

Thomas, H. K. (1999). The social construction of literacy in a high school biology class. In T. Shanahan & F. Rodriguez-Brown (Eds.), *Forty-eighth yearbook of the National Reading Conference Yearbook* (pp. 317-328). Chicago: National Reading Conference.

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Summary: A teacher from a public high school college prep biology class believed in social interaction and student autonomy as authentic means for learning. A human physiology course was set up into five topic workstations. Students were responsible for readings, activities, and lab work designed to teach each of the five topics. The teacher provided instructional mini-lessons only when called upon by the group, reasoning that content was most beneficial when initiated by students who needed it for completion of an assignment. Students had complete autonomy over when and how the information was learned before moving to the next workstation; the teacher imposed penalties for students who asked about directions.

Assumptions:

- Students need to be engaged in making connections to prior knowledge and in developing their own meanings.
- People bring meaning to objects and events by viewing each new phenomenon through a combined lens of personal biography and shared social agreement.
- Working together over time, a group will develop shared understanding and common definitions.

Results:

- Student voices were heard in relation to both classroom process and scientific content.
- Students provided feedback into how classroom process could benefit their learning.
- Cooperative learning groups allowed most students to find their own best method for learning.
- The self-directed nature of the class was difficult for students who lacked the skills necessary for engagement and wanted more teacher direction.

Conclusions:

- A classroom atmosphere in which student voices can be heard and in which language uses are not solely controlled by the teacher appears to support content learning.
- Teachers who develop an atmosphere of mutual respect with students are more likely to hear multiple voices in their classes.
- Teachers must be willing to give up control and allow students to develop autonomy in regard to processes and content.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Develop student autonomy by providing alternate classroom structure that allows for student voice and control.
- Provide the scaffolding some students may need to work successfully within this structure.

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Encourage use of this process in content area classrooms.
- Engage teachers, parents, administrators, policy makers, and community members in conversations about the benefits of student autonomy in learning situations.