

Ares, N. M., & Percy, M. M. (2003). Construction literacy: How goals, activity systems, and text shape classroom practice. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 35, 633-662.

Keywords: motivation, instructional models, leadership

Summary: The authors of this study sought “to identify and describe dynamic features of the classroom context that were important in students’ participation in classroom literacy activities.” Conducted in a combined English/reading class, twenty-three middle school students, ranging in age from 11 to 13 years old, were interviewed, observed, and videotaped for a period of 18 weeks, concerning their participation in their classroom community. The class was chosen because the teacher indicated a learner-centered approach to teaching. However, based on her level of expertise in reading, and her lack of expertise in English, the researchers noted the classroom dynamics played out differently as a direct result, in one case allowing for greater student participation and in the other far less participation.

Assumptions:

- Opportunities to participate directly affect student involvement.
- Teacher and student goals shape opportunities to participate.
- Verbal and written texts used and produced in the classroom shape opportunities for student participation.

Results:

- Goals for participation included the teacher as a potent force.
- English instruction was teacher- and text-centered with more passive student participation.
- Reading instruction was community-centered and focused on active meaning making.

Conclusions:

- Dramatically different goals, values, and distribution of labor characterized the organization of three distinct activity systems in English class and reading class.
- Using instructional time for whole-class, individual seatwork, or small group activities affected the level of engagement and literacy learning opportunities in the classroom.
- An increase in small group activities provided students with opportunities to engage in reading in more transformative ways.
- Activities that provide students with the opportunity to construct knowledge, meaning, and content foster a depth of engagement not found in teacher-centered activities and participation structures.
- It is important for teachers to be comfortable with their level of expertise when developing instruction.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Plan for small group activities that give students opportunities to negotiate roles and tasks.

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Support teachers' use of small group activities during instructional time with resources and appropriate professional development.
- Administrators should be careful when choosing teachers who lack content area knowledge, to fill in where needed.