

Foreword

I AM DELIGHTED to write this foreword, not only because Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon has been a friend and colleague for more than forty years, but also because I believe deeply in the educative value of interpretive discussion for all students, especially in a democratic society. I also believe that teachers at every level and stage of their career can enrich and strengthen their teaching by learning the discussion-leading patterns and practices presented in this book. Participating in interpretive discussions can help teachers and students alike learn to use their minds with power and pleasure.

Haroutunian-Gordon introduced me to the concept of interpretive discussion when we worked together in the Master of Science in Teaching Program at the University of Chicago in the 1970s. Inspired by the Junior Great Books approach to discussion that she encountered as a sixth-grade teacher, she taught our elementary teacher candidates how to prepare for and lead interpretive discussions of children's literature. Students prepared clusters of questions and practiced leading discussions first with their peers and then with small groups of children in their practicum sites. The teachers also tape-recorded these discussions in order to study their practice and its impact on students' thinking and participation.

Over a long and fruitful career, Haroutunian-Gordon has explored the philosophy and practice of interpretive discussion through a dynamic program of scholarship and teacher education. She has conceptualized the intellectual foundations of interpretive discussion, elaborated its distinctive pedagogy, studied its patterns and impact on teachers and students, and designed unique systems for inducting others

into this powerful educational practice. At the annual reunions of the American Educational Research Association, I listened with admiration and interest as she described how she transformed her philosophy of education course in the Master of Science in Education Program at Northwestern University into an interpretive-discussion laboratory. Elementary and secondary teacher candidates experienced the intellectual challenges and satisfaction of interpretive discussion as they searched for meaning in the required texts of the course (Dewey, Plato, Rousseau); teaching assistants, mainly doctoral students and alumni of the program, learned to prepare for and lead such discussions under Haroutunian-Gordon's guidance. Through this unique experience, scores of aspiring and practicing teachers were introduced to the power and practice of interpretive discussion that they, in turn, introduced to their students.

Three important books grew out of this work: *Turning the Soul: Teaching Through Conversation in the High School* (1991), *Learning to Teach Through Discussion: The Art of Turning the Soul* (2009), and now the present volume, *Interpretive Discussion: Engaging Students in Text-Based Conversations* (2014). This book offers a valuable guide to the intellectual and practical work of interpretive discussion. As Haroutunian-Gordon promises in her introduction, the book aims to “help educators practice the rewarding art of interpretive discussion with success and satisfaction.”

Haroutunian-Gordon takes us inside her thinking as she prepares for, leads (or coleads), and reflects on three interpretive discussions. In following her extensive examples and close-up analysis, we get a grounded understanding of each phase of the work, from selecting a discussable text and framing a set of questions, to asking for textual evidence and determining the strength of an argument, to reflecting on whether the discussion has surfaced a “shared point of doubt” and whether participants have made progress toward resolving it. We also learn about the complexities and uncertainties of the work. It is humbling to realize that even a skilled discussion leader like Haroutunian-Gordon puzzles about what speakers mean and whether she made the right move to help clarify a student's thinking. It is inspiring to see how interpretive discussion helps teachers and students alike get better at questioning and listening.

Haroutunian-Gordon has produced a powerful tool for serious and sustained teacher development, focused on a core practice that belongs in the repertoire of all teachers. In the opening chapter, she suggests that interpretive discussion is

one way to achieve the analytic skills and understanding called for in the Common Core Standards. “Leading discussions” also appears in contemporary lists of high-leverage teaching practices, core practices that provide a basis for responsible, independent teaching (see www.teachingworks.org).

This book can help teachers develop a shared vision and understanding of interpretive discussion and its flexible uses across subjects and grade levels. The framework, annotated examples, and appendixes can structure and guide teachers’ joint work as they prepare questions, colead discussions, observe and analyze classroom experiments, and discuss emergent questions and problems. As teachers gain confidence and skill through collaborative experimentation and development, they can also study the impact of participating in such discussions on students’ confidence and academic skills. In short, Haroutunian-Gordon’s book offers a curriculum for teacher learning at every career stage.

Reading this book, you will find it hard to defend the view that good teachers are born, not made. Haroutunian-Gordon provides compelling evidence that a core teaching practice like leading interpretive discussions can be taught and learned by teachers, but not without serious and sustained effort. And what better way to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning in our schools?

I hope that this book will become a primer for teachers, teacher educators, and professional developers, helping teachers across the country to learn, teach, and practice the art of interpretive discussion.

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