

What If and Why?—Literacy Invitations for Multilingual Classrooms

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I read this book, because I have always been intrigued by the K – 6 classroom in Bloomington where the author did her research, and I have always wanted to document what goes on in there. I think it's exemplary, and I want others to know about it. When I heard that Katie Van Sluys had written about the classroom I borrowed a copy of the book from Rise, one of the two teachers in this classroom community of approximately 50 children ranging from age 5 to 12, and dove in.

The book is about invitations as a catalyst for inquiry, investigation and thinking. “Invitations solicit people to come together to engage in an activity of mutual interest” (p.1). This is just the beginning though. Students can enter the invitations at many entry points and they can engage in many ways of knowing. They often end up with more questions. The invitations are based on students' interests and questions. They can take a variety of directions. They are open to all learners regardless of their age (often there will be primary and intermediate students working together), their previous knowledge, their past experiences and their reading and language flexibility. They are not a set of required procedures but open-ended investigations that depend on the lives, the experiences and the questions of those conducting them. I would describe the invitations as organic. They are constantly evolving. They are all-inclusive by virtue of their structure. And they're critical in the sense that they invite students to explore the world from many perspectives, often challenging norms and inviting action.

Katie talks about an example invitation that started out with two students looking at Mothers' Day advertisements and ended up wondering about how motherhood is portrayed in the media. The students questioned why there were only white mothers and why there weren't any heavy mothers. Another youngster who had lived his first years in England had a coin collection that he was studying. He asked the question: Why is the Queen of England on coins from England, Canada, Belize and Hong Kong? This inspired an invitation called Exploring Currency. There was a two-pocket folder with the invitation: You're invited to explore as many examples of world currency as you can. If you like, use a hand lens to help you take a closer look. Then there were questions: What do you notice about the money? Are the coins and/or paper currency related in any way(s)? If so, how can the relationships be explained? What questions come to mind? These questions were followed by a list of possible resources including web sites.

The author explores 15 different invitations throughout the book, everything from “Families” to “Peace, Power and Action” to “In the News: Beyond Facts, Reading News Critically,” allowing the reader to see how the invitations come about, how they are developed, where they go and even how they are revisited by different learners and the same learners at different times during their potential 7 years in this classroom.

When I visited this K-6 classroom earlier this week one of the students, Alex, shared an experience he had had at home during the snow days. His father does excavating at work and had uncovered a ledger that was dated 1936. The students gave Alex their rapt attention as they all tried to guess how old the person who wrote it would be now, whether he/she would still be around, was it a man or a woman. They were fascinated at the difference in costs of different

items. Then Timmy raised his hand. Alex called on him. “We could make this into an invitation.” These students are driven by their own questions, and invitations serve as a tool for addressing their questions and concerns.

Van Sluys doesn’t leave the reader wondering how to create these dynamic invitations. She emphasizes how important it is to know your students well in order to know what they’re thinking about and what they are curious about. The teachers, Ms. R and Mr. G, are very intentional in gathering information about students – what they care about, how they learn and how they think. They listen to students, have conversations with them and listen to them converse with each other, peruse their writings and other products that they make, take notes when they hear their questions in the lunchroom or on the playground, observe their actions and sometimes formally ask the students to record what their present thinking is. Sometimes the teachers will sit down and make charts. Beside each student’s name they record what they know about each student’s cultural life, what experiences and resources each child brings to the classroom. Another time the teachers give each student a template. At the top it says, “What I’ve noticed you’re interested in and thinking about.” The teacher fills this in with her current observations and thinking on these topics. Below this it says, “What have I missed? What are other issues and interests on your mind?” The student brings the teacher up to date on his current ideas.

Critical literacy is a part of the invitations. Many of the invitations include a text set. “Working with multiple texts reveals diverse perspectives, contradictions and tensions that give students reason to question, inquire into and reflect on the world and their position in it.” (p. 69) Van Sluys presents a framework that she developed with other educators that helps teachers be aware of the four important dimensions of critical literacy: disrupting the commonplace (questioning the way things are), considering multiple viewpoints (getting into another’s shoes and seeking the voices of the marginalized), focusing on the sociopolitical (consciousness and resistance) and taking action (reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it).

Invitations offer opportunities for young people to explore the world from many angles and determine what it is that they can do to make the world a better place for all. During my visit, I noticed a sign on a cupboard that said: “We have the power and energy to create the world we want to live in.” Today on the front page of our local newspaper there is an article about this classroom and how they have sponsored a child in Haiti for two years. Last year a parent of two of the students in the class had visited Haiti with her sister who was trying to find the mother of the child she had adopted. The sisters saw “unfathomable living conditions” and invited this classroom to sponsor a child, so he could go to school. The students had a garage sale and raised the necessary \$250. Now they have a bulletin board display that highlights their friend, Stevenson Isidor, and the students are intimately aware of the situation in Haiti and want to find out if their friend is safe.

Van Sluys goes on to say that there must also be time for reflection and time to attend to the process, so that students actually learn the habits of mind that promote this more effective way of learning. “When they know and can talk about what they’re doing, they increase the number

of options they can intentionally draw on in the future.” (p.102)

When students engage in a fishbowl strategy and most of the class encircles one group who is working on an invitation, students are asked to observe who is participating, how many turns are taken, what sorts of questions are asked, how participants keep the inquiry going and how plans are made and actions taken.

When students are asked to map their paths of inquiry periodically or if the teacher chooses to map a group’s path, students can see how they are moving the inquiry process forward or if they aren’t.

Sometimes students are asked to sort the questions they hear into data-gathering questions, process questions and critical questions. Students can learn to see that if they are asking all process questions they may be learning how to explore their own experiences without moving toward more critical pursuits. The teachers can help by drawing attention to the type of question that is dominant and help to nudge them forward.

Simply naming what students are doing can help them become aware of learning strategies such as negotiation, thinking aloud and critiquing. Then students can name these strategies for themselves when they need them in the future.

As Dr. Van Sluys points out, the teachers’ role is critical. As she writes, it’s important for Ms. R and Mr. G to know when to observe and when to jump in. Sometimes it helps to join a group and become a co-inquirer. Sometimes it is necessary to offer advice, which might be posing a problem for the group, or it might mean helping the group solve a problem. Teachers spend time observing and paying attention to what students are doing and then they interpret where they are in the learning process. How can they help students understand better how to inquire?

I highly recommend this book as an entry into a remarkable classroom and as an excellent way to familiarize oneself with invitations that allow students to become critically literate citizens of the world. The book would also serve as an outstanding book for Critical Friends Groups to discuss. At the end of each chapter Van Sluys issues an “Invitation for All.” For example, at the end of Chapter 7, *Teaching in the Moment*, Van Sluys invites teachers: “Think about where you are in the process of inviting students to live as critical inquirers in your classroom. What is your role in the action? Get a tape recorder. Carry it with you as you work with students. Then listen to the recording: What are you saying? What words and phrases are you using? How are students responding? What can you say about the relationships between your contributions and the students’ contributions? What is going well? Where do you see opportunities for growth?” (p. 115)

In the meantime I will try to figure out how I can video-record this classroom and highlight the Invitations along with other aspects that have fascinated me for years: What impact is there on a child who is in the same learning community with the same teachers for potentially 7 years? How is a democratic learning community created? How does exploring critical literacy lead to social action? What is the impact of having a male and a female teacher as co-teachers? What does parent involvement add to the environment for learning?