content to present students; therefore, Charlotte could observe her classes' strengths and weaknesses and modify her strategies as they progressed.

### *Types of Resources*

For the second subtheme of resource experiences, teachers explained a variety of resource types that they draw upon before and during class discussion facilitation. To begin, many participants acknowledged that experience has been their most valuable resource. Participants pointed to experiences "doing time" (in Emily's words) in the classroom, whether in English or different subjects (e.g., horseback riding, childhood

development, human sexuality, mommy and me). For these participants, teaching experience allowed them to learn on the job through trial-and-error. Charlotte said that “whether you're credentialed or not... leading discussions in a class setting... it just takes a lot of practice. You know, it's a lot of practice, having the tools, whether, whether you're a credentialed teacher or not.” Also, participants who had homeschooled their children felt it prepared them to lead discussions and teaching more generally. Even within a school term/year, participants felt that instructional experience with a specific student group helped them adapt strategies to their “audience.”

Furthermore, participants cited non-teaching career experience such as being a professional writer/editor, occupational therapist, and AP exam writer. On being a licensed therapist, Vivian stated:

I think being a therapist actually helped because, you know, like, in therapy, we learn not to ask questions that have yes or no answers, but ask open-ended questions. So, I think that's actually helpful when you're, um, having discussion in classes because if somebody is really shy and you ask them a question, it's just going to be, like, yes or no. But if you can ask an open-ended question, then they will be able to expand more.

Finally, teachers mentioned their experiences learning in their own college programs (and even earlier, such as in high school) as impacting how they facilitate discussions. For instance, in Hazel's Jewish Studies degree, one pivotal project instructed her to design curriculum. From the other side, some participants noted how gaps in their foundational education have made discussions more challenging for them. Overall, as Charlotte put it, “Not all amazing teachers are credentialed or have a master's degree. Experience is the best teacher in this field.”

Regarding teaching in general as well as discussion facilitation specifically, innate teacher qualities are important resources that teachers draw upon regularly. Multiple

participants stated that teaching is not a good fit for every person. For instance, Sarah remarked that “you can go to all the methods classes. You can take all of the, the classes and whatever, have all the degrees, but if you're not a teacher, it's not going to work very well.” She and others emphasized that people who “are not by nature teachers” (Sarah) experience more challenges leading discussions. What, then, constitutes being a teacher? Participants voiced that, as a necessary foundation, teachers are people who want to teach and want to teach the specific subject of English. As opposed to executing the bare minimum, teachers who have an earnest desire to help students and lead effective discussions are more motivated to do so.

Along that line of innate teacher qualities, participants cited their natural excitement and passion for learning material—including their genuine joy at humorous elements in studied texts, which translates to student enjoyment as they share in analysis (and often laughter) together. Additionally, having energy to hype students up and be a little goofy is a helpful resource during discussions. Next, there are the innate skills of facilitating conversations, drawing students in, and speaking in front of a group. Several teachers also mentioned naturally not being intimidated by different perspectives, which has aided them in leading discussions. In these ways, participants posited that the resource of innate qualities—as teaching may be more a “gift” than an art (as Sarah argued)—supports them in facilitating English class discussions.

Another resource teachers use to help them facilitate discussions is preparation. Preparation shows students that the teacher values the discussion, and it helps things to run smoothly and meaningfully for participants. One facet of preparation is selecting a text to assign and discuss. For instance, one teacher described conducting research on the

website Goodreads and asking herself questions about books she discovered before narrowing down to one. Furthermore, selecting a topic of discussion involves considering students' developmental stages and extant life experiences. Olivia said: "I take the age in consideration, the maturity level, and what they're, what they're ready to talk about, what's their, what's concerning. And they all have also different, um, different backgrounds and things that they deal with in their families, so some topics might be a little bit more sensitive than others."

Also, teachers conduct extensive research (e.g., via websites, podcasts, college courses, literature guides/criticism) on the topic/text of discussion. For instance, this could mean contextual information on an author, a text, or a historical event/time period, as well as how others have analyzed and interpreted a particular text. Furthermore, participants outlined how they prepare for a discussion with a plan. This plan often includes the goal of the class conversation as well as specific questions the teacher plans to use. Ideally, it contains planned questions, follow-up question ideas, and alternative directions to explore depending on in-the-moment participation—as well as some answers they expect or would suggest themselves.

Another part of teacher preparation is reading the assigned text every time they teach it. Daniel commented that "there can be a tendency the, the further you get in your career, to just, kind of, 'Oh, I've read that, you know, three or four times. I can, I can wing it.' My own experience is that conversations typically don't go as well when I rely on that." Though it is time-consuming to keep up with, teachers emphasized how reading along with the students refreshes them on details so that they can better lead discussions and answer questions. Some participants also annotate their text to provide fodder for

questions during a conversation. Overall, participants stressed the importance of the teacher themselves (over)preparing for a class discussion but while realistically considering their own schedule and limitations. As Emily emphasized, “you have to do the work and come prepared, or it's going to be a fail. You can't fake it. You cannot fake it.”

Participants posited that other teachers serve as valuable “human resource[s],” using Darrick’s phrasing. Other teachers—whether individually (e.g., as mentors, peers on a faculty team) or collectively (e.g., as part of informal homeschool parent networks)—offer non-credentialed English teachers help in discussion facilitation. These other teachers share techniques and ideas based on their own training and experiences. They connect participants with resources that they recommend or have worked for them (or, when colleagues at a school, often provide the curriculum and lesson plans they have used for a particular course). In certain cases, they even observe teachers’ discussions and provide evaluative feedback. Charlotte highlighted how influential other teachers have been in her class discussion journey: “... just being able to plug in, plug into more experienced people, I think has been what's helped me the most. You know, asking a lot of questions from, from those who have gone, they're a little bit ahead, more ahead of me.” On the opposite end of the spectrum, two participants communicated their lack of connection to other teachers and how it has affected their teaching. Sarah said that “I feel like an island most of the time,” and Violet commented that homeschooling “can be so lonely, and so isolating.”

Another way that teachers bring value to participants' discussions is through direct modeling. Maya explained why non-credentialed English teachers are often lacking in this area:

So, the traditional route—you're, as a, as, as an Education major, you're going into schools while you're in college, and you're getting more experience, and you're shadowing other teachers. And teachers are training you and things like that. So, that route, you know, of course, prepares you more.

As the study participants facilitate discussions, they draw from experiences from their college education and subsequent workshops, asking themselves how their past teachers would have handled various situations. How might they have engaged students? What activities or techniques did they use? In other words, curricula often describe the ideal discussion on paper, but “how does this really look in class?” (Charlotte). Paisley relayed that “Most people are visual learners. Simply reading something may be helpful. But seeing/hearing it modeled is usually more effective.” Other participants recalled how they watched YouTube and other training videos (e.g., by searching “Socratic seminars”) to learn from teachers' modeling. Accordingly, multiple participants suggested that videos of teachers modeling effective discussion facilitation would greatly benefit them. As Paisley stated, “Watching a discussion, then analyzing it is one of the most useful things for me. See then try.”

Moving into more traditional and expected forms of resources, teachers utilize training to equip them for discussion facilitation. Training may be in the form of conferences (e.g., A.P.), continuing education and professional development courses (e.g., on classical teaching, mindfulness pedagogy), webinars (e.g., offered by Memoria Press, the Foundation for American Christian Education [FACE]), videos (e.g., IEW

training), instruction offered by an employing organization (e.g., Classical Conversations), and podcasts (e.g., Center for Lit's *BiblioFiles*).

Stella demarcated training/curricula that speaks to theory versus activities. Theory, also called philosophy, refers to the foundational concepts that undergird a “good” discussion. Most teachers admitted that they do not often consider or educate themselves about the theory behind discussions; instead, they develop it more organically through experience. Activities, also called strategies, refer to the tools a teacher can employ to lead a discussion. Participants identified a need for both text/topic-specific and generic (“grab bag,” in Daniel’s words) strategies. Similar to this, some teachers mentioned that they want general tools for teaching such as special needs and learning differences (especially involving students for whom oral discussion does not come naturally), teaching online through Zoom (e.g., using the chat and whiteboard functions during a discussion), providing students with context, redirecting off-topic insights, time management skills, and teaching in specific contexts like homeschool cooperatives (because, in Stella’s words, “education is not a one-size-fits-all solution”).

The most commonly mentioned resource was curriculum. Frequently mentioned curricula were published by (in no particular order) Cana Academy, Memoria Press, Classical Academic Press, The Center for Literary Education, and independent teachers on the website Teachers Pay Teachers. Most participants stated that they use a curriculum to help them develop discussions, whether that is a literature guide, questions list from a book publisher, curriculum they designed themselves, etc. These curricula may recap teachers’ knowledge of an assigned text, which enhances their preparation process (and are more easily found for commonly taught, less challenging texts). Along this line,



Jackson has considered developing literature guides “where all literary devices and elements (language devices, themes, characterization, allusions, etc.) are broken up by page/chapter/etc., so that teachers don't have to find these elements independently and consolidate it.”

Curriculum also provides teachers with specific (or, more universal [*Teaching the Classics*, classical guides using the five common topics]) questions to ask students. While some participants value comprehension-oriented questions, most wish that curricula offer questions for deeper analysis, evaluation, and application to students’ lives. May explained that most discussion guides “aren't really designed for open-minded conversations in a class. Those are designed for you to take a test.” Furthermore, teachers find it easier to use text-specific guides with suggested (or, for objective/comprehension questions, correct) answers.

Overall, teachers were pleased with the discussion curricula they had used—pleased, too, that there are many accessible resources “out there” to help them. However, several experienced teachers felt that curriculum is often too verbose and should be more succinct—providing a general outline of needed information while directing teachers to further resources. However, they acknowledged (echoing other participants) that newer and untrained teachers benefit more from step-by-step instructions. For instance, May said:

And the texts that are out there do assume somebody is teaching full-time in a classroom every day and that they are a credential teacher. So, it can be really intimidating to look through some of those guides... it doesn't do a lot of handholding of “here's how you approach this topic, you as a teacher.” I have to figure out, um, how to take the information they're giving me and somehow, um, introduce it or guide the kids into it in a class. So, it assumes that you have some training or, and/or experience in teaching class every day, probably in a classical school or college environment.

Concerning other similar resources, teachers use videos to spark interest in a discussion and/or reinforce learning material for students.

Finally, though participants were not homogenous in religious/spiritual identification, four participants referred to faith as an essential resource for their discussion facilitation. For these participants, their faith in God impacts how they approach the big picture goals of discussions. As Daniel said:

There's, there's a bigger story that's being written in the lives and hearts of these kids, and so, um, this, the discussion may not be the end. It may be just some tool that the Lord is using to help them grow.

In a similar way, Charlotte and Olivia described how they pray while preparing for discussions so that God “leads me in the right direction” (in Olivia’s words). Additionally, Daniel remarked that the Circe Institute and Society for Classical Learning (SCL) conferences offer broad thoughts about classical Christian education rather than focusing primarily on practical suggestions. He leaves the conferences feeling “refreshed in my vision for teaching and my, the mission that the Lord has called me to, and so, um, I feel better equipped to, to, kind of, move forward in some of those practical ways because I've been refueled in my own mind and soul.”

### *Summary*

This chapter focused on RQ1, which investigated non-credentialed English teachers’ experiences facilitating class discussions. The result of a grounded theory analysis of data from 29 interviews was five discrete themes: experiences with student participation level, experiences with student participation quality, experiences with student buy-in, experiences with student benefits, and experiences with resources for discussions. When explaining their experiences, teachers detailed how students often

speak up in different frequencies for a variety of reasons (e.g., not confident in their own voice versus highly extroverted) but that they as the instructor can encourage appropriate participation levels. Teachers also highlighted the importance of high quality student participation, in which many of their discussion goals correspond to Bloom's Taxonomy, and how they affect students' quality of responses. Next, teachers indicated that students display varying levels of buy-in, or engagement. Several barriers exist to high student buy-in (e.g., physiological factors like fatigue or hunger), and the teacher plays a vital role in cultivating student buy-in. Furthermore, research participants mentioned myriad student benefits of participating in discussions such as learning about moral character and thinking independently. Lastly, teachers spoke during interviews of how they employ resources in their discussion facilitation, as well as what types of resources have helped them. In the next chapter, results for RQ2 will be explained.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Findings for RQ2

This chapter discusses the themes for RQ2, which analyzed what information is communicated in extant discussion facilitation resources targeted towards non-credentialed English teachers. Eight resources were analyzed during this process: the "Classroom Discussions: Strategies & More" video by Frank Avella of Teachings in Education, "4 steps to engaging students with effective questioning" video by Glenn Wagner of Activate Your Classroom, *Teaching the Classics* teacher workbook by Adam and Missy Andrews of The Center for Literary Education (Center for Lit), *Everyday Debate & Discussion* book by Kelly Johnson of Classical Academic Press, *A Lively Kind of Learning: Mastering the Seminar Method* by Jeannette DeCelles-Zwerneman of Cana Academy, *Leading a Seminar on Homer's Odyssey* by Mary Frances Loughran of Cana Academy, *Beowulf the Warrior Teacher Guide, Second Edition* by David M. Wright of Memoria Press, and "A Midsummer Night's Dream Handouts w/ Discussion ?s, Close Readings, and MORE" Teachers Pay Teachers resource by Weird Sisters Teach. Through the archival thematic analysis, fifteen codes were developed. After another round of coding, these initial codes were transformed into five domains. This next round of coding involved rereading all codes and their corresponding data, brainstorming multiple ways to combine and rename codes, and synthesizing and finalizing themes and subthemes that best fit the data and research question. These overarching themes capture the information that is communicated through resources intended to help non-credentialed English

teachers facilitate class discussions. Five themes emerged from the inductive coding process: discussion philosophy, discussion preparation, discussion strategies, and post-discussion assignments. An overview of these themes is presented in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Summary of Thematic Findings for RQ2

Themes	Subthemes
Discussion philosophy	Offers benefits for teachers Engages students in the learning process Improves ability to articulate ideas Improves quality of thought and reasoning
Discussion preparation	How teachers prepare themselves How teachers prepare students
Discussion questions	Qualities of good questions Suggested general questions Suggested text-specific questions
Discussion strategies	Specific discussion formats Strategies related to student participation level Strategies related to student participation quality Miscellaneous discussion strategies
Post-discussion assignments	Principles of post-discussion assignments Suggested post-discussion assignments

### *Discussion Philosophy*

The resources studied provide a glimpse into the “why” behind discussions: what value they offer to teachers and students. In several resources, authors or speakers recall successful discussion experiences to illustrate their purposes and benefits. In total, discussion philosophy information encompasses the following subthemes: benefits for teachers, how students engage in their learning process, improve their ability to articulate ideas, and improve their quality of thought and reasoning.

### *Offers Benefits for Teachers*

The first discussion philosophy subtheme describes how teachers benefit from integrating discussions into their instruction. Firstly, discussions allow teachers to gauge and correct students' understanding of a topic in real time. If students demonstrate factually correct statements, sound reasoning, and insightful thoughts, they likely have a good grasp of the topic. Furthermore, while monitoring students' responses, teachers can make in-the-moment corrections and clarifications to facilitate students' learning. Secondly, discussions are beneficial to teachers because they are adaptable. Regardless of an individual teacher's personal convictions or pedagogical style—as well as the subject matter and logistical constraints of the classroom—teachers can adapt the discussion activity to best serve them and their students. On debate, a specific type of discussion, Johnson (2016) posited, “There is an endless variety of ways that debate can be structured and organized, and that is the beauty of it—teachers can adapt it to meet their specific needs” (p. 299).

### *Engages Students in the Learning Process*

The second discussion philosophy subtheme relates to how discussions engage students in the learning process. Many resources praise discussions as engaging students in their own learning through passionate, student-centered conversations where everyone is involved and interested. During the “golden days” (DeCelles-Zwerneman, 2017, p. 9) of discussions, students are free from distractions, participating equally (or near equally), and energetically invested in the dialogue—maybe even almost interrupting one another because they are passionate and engaged. DeCelles-Zwerneman (2017) described:

The best debates will be memorable precisely because they were fiery but convivial... Students commonly remember those discussions that were most heated because they recall having a personal stake in the questions under examination. They feel and express passion because it may actually change how they view the world and their own conduct. In other words, the discussion matters.

Students are learning from each other and the teacher, gaining new or deepened understanding of a topic through conversational dialectic.

### *Improves Ability to Articulate Ideas*

Moving on, the third discussion philosophy subtheme explains how discussions improve students' ability to articulate their ideas. Mentioned only a handful of times, oral communication skills are touched upon as part of the philosophy behind class discussions. When students engage in a discussion together, they learn to articulate their ideas in more impromptu settings using proper English grammar and presentation skills. *Classroom Discussions: Strategies & More* (2020) adds that "Oral language actually lays the foundation for reading and writing skills as well," underscoring the importance of students effectively communicating thoughts.

### *Improves Quality of Thought and Reasoning*

Finally, the most frequently mentioned tenet of a discussion philosophy is how class discussions improve students' quality of thought and reasoning. The mere act of orally communicating a thought—and grappling with it collectively with peers—forces students' ideas "toward something refined, clarified and richly textured" (DeCelles-Zwerneman, 2017, p. 5). Moreover, as opposed to the lecture format, which instructs students *what* to think, discussions equip students "how to think" (Andrews & Andrews, 2004, p. 12); therefore, instead of being spoon-fed answers, students must ask and

respond to thought-provoking questions. Whether resources advocate for Socratic seminars, debate, or discussions more generally, they highlight how effective discussions press students to formulate, analyze, and critique persuasive arguments built on textual evidence. This also involves taking opposing arguments seriously, thoroughly and respectfully seeking to understand them before weighing them based on objective standards. In this way, discussions cultivate students' quality of thought and reasoning and defend against activist- and domination-driven disagreement.

### *Discussion Preparation*

Leading an effective discussion begins far before the teacher asks, “What do you think?” to a group of students. Making up the second theme of this research question, resources detail how teachers should prepare themselves to lead a discussion—and how they can prepare students to engage meaningfully.

#### *How Teachers Prepare Themselves*

For the first subtheme of discussion preparation, teachers are instructed in resources how to prepare themselves for discussions. When preparing for a discussion activity, teachers are encouraged more generally to make discussions a consistent part of their curriculum—if they have decided that it is appropriate for their students' ages and maturity levels, as well as class size (fifteen students is ideal, according to DeCelles-Zwerneman, 2017).

For a specific discussion—particularly if based off an assigned text, teachers should select an appropriately challenging, intellectually substantive reading or topic. They must conduct a thorough reading of the text, choose a discussion format based on



what they are comfortable with, design a broad plan with key goals/takeaways, and construct questions and follow-up questions that they themselves are prepared to answer using textual evidence.

Furthermore, resources emphasize that teacher preparation involves thoughtful research. While teachers do not need to know everything about a topic to lead a discussion on it, they must have a solid understanding of key content, terms, and processes (e.g., of logic, literary analysis). It is also helpful for literature teachers to read scholarly commentaries that provide interpretations and helpful contextual information on a particular text (which may serve as “a window into a work”; Andrews & Andrews, 2004, p. 3). Several resources recommended specific texts and websites (e.g., three dialogues of Socrates, the National Speech and Debate Association website, etc.) to facilitate teachers’ research.

### *How Teachers Prepare Students*

The second subtheme of discussion preparation establishes strategies for preparing students for a class discussion. In general, preparing students to engage in a discussion involves establishing a trusting environment where students can share their ideas and even disagree with respect. Part of this is the teacher modeling appropriate behavior. They may also show students videos of effective discussions (and speeches) to prepare them to communicate their thoughts orally. Additionally, preparation for a text-based discussion necessitates teaching students how to read different genres, annotate texts, and cite textual information. *Classroom Discussions: Strategies & More Discussion Strategies* (2020) also suggests preparing students for the possibility of participating in online discussions; after the COVID-19 pandemic begun in 2020, it is helpful to

familiarize students with online learning platforms where discussions may be held (e.g., Google Hangouts).

Preparing students for a specific discussion is paramount; if students have not adequately readied themselves, teachers can expect a “sloppy discussion on topics only remotely related to the text” (DeCelles-Zwerneman, 2017, p. 13). For text-based discussions, ideally, students should read, heavily annotate, and consider the entire text before class. DeCelles-Zwerneman (2017) says:

Guiding discussions is something of an art form. Much as a chef provides the elements for an excellent, richly layered sauce and puts them on the heat to coalesce, the elements are there for an edifying seminar if its members have read and reflected on the text in advance.

One resource encourages students to prepare questions in advance to propose to the class; this depends on the teacher’s chosen discussion format.

Some discussions may require students to conduct research beforehand. However, DeCelles-Zwerneman (2017) emphasizes that students should be discouraged to peruse secondary sources such as textual commentaries. They should be learning how to analyze an argument or narrative using the text itself, not relying on others’ pre-formed opinions to support their thesis. Similarly, preparing students for a particular discussion may involve them gaining contextual knowledge through the teacher or their textbook. Several print resources provide students with reading notes, basic features of a text, and key words found in the reading. Other resources give the teacher suggestions on what context could look like (e.g., for *The Odyssey*, maps of relevant civilizations and to show Odysseus’ journey; Loughran, 2018).

To prepare the environment for a discussion, DeCelles-Zwerneman (2017) advises teachers to sit at an oval table with students where there is no technology or clutter on the

table, just participants' texts and drinks. DeCelles-Zwerneman acknowledges that for a more informal atmosphere, teachers may have the class sit on couches and offer refreshments.

### *Discussion Questions*

Furthermore, the third theme of this research question relates to discussion questions. Asking effective questions is a key element of leading a meaningful discussion. Resources explain to non-credentialed English teachers the following information: qualities of good questions, suggested general questions, and suggested text-specific questions.

#### *Qualities of Good Questions*

For the first subtheme of discussion questions, resources describe general qualities of effective questions. Questions should “lead the students further into the story” (Loughran, 2018, p. 2), pressing them to wrestle with challenging ideas where there is not an easy or clear “right” answer, but an argument can be made using evidence from the text/learning material. Such questions often utilize the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy. These questions should be open ended and mindfully worded to minimize bias. Resources acknowledge that comprehension-type questions can clarify student misunderstanding, and that questions of fact could lead into more complex conversations, but “[t]he real gold” (DeCelles-Zwerneman, 2017, p. 5) stems from questions that ask students to analyze and evaluate rather than simply recall facts. Johnson (2016) suggests inexperienced discussion facilitators prepare 3-5 questions beforehand, and experienced facilitators may prepare one question and improvise based on students’ participation.

### *Suggested General Questions*

The second discussion questions subtheme suggests questions that can be applied to a variety of topics and texts. Andrews and Andrews' (2004) Socratic List, widely mentioned among interview participants, lists twenty-one questions (plus sub-questions) that can be asked of any story. Questions are ordered by level of complexity, corresponding to the classical trivium model of grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages of learning. Johnson (2016) proposes a short list of questions that include the following: what evidence supports a student's belief, how they know that the evidence proves their point, why someone might disagree with their perspective, etc.

### *Suggested Text-Specific Questions*

Finally, the third subtheme for discussion questions relates to how resources provide text-specific questions that teachers could employ. An overwhelming majority of questions correspond to the "understand" level of Bloom's taxonomy, or the grammar stage of the trivium model. Such comprehension-oriented, right/wrong questions may ask about plot events, setting, characters, etc. Also, questions have students analyze a text by diving into elements such as literary devices. Only two resources prompt students to evaluate a text and its underlying assumptions, and only Weird Sisters Teach's (n.d.) resource asks an application question related to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Several resources provide correct or suggested answers for the teacher's reference.

### *Discussion Strategies*

The fourth theme of this research question corresponds to strategies to use during a discussion. Whereas discussion philosophy covers the “why” behind discussions, and discussion preparation describes the “how” of getting ready to engage in a discussion, discussion strategies pertain to the “how” of leading a discussion in real time. Strategies tend to be highly practical and may be text/topic specific. Resources offer specific discussion formats, strategies related to student participation level, strategies related to student participation quality, and miscellaneous discussion strategies.

#### *Specific Discussion Formats*

The first subtheme of discussion strategies relates to how discussion facilitation resources offer teachers suggested discussion formats that can be applied to a variety of topics and texts. For text-based discussions, Andrews and Andrews (2004) recommend that students take notes on a story chart (with blank spaces for characters, conflict, plot, and theme) during the conversation. A couple resources suggest that students write their prepared questions on the whiteboard so the class can conduct a voice vote on which one(s) they want to explore. Other formats include private sharing (small group discussions) before whole-class debriefing, talking through a text line by line, showing students informative posters to inspire conversation, public forum debate, fishbowl discussions (where students outside the circle observe/take notes on the inner students engaging in conversation), etc.

### *Strategies Related to Student Participation Level*

Furthermore, the second subtheme offers discussion strategies related to students' level of participation. Reflecting the current study's interviews, resources suggest that teachers curb their *own* and *students'* excess talkativeness so that everyone has a chance to participate. Johnson (2016) advises calling on reticent participants. Also, providing wait time allows students to process questions, and they are more likely to offer a response. *4 Steps to Engaging Students with Effective Questioning* (2017) recommends telling students beforehand how much wait time they are allotted. For instance, he demonstrates:

What I'd like you to do is to take about ten seconds, and I want you to try and remember what some of those differences were, and then I'm going to pick two or three of you to share your answers, so be ready, because I might pick you. You're ready? Go.

### *Strategies Related to Student Participation Quality*

The third subtheme explain how other strategies brought up by resources relate to students' quality of responses. Teachers should intervene and correct faulty student interpretations while maintaining an intellectually curious environment of inquiry, not a "guessing game" where students read their teacher's mind and spit out the desired answer (DeCelles-Zwerneman, 2017, p. 21). The guessing game is no more learning conducive than the lecture, where students are handed answers. Fostering this inquisitive, scholarly environment involves asking challenging and debatable questions, prompting students to elaborate on their reasoning (especially using textual evidence), and encouraging independent thought while emphasizing the validity of rigorous analyses. After all, "not all analyses of a text are plausible" (DeCelles-Zwerneman, 2017, p. 9). Some resources

encourage teachers to scaffold conversations, giving students more control over discussions as they gain experience. However, the teacher must remain the “intellectual center of the universe in his classroom” (DeCelles-Zwerneman, 2017, pp. 9-10), as they are advanced in knowledge, skill, and life experience from which students can benefit. Even as students become experienced, the teacher continually models effective analysis, oral language, and argumentation skills—and is the litmus test of high quality student participation. DeCelles-Zwerneman (2017, p. 10) posits:

... the seminar leader is like an experienced mountain guide: His clients must do the climbing, but he is the one who knows the path up and down, and he is the best climber in the room.

Resources also instruct teachers to let students’ responses inform the flow of a conversation. At times, discussions veer into unexpected territory, which the teacher should allow. However, teachers must intervene and stop unproductive tangents, thereby training students to remain on topic. Another strategy related to student participation quality is that teachers should establish and enforce behavioral expectations throughout a discussion. This involves closely monitoring students’ behavior and gently providing correction when necessary.

### *Miscellaneous Discussion Strategies*

In addition to the aforementioned strategies, discussion facilitation resources provide teachers with miscellaneous strategies, which makes up the fourth subtheme of discussion strategies. Pertaining to participation grades, *Classroom Discussions: Strategies & More* (2020) and (Johnson, 2016) tell teachers to grade or not to grade discussions but with paltry reasoning. Some other suggestions mentioned include the teacher taking notes on a discussion and distributing them the next day to students,

moving around the classroom to keep students' attention, and incorporating student interests raised in a conversation into future lessons. Resources also encourage teachers that their passion and best effort will translate to effective discussions, and that they must remain patient as they gain valuable experience.

### *Post-Discussion Assignments*

The fifth theme for this research question describes that while focusing primarily on how to conceptualize, prepare for, and facilitate a discussion, resources also mention how teachers can transition from an effective conversation to formative assessment tools. General principles for post-discussion assignments are outlined along with suggested assignments.

### *Principles of Post-Discussion Assignments*

For the first subtheme of post-discussion assignments, resources explain principles of meaningful post-discussion assignments. *Classroom Discussions: Strategies & More* (2020) emphasizes the importance of post-discussion formative assessments to test students' understanding of a topic. If they only engage in an oral discussion, they may not fully demonstrate their knowledge and meaning-making. Andrews and Andrews (2004) advise teachers to assign related writing assignments soon after discussions—while everything discussed is still fresh in students' minds.

### *Suggested Post-Discussion Assignments*

Regarding the second subtheme, resources highlight suggested post-discussion assignments that teachers can use to follow up an in-class conversation. General suggestions include expository essays. Along this vein, Andrews and Andrews (2004)



delineate how the grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages of learning could translate to different writing assignments. Some resources offer text-specific suggestions. For instance, Wright's (2018) *Beowulf* resource offers rhetorical expression prompts and an expected organizational structure—as well as a comprehension-style quiz on each of the epic's parts.

### *Summary*

This chapter covered the findings for RQ2, which sought to categorize information communicated in extant resources to help non-credentialed English teachers facilitate discussions. The eight selected resources were analyzed using grounded theory, and five themes emerged during the process: discussion philosophy, discussion preparation, discussion questions, discussion strategies, and post-discussion assignments. Discussion philosophy pertains to what resources explain as the purpose of discussions and what benefits they offer for teachers and students (e.g., improves students' ability to articulate their thoughts and reasoning). Discussion preparation refers to how teachers are to prepare themselves and students to engage meaningfully in a class discussion. The discussion questions subtheme describes qualities of effective questions along with suggested general and text-specific questions teachers can put to use. Discussion strategies offer formats and tools that teachers can adopt into their instruction. The subtheme of post-discussion assignments relates to general and specific assessment ideas that teachers can employ following a productive class discussion. In the next chapter, implications of both research questions and the study limitations will be discussed.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Discussion and Implications

The current study operated based on two purposes. First, the study aimed to investigate non-credentialed English teachers' experiences facilitating class discussions (RQ1). Second, the study aimed to analyze the information communicated in extant discussion facilitation resources targeted towards non-credentialed English teachers (RQ2). RQ1 was assessed through a grounded theory thematic analysis of interview data from 29 non-credentialed English teachers. Key themes uncovered through the analysis process correspond to teachers' experiences with student participation level, student participation quality, student buy-in, experiences with student benefits, and resources for discussions. Thus, students' oral participation and level of investment were emphasized by participants during discussions; participants also highlighted the ways discussions help students beyond the classroom, as well as how they have employed resources for more effective conversations. RQ2 was assessed through a grounded theory archival thematic analysis of eight discussion facilitation resources. Key themes uncovered through the analysis process correspond to discussion philosophy, discussion preparation, discussion questions, discussion strategies, and post-discussion assignments. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that discussion facilitation resources focus on the "why" behind discussions, how to prepare for them, how to enact them using thoughtful questions and strategies, and how to continue students' learning through suggested assessments.

This chapter discusses the overall findings and their implications. To begin, the study findings pose both theoretical and practical implications for the discipline of communication. Moreover, there are several limitations that may have impacted results, though the study's findings are significant and meaningful. Finally, in this chapter, future directions for research are suggested.

### *Theoretical Implications*

First, pertaining to dialogue theories, a majority of interview participants self-identified with the Socratic theoretical foundation, which emphasizes targeted questions that guide students to examine and correct their beliefs and logic. The Socratic method also prioritizes argumentation skills, as does a myriad of instructional research on dialogic class discussions (Reznitskaya et al., 2009; Sedova et al., 2016). This focus contrasts to that of theories like Martin Buber's I-It/I-Thou dichotomy, in which the ideal human relationship is devoid of intent to influence the other person, or the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), in which participants should share their beliefs and accept each other's without debate. The study's interview data suggests that argumentation helps develop students' critical thinking and oral communication skills, as well as engages them by giving them a reason for active buy-in. However, moving beyond open questioning and less persuasive communication—as might be seen in Buber- or CMM-influenced conversations—may at times result in unproductive or even disrespectful discussions, especially when the topic is personally relevant, important, and high-stakes to students. Thus, the study builds upon the Socratic perspective on elenchus (as well as the student reasoning element of dialogic class interactions) by outlining potential dangers of argumentation-oriented communication.

Furthermore, no interview participants mentioned Bakhtin or his idea of dialogism, which conceptualizes conversation as a multiplicity of voices participating within a set existing context. Notwithstanding, the present study supports the idea that dialogism is relevant in class discussions. Research participants overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of providing students with contextual information to prepare them for a healthy conversation, as all utterances are chronotopic (they do not spring out of nowhere but carefully build upon an existing conversation rooted in space and time). Participants relayed that when they are *not* mindful of learning the chronotopic elements of learning content, how it is shaped by its surroundings, they are not adequately prepared to lead a discussion. Similarly, when students do not, for instance, read an assigned text or conduct necessary research, they cannot participate meaningfully in the discussion about which they are uninformed. In this way, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, first applied to literature analysis, makes sense of the study findings on dialogic classroom discussion interactions.

Finally, Paulo Freire's theory of banking versus problem-posing states that true learning occurs when students work through problems collaboratively rather than being fed a single narrative about reality by their teacher. Freire's theory is bolstered in the current study. Participants relayed that they utilize class discussions to involve students in the learning process (problem-posing) rather than be told what to think (banking). Furthermore, according to Freire's theory, dialogue participants converse with the explicit goal to reflect and act upon their world so they can improve it. The research participants brought up this goal often. Participants highlighted the importance of students gaining new perspectives, applying learning content to their experiences, and

developing as human beings through character lessons. Thus, practical applications and real-world change are widely desired by teachers in the English classroom, supporting what Freire's theory posits about praxis.

Second, pertaining to research on class discussions, participants emphasized the significance of student uptake, where student responses build upon each other (Cazden, 1990). Rather than each student stating isolated viewpoints, they consider what has already been spoken and relate their response to the preexisting conversation. The idea of uptake takes influence from "information uptake," in which communicative participants express ideas that incorporate previously made contributions (Suthers, 2006). Uptake behavior has been studied in the classroom primarily under the topic of teacher questioning and discursive moves (Davison & Daly, 2020; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Student uptake was mentioned multiple times by study participants. However, it is not as represented in academic literature as teacher uptake, though it is valued highly by pedagogies such as the Harkness method where students act as co-facilitators (Christoph, 2015). The current study supports the idea that teachers prioritize and notice student uptake moves during class discussions, which highlights the need for future research to analyze student uptake behaviors (e.g., how commonly present are they?) and how teachers might encourage them in the classroom through instruction, modeling, or alternate means.

Further, despite the rich scholarly literature on teacher uptake, only one of the study's participants, Hazel, referred to it. Hazel voiced that it's helpful to "try to listen and, and remember, 'Okay, this person said that,' so then ten minutes later, when somebody else says something that connects to it, you can go back to that original, refer

to what the original person” had said. This unexpected finding may suggest that non-credentialed teachers are not as trained in or aware of teacher uptake behaviors, which could be incorporated into future targeted resources for this population. Future studies could also perform comparative analyses of credentialed and non-credentialed English teachers to probe into the source of this disconnect (i.e., due to a lack of a current state certification or other factors).

### *Practical Implications*

The study’s findings can first benefit developers of discussion facilitation resources for non-credentialed English teachers (e.g., curriculum companies, professional development trainers). Knowing what domains categorize teachers’ experiences allows developers to understand and address common challenges. They can more helpfully provide information and assistance in areas that matter to teachers. For instance, the present study unearthed a lack of resources with text-specific questions that have students identify personal applications—despite many interview participants stating how crucial applying a text is to students’ lives during a discussion. Also, a resource suggestion multiple participants voiced was for general discussion formats and strategies that could be applied to a variety of subjects and texts. Additionally, though participants widely identified with the Socratic seminar method, only one resource (*Everyday Debate & Discussion*) offers broad Socratic-type questions that can be used to draw out students’ beliefs, presuppositions, and logic. Moreover, multiple teachers identified that they would like to learn more about how to engage neurodiverse students with learning differences in discussions, but that it is hard to find in curriculum or trainings. Finally, another key element participants mentioned is the need for modeling videos of teaching facilitating

effective discussions. Therefore, in these ways, the present study offers specific, practical ways for resource developers to better meet non-credentialed English teachers' needs.

Furthermore, it is beneficial for developers to learn about the wide variety of resources teachers use to facilitate discussions—not just curriculum, books, or training lessons. The current study expands what are traditionally and more commonly conceptualized as resources to be more accurate and representative of what helps teachers. Practically, developers can use this knowledge to cultivate more creative resources (e.g., teacher mentorship support programs, two versions of curriculum texts that give myriad details for new teachers and more of a basic outline for experienced teachers).

Second, this research practically impacts non-credentialed English teachers by giving them an overview of common discussion facilitation experiences. Several interview participants identified how they feel isolated in their teaching journeys, and many participants were not sure if their discussion facilitation memories were universal or common. Therefore, it is beneficial for teachers—new and experienced—to familiarize themselves with the domains they will find most rewarding and challenging in discussions: students' participation, quality of thought, buy-in, and benefits. Additionally, knowing what types of resources have benefited similar educators assists non-credentialed English teachers in finding their own helps—at the very least by knowing the primary domains that categorize discussion facilitation resources.

Third, this study supports the idea that formal training and credentialing may be helpful for teachers but is not necessary for cultivating self-reported confidence in preparation and instructional strategies for English class discussions. Though all 29

interview participants did not take a traditional route to becoming an English teacher, many found that their unique experiences (whether in non-Education degree programs, careers outside of academia, etc.) equipped them to lead what they perceive as meaningful discussions. Therefore, with university costs only increasing, students should be encouraged to pursue a teaching career from the educational angle that best serves them—which may or may not involve obtaining a state teaching certificate.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Though the present study has produced some rich findings, there were several limitations. First, teachers who agreed to participate in a short interview were recruited. Many teachers responded to the principal investigator's messages that they did not have time to participate; thus, the pool of participants may have been skewed to include only teachers with reasonable workloads or effective time management skills. It may also have been skewed because participants who have or had negative experiences with teaching might not have volunteered in the research. Second, non-credentialed English teachers' experiences facilitating discussions and using resources may not apply to teachers of other disciplines or those without state teaching certificates. For instance, math, history, religion, or other teachers may experience and approach challenges in unique ways. This suggests an exciting direction for future research and cements the significance of studying highly specific, localized populations such as non-credentialed English teachers, creating rich and applicable findings. Third, 29 participants engaged in the study, but four of them participated via email, which may have constrained the depth of their responses. Fourth, because one of the participants had previously held a state certificate in English, their experiences may have differed meaningfully from other participants'—despite their



insistence that they held their certificate a long time ago and that certification instruction is much different today. Fifth, the first research question's study methods were limited to individual teacher interviews that elicited both retrospective and one-sided accounts of discussion facilitation experiences. There is always a risk that retrospective accounts may be incomplete or misremembered by research participants, and drawing solely from interviews does not provide as full of a narrative picture as would additions of class discussion observations, interviews with students and parents, etc. When analyzing the present study's findings, it is important to consider several research limitations.

Despite interview participants' overall comfortability leading class discussions, many also acknowledged that there are gaps in their understanding and training from which they would have benefited, which brings about exciting opportunities for future research that can build upon the foundation from this study. Future research could focus on identifying specific knowledge and skill differences between credentialed and non-credentialed English teachers—further paving the way for improved targeted discussion facilitation resources. Furthermore, an action research framework could help future researchers test out interventions and resources in non-credentialed English teachers' classroom practices.

Overall, it is important to learn about non-credentialed English teachers' experiences facilitating class discussions and utilizing relevant resources. Myriad non-credentialed English teachers serve students in public, private, and homeschool educational contexts nationwide. Due to a lack of certification training, these teachers likely approach instructional methods differently, though many non-credentialed English teachers place high importance on discussion and argumentation. To begin, this study

seeks to contribute to the scholarly conversation on the value of dialogue theories in class discussion communication. Socratic elenchus, though prioritized by a majority of the study's sample, is not commonly used to underscore academic research on class discussions. Yet it provides depth to the interview data, indicating that the collaborative search for truth—argumentation—is beneficial only if pursued with intentionality, respect, and emotional control. Furthermore, researching this population of teachers supports their credibility and value as leaders in education. As Stella said (and echoed by other participants), there must be “a greater recognition of the fact that teaching has a wide and expansive umbrella of careers and opportunities. Not all amazing teachers are credentialed or have a master's degree.” Finally, though there are numerous English teachers without formal credentialing in homeschool environments, private schools, and even public schools, many find that discussion facilitation resources are inaccessible or insufficient for them. Thus, diving into these experiences with resources affords the ability for resource developers and schools to meet teachers' needs more fully.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Recruitment Email for Individuals

Subject line: Request to chat!

Body:

Hi [potential participant's name],

My name is Lauren Oliver, and I am a second-year M.A. in Communication student at Baylor University. My undergraduate degree is in English; I was home-schooled from 4<sup>th</sup> grade through high school; and I've been honored to have taught writing, literature, and public speaking in various settings (including to charter/homeschool students as an IEW Registered Instructor).

[State which mutual acquaintance provided me with the potential participant's contact information. I am reaching out in case they are interested in participating in my thesis research.] My study has the following mission: *learn about non-credentialed English teachers' experiences facilitating class discussions, and identify how future instructional resources can be more helpful.*

To participate, elementary-high school English teachers without a teaching credential would briefly (30 min.-1 hr.) chat with me about their experiences leading discussions.

**If you are available to speak with me, please email me at [email] or text me at [phone number].**

I am happy to provide additional information about myself, this project, or Baylor University. Thank you for your consideration!

Best,  
Lauren

## APPENDIX B

### Recruitment Email for Schools and Homeschool Cooperatives

Subject line: Request to chat!

Body:

Hello,

My name is Lauren Oliver, and I am a second-year M.A. in Communication student at Baylor University. My undergraduate degree is in English; I was home-schooled from 4<sup>th</sup> grade through high school; and I've been honored to have taught writing, literature, and public speaking in various settings (including to charter/homeschool students as an IEW Registered Instructor).

I am recruiting participants for my thesis research, which has the following mission: ***learn about non-credentialed English teachers' experiences facilitating class discussions, and identify how future instructional resources can be more helpful.*** To participate, English class teachers without a teaching credential would briefly (30 min.-1 hr.) chat with me about their experiences leading discussions.

Might you be able to connect me with [school or homeschool cooperative's name] English teachers to see if they're interested in speaking with me?

I am happy to provide additional information about myself, this project (e.g., research prospectus, approved Institutional Review Board forms), or Baylor University. Thank you for your consideration!

Best,  
Lauren

## APPENDIX C

### Participant Consent Form

Baylor University  
**Department of Communication**

Teacher Consent Form for Research

PROTOCOL TITLE: What Do You Think? Applied Research in Class  
Discussion Communication

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Lauren Oliver

SUPPORTED BY: Baylor University

**Purpose of the research:** The purpose of this study is to lay the groundwork for future training materials aimed at helping non-credentialed English teachers facilitate class discussions.

The study activities will help identify key topics that are insufficient/missing from existing materials and that can benefit non-credentialed English teachers based on interviews about their experiences.

We are asking you to take part in this study because you are a non-credentialed English teacher aged 18 or older who teaches at the elementary, middle, or high school level.

**Study activities:** If you choose to be in the study, you will:

- Participate in an interview with the principal investigator ranging from thirty minutes to one hour. Interview questions will ask you to describe your experiences facilitating class discussions, as well as in what areas you would like to grow and/or find challenging. This interview will be audio recorded for reference.

**Risks and Benefits:**

*Interview:* You may feel emotional or upset when answering some of the questions. Tell the researcher at any time if you want to take a break or stop the interview.

You may or may not benefit from taking part in this study. Possible benefits include learning more about your teaching practices and experiences. Others also may benefit because of your participation in the study. The data collected may inform future training materials for non-credentialed English teachers regarding class discussion facilitation.

### **Confidentiality:**

A risk of taking part in this study is the possibility of a loss of confidentiality. Loss of confidentiality includes having your personal information shared with someone who is not on the study team and was not supposed to see or know about your information. The researcher plans to protect your confidentiality.

If the interview is conducted online, confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Your participation involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet, which could include illegal interception of the data by another party. If you are concerned about your data security, contact the researcher to schedule a time to complete an in-person interview with the same questions.

We will keep the records of this study confidential by storing all digital information in a password-protected folder on a local computer drive, and all physical notes in the principal investigator's office. We will make every effort to keep your records confidential. However, there are times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of your records. By law, researchers must release certain information to the appropriate authorities if they have reasonable cause to believe any of the following:

- Abuse or neglect of a child
- Abuse, neglect, or exploitation of an elderly person or disabled adult
- Risk of harming yourself or others
- Alleged incidents of sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, or stalking, committed by or against a person enrolled at or employed by Baylor University at the time of the incident

Authorized staff of Baylor University may review the study records for purposes such as quality control or safety.

### **Questions or Concerns**

Please reach out to the researchers with any questions or concerns you have about the study (between 9am and 5pm CT on normal business days; expect a response within two business days). Below you will find their contact information:

- Primary Investigator: Lauren Oliver, [email], [phone number]
- Faculty Advisor: Dr. Blair Browning, [email], [phone number]

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other

than the researcher(s), you may contact the Baylor University IRB through the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at 254-710-3708 or [irb@baylor.edu](mailto:irb@baylor.edu).

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to stop at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. Information already collected about you cannot be deleted.

*I agree to take part in this study.*

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date



## APPENDIX D

### Synchronous Interview Guide

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. In which contexts have you taught (homeschool co-op, private school, etc.)?
3. Which “English” classes have you taught (literature, writing, etc.)?
4. Do you have any certifications relevant to teaching or facilitating discussions?
5. Have you been trained to teach or facilitate discussions in any way (e.g., going to conferences, listening to podcasts, webinars, etc.)?
6. What do you consider the purpose of class discussions?
7. What do you find easy about facilitating class discussions?
8. What challenges have you experienced when facilitating class discussions?
9. What resources have you used to help you facilitate class discussions? How have they been helpful/unhelpful?
10. What resources do you think could help you facilitate more effective class discussions?

## APPENDIX E

### Asynchronous Interview Questions

#### *General questions:*

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. In which contexts have you taught (homeschool co-op, private school, etc.)?
3. Which “English” classes have you taught (literature, writing, etc.)?
4. Do you have any certifications relevant to teaching or facilitating discussions?
5. Have you been trained to teach or facilitate discussions in any way (e.g., going to conferences, listening to podcasts, webinars, etc.)?

#### *Experience questions:*

6. What do you find as the purpose of discussions in your English classes? (What value do they bring?)
7. What do you find *easy* and *challenging* about facilitating discussions?

#### *Resource questions:*

8. Talk me through some of the resources you’ve used to help facilitate discussions (e.g., literature study guides, videos on the Socratic method, etc.). What has been helpful about them? Is there anything you wish was different?
9. In future or updated discussion resources for uncredentialed English teachers, what *information/tools* would you want to see?

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