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Breaking the Sounds of Silence: Promoting Discussion of Literary Texts in Intermediate Courses

by Laurey K. Martin

THE TEACHING PROFESSION'S EQUIVALENT of the question that has plagued socialites for generations—"What if I gave a party and nobody came?"—is clearly "What if I held a discussion and nobody talked?" The spectre of silence looms ominously every time we include a class discussion in our lesson plans. Thus we are often tempted to defer, limit, or abandon discussion modules. We place them at the end of the hour when the lack of enthusiastic response can be more easily disguised, and we frequently bail ourselves and the students out by answering our own questions when student response is slow. Such expedients are clearly short-sighted, since students can only become effective discussion participants by actually participating in the give and take of discussions; they are surely not going to become so by listening to our monologues.

What then are we to do? Learn to confront student silence with stoic patience? Wait patiently for the mythical "great" class where everybody talks? More productively, we should reassess the manner in which we engage students in the discussion process. We should start by focusing on the types of questions we generally ask as we strive to stimulate student participation and examine the factors that distinguish effective questions from those that provoke little or no response. Then, we need to consider how questions should be conceived, phrased, and sequenced to structure a productive discussion.

Recognizing ineffective questions: There are certain types of questions that tend to stifle rather than promote student participation in discussions. The three most problematic types are questions that are linguistically beyond our students' grasp, questions that are too broad or overly vague, and, conversely, those that are excessively narrow. Each creates its own particular pitfalls.

Inappropriate level: In every discussion we are asking students to perform several tasks—to synthesize information, to generate ideas, and to formulate opinions. In a foreign language class, matters are complicated by the fact that we are also asking students to express themselves in a language

that they speak with less than native fluency. Thus, we must confront their linguistic limitations and attendant fears of not being understood or of making "a mistake," in addition to their reticence to put forth ideas for others to hear, evaluate, and, perhaps, debate. Before we even begin to formulate the questions that will generate our discussion, we must therefore come to grips with our students' linguistic status—with their proficiency level. As Magnan notes, at the end of first-year courses (i.e. just before entering third semester, the beginning of the intermediate sequence), university students demonstrate a median proficiency rating of Intermediate-low/mid according to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. She further notes that, although by the end of second-year courses (i.e. midway through the intermediate sequence), students demonstrate a range of proficiency from Intermediate-low to Advanced, the median rating is still Intermediate-mid (Magnan 430). If we do not expect that students in our intermediate courses will have attained the Advanced-plus or Superior level of oral proficiency, we should not formulate questions in such a way that students would need Advanced-plus or Superior level skills in order to answer them successfully.

Such questions are, however, all too frequent in intermediate classrooms and textbooks, as instructors and authors confuse material that is being presented as part of the grammar syllabus with language that the students can actually use. For example, "*si* clauses" are a common item on the grammar syllabus of third-semester college courses. For some students this may be primarily review. For the majority, however, this is the first exposure they have had to the past conditional, and, for a certain number, it is even the first time they have used the present conditional with verbs other than *vouloir*, *pouvoir*, and *devoir*. Clearly, if most students are still struggling to manipulate successfully the intricacies of hypothetical constructions in mechanical grammar drills, we can hardly expect widespread or enthusiastic response to a discussion question whose answer requires the production of such a construction. If, for example, we were presenting a prose text written in the first person and wanted students to discuss the implications of first-person narration, we would be well advised to avoid asking a question such as "De quelles façons l'effet de ce texte aurait-il été différent si l'auteur avait choisi de l'écrire à la troisième personne au lieu de l'avoir écrit à la première personne?" This is a perfectly fine question in terms of focusing attention on the fact that the choice of narrative voice has implications for the reader as well as for the writer. Nonetheless, for most students in intermediate-level courses, there is simply too much language here to be overcome—in understanding the question, in situating it temporally, and in trying to clothe a response in correct grammatical garb—to allow students even to get to the point of trying to imagine the "feel" of the text written in a different narrative mode.

The types of supported opinion and hypothesis required by this question are Superior Level tasks on the ACTFL scale. While students should be

working toward proficiency in these tasks, the vast majority of students will not have attained it while in second- or third-year "intermediate" courses. Yet this type of hypothetical construction appears frequently in intermediate readers, in questions dealing with inference based on a particular text students have read ("Si Perrette vivait aujourd'hui, en quoi consisterait sa vie?") as well as in questions meant to serve as the springboard for a general discussion ("Si le monde avait l'occasion d'adopter une seule langue universelle, devrait-on le faire?").[1]

Grammatical complexity can make questions seem more complicated and difficult than they are. As a result, even those students with ideas to share may not speak up because they are unable to provide appropriate linguistic packaging for the answer quickly enough. As Phillips notes, where comprehension questions relating to reading texts require oral (or written) language responses, "both student and teacher are inadvertently influenced by the productive skill. Students may not answer as fully as they understand because they are concentrating upon pronunciation or spelling; in fact, a blank answer may not indicate lack of understanding at all, but rather an inability to produce an answer in the second language" (293–94). The thinking process disappears behind a concern for phonetic, orthographic, or grammatical accuracy.

To re-establish the primacy of ideas in class discussions, we need to apply to the intermediate level what we know to be effective in beginning-level classes, particularly with respect to structuring activities so students can draw upon what they already know and focus on the task at hand without unnecessary complications. In other words, we need to prepare and control discussion questions for intermediate students just as carefully as we prepare and sequence language-getting and language-using activities for beginning students. As Kaplan points out, we must continue to be aware of controlling for language level as students move from courses whose primary focus is language instruction to "content-oriented" courses, and avoid falling into the traditional trap of making no *linguistic* distinction between an introduction to literature survey intended for students entering their third year of language study and a specialized topic course intended for exiting majors (493). In terms of the range of ACTFL proficiency levels mentioned earlier as being typical of students entering second- and third-year courses, we should remember that at the Intermediate-mid level students can narrate and describe in present time but have difficulty handling time shifts or complications—and that even at the Intermediate-high level, although students can produce coherent discourse that shifts time frames, they do not succeed in doing so all of the time.

Lack of focus: If we ask questions that are too broad or too vague, students do not know where to begin in answering them, or even what the question really is. Sometimes this is another proficiency-related issue: if students are capable of generating sentence-length but not paragraph-length connected discourse, it is not reasonable to ask them a question that requires at least a

paragraph to answer. At other times (or for other students) it is simply a matter of not knowing where to begin or how much to say.

The archetypical broad question is "Que pensez-vous de ce conte/poème/article/etc.?" Students generally respond to such questions with noncommital comments such as "It was OK," or "It was interesting." Not wanting to offend us or their fellow students one way or the other, they hedge their bets, saying just enough to satisfy their perceived obligation to respond, but not taking the risk of giving a "wrong" answer. When confronted with the inevitable follow-up question ("Why?"), they usually say "Well, I don't know, it just was," because their original response was determined more by their reaction to the question than by their reaction to the text.

There are other factors at work here also. During class discussions students are forced to recall what they can of the text, having read it hours or days earlier. If they offer a stronger than neutral opinion that you subsequently ask them to support or illustrate, they are faced with the formidable task of both remembering and then finding the specific, relevant passages to explain their general reaction. Many may see it in their interest not to go out on a limb by expressing a clear-cut opinion, fearing that their response might seem naive or pretentious, or that they might have missed something that would make their assessment seem ridiculous.

We should avoid such broad questions, particularly in opening a discussion, when students feel most hesitant and unsure if they are on the right track. If we feel compelled to ask them at all, we should save them for the very end of the discussion, because at that point students can use the ideas that have already been generated to focus and support their opinions.

Excessive narrowness: At the other end of the spectrum is the question that is overly narrow. Obviously, the most narrow question in terms of stimulating discussion is a yes/no question, for once a student has said "yes" or "no," there is nowhere else to go. But even "content" questions can be limiting if they ask only that students provide a discrete piece of information. If, for example, your students were reading an excerpt from the beginning of *Le Père Goriot* and you asked where the novel takes place ("Où se passe l'action au début de ce roman?"), someone would likely respond "en France." In factual terms, this answer is correct; however, the "discussion" about the text has not progressed very far. You have said ten words, and a student has said two—which is far from an ideal ratio of teacher-talk to student-talk in a class discussion. If you want more information about the setting, you have to ask another question ("Mais dans quelle ville en France?—à Paris") and another ("Et où exactement à Paris"—"dans la maison Vauquer") and another ("Et qu'est-ce que c'est que la maison Vauquer?"), and another until you finally obtain the precise answer you are seeking. This sets up a classroom dynamic resembling an interrogation more than a discussion, as you fire questions at students who respond with a word here and there.

Granted, this type of exercise can serve a certain function—to spot-check that students have done the reading, for example. It is not going to generate much language, however, and it should not be mistaken for a discussion. In fact, the nature of the questions and the "I ask/you answer" style of delivery convey the sense that there is one and only one right answer. As a result, the "discussion" loses any sense of constituting an exchange of ideas and takes on the appearance of a sort of test. Yet, as Aspatore reminds us, we should be wary of placing too much emphasis on eliciting "the right answer" at the expense of considering "the process involved in generating any answer, right or wrong" (297). In a real discussion, the instructor's role should be that of facilitator, mediator, and guide—not that of inquisitor. We must give students the opportunity to interact with the text and approach it critically and creatively, without constantly being challenged to provide a particular "right" answer.

Another problem with specific-answer type questions is that they often lead to a seek-and-find activity, as students flip pages trying to locate the precise bit of information for which you have asked. Not only is this time-consuming but it also orients the students toward the book rather than toward each other. Instead of a discussion, we end up with an exercise in skimming and scanning.

Having distinguished the types of questions that are likely to be ineffective in promoting and sustaining class discussions, we can now turn to developing some strategies for formulating and sequencing questions so as to increase the odds of a productive discussion. It is important to remember that before students can communicate ideas in a discussion they must have ideas to express—and to recognize that most students in intermediate level courses lack the analytical as well as the linguistic tools and/or practice to sustain the types of discussions they consider "interesting." Therefore we must use the strategies of preparation, reformulation, and progression to provide a meaningful context and an appropriate analytical framework within which they can arrive at a productive exchange of ideas.

Preparation: Preparation by both the students and the teacher is indispensible in setting up a successful discussion. For the teacher this attention to preparation does not necessarily mean more preparation, just earlier preparation. Before assigning a particular text we must decide precisely what it is about the text that we want to discuss. Before including a discussion on a particular topic in our lesson plan we must focus on what aspects of the topic we want to emphasize, what our angle will be, why we want to discuss the topic, and where we want the discussion to lead. Having done so, we can better prime the students in class in the days preceding the actual discussion, and we can provide them with a set of questions to ponder, prepare orally, or even write out at home.[2]

This advance preparation by the instructor means that students can do much of the time-consuming (silence-producing) picking apart and digesting of the text or the topic at home and allows them to come to class with

some general ideas and reactions already formulated. As Blackbourn notes, in the transition from language courses to literature courses that occurs at the intermediate level, it is especially important to channel the students' efforts in working with particular texts or topics so that their task is more manageable and, as a result, more productive (199).

To be effective as discussion-aids, however, these questions must go beyond standard "comprehension" type questions. They should encourage students to think about the way a text is structured, about the explicit and implicit points the author seems to be making, and about the relation of one particular text or topic to broader cultural issues. The questions should help students to establish a context, to focus their attention on key or problematic passages, to suggest ways of approaching the text, and to work out their own—if not definitions for—at least sense of various categories of analysis, such as realism or third-person narration. Thus, these questions should attempt to bridge the gap between the various language systems that Schofer detects in all courses dealing with literary texts: the professor's metalanguage, the students' previously-acquired language (that must be transformed into a metalanguage appropriate for literature), and the literary languages and conventions of the texts under study (465).

When preparatory questions touch on complex notions, students can be guided with the addition of "helper questions." These helper questions provide a means of breaking down a complex notion into manageable chunks and offer suggestions to consider in formulating a response. For example, if students are reading a fairy tale such as Perrault's "La Belle au bois dormant," and we wish to have them discuss the narrator's presence in the tale and attitude toward the events being recounted, we could first point out several places where narrative intervention occurs. This would allow students to focus their preparation on thinking about the implications of the narrator's role rather than on hunting down examples. Then we could ask:

> Dans ces passages, quelle attitude est-ce que le narrateur adopte par rapport à son histoire (omnisciente/limitée; intime/distante; objective/subjective; sérieuse/comique; sincère/cynique)? En quoi cette attitude influence-t-elle notre appréciation du conte? notre compréhension de ce qui se passe? D'après vous, quelles raisons existe-t-il pour adopter un tel style narratif? (didactiques? humoristiques? idéologiques? moralisatrices?)

The use of helper questions means that each student does not independently have to rediscover the wheel for each question. It also refocuses attention away from categories of analysis *per se* and on to students' opinions about what happens in the text, and how and why—which is what is really most productive for discussions at the intermediate level.

If we are dealing not with a specific reading but with a topic, some preparation questions might elicit reactions from the students based on their personal experiences or intellectual background. If, for example, the

class were going to discuss the notion of regionalism and the growth of regional movements in France, we could ask:

> Décrivez votre région aux Etats-Unis (topographie, climat, industries principales, caractéristiques du peuple, etc.). Quels stéréotypes sont associés avec votre région (industrie/paresse; richesse/nécéssité; amabilité/snobisme; tradition/invention; technologie/nature)? D'où dérivent-ils? D'après vous, lesquels de ces stéréotypes sont justes? faux? Quelle est la valeur/quel est le danger de ce genre de stéréotype régional?

Such questions enable students to feel included in the topic, to perceive its relevance to their own lives, situations, and culture, and to sense that what they are doing is meaningful in broader terms than just as oral language practice. Such questions should also stimulate associations so that students begin to sense the ways in which cultural notions are interrelated and to appreciate how different issues inform one another. If the length or complexity of the material to be discussed necessitates a substantial number of questions to assure adequate preparation, different questions can be assigned to different groups of students. Thus no one is overwhelmed by the quantity of material to prepare, and the students will not be bogged down in the mechanics of the preparation rather than be profiting from the intellectual stimulation it can provide.

In short, discussion preparation questions should guide students to analyze rather than just consume ideas. To accomplish this end the questions should be as open-ended as possible and not give the sense that there is a right or wrong answer. In drafting them, we should keep in mind that their goal is to promote understanding and to prepare students to formulate and eventually express opinions, not to "test" what students know. The questions should thus reflect the interactive model of reading proposed by Swaffer, who suggests that to facilitate the reading task instructors should strive to activate reader schemata, guide students to awareness of text structure, assist in strategy development, and promote relaxed interaction between students and text (139).

Reformulation: While preparation questions serve as the starting point of the eventual class discussion, it is, of course, important that the discussion itself not consist simply of a rehashing of the same questions *per se*. Rehashing is clearly counter-productive. Good students are tempted to skip the class in which the discussion is scheduled or tune out while it is going on. Feeling that they already have a sufficient handle on the material after going over the preparation questions at home, they conclude that the discussion will not add anything to their understanding. Meanwhile, less motivated students are likely to skip the preparation phase—even though they are the ones who need it the most—figuring that they can simply "do" the questions in class.

To avoid re-hashing the preparatory questions in class, however, one need not engage in the time-consuming preparation of a whole new set of

questions. Rather, the questions can simply be reformulated in a different way. Effective techniques for reformulation include reordering, combining elements from several preparatory questions into one broader discussion question, and looking at the same idea from a slightly different angle. Say, for example, that we are going to discuss the beginning of Maupassant's "Une Partie de campagne"—which, along with Maupassant's other short stories, is common fare in intermediate-level courses. In the preparatory "ponder at home" questions, we could ask the students:

> Qui sont les cinq personnages présentés dans les premiers paragraphes du conte? (Nommez-les et indiquez les rapports qui lient les uns aux autres). Lesquels sont identifiés par leur nom de famille? par leur prénom? par un autre terme plus général? A partir de cet emploi des noms, qu'est-ce qu'on peut déduire sur la structure de la famille? Qu'est-ce que l'interaction entre les différents membres de la famille suggère quant aux rôles masculins/féminins dans cette famille? quant aux rôles des différentes générations?

With these questions we are focusing the students' attention away from what is happening (which they usually have the easiest time figuring out) and on to the relationships underlying the action. These relationships form the psychological backdrop for the rest of the story and are also interesting for what they reveal in sociological terms about a particular class of people at a particular time in French history. In class we can then ask the students a set of different, but related questions:

> Décrivez les cinq personnages et la façon dont le narrateur les présente. A quelle classe sociale ces gens semblent-ils appartenir? Quels rapports voyez-vous entre leur classe et la structure de leur famille? Imaginez que vous tournez un film qui traite de cette famille. D'abord décrivez la façon dont vous présentez les personnages et la façon dont vous indiquez les rapports entre eux. Ensuite décrivez les attributs de leur apparence ou personnalité sur lesquels vous insistez.

If students have worked through the preparation questions at home, they should be conceptually, linguistically, and psychologically prepared to participate in the class discussion. The discussion nonetheless asks them to go beyond recounting what they have read to voice opinions and make speculations.

Progression: Note the sequencing of the suggested classroom discussion prompters. They start with what is known (who the five characters are and how they are presented) and move toward speculation (how one might present them similarly in a different medium). They start with something concrete (the personal identities and interrelationships of the various characters) and move toward something more abstract (their class identity). They start with fairly simple ideas (who these people are, how they are presented to the reader) and move toward more complex notions (how does one convey personality in film as opposed to literature, by what means can one capture an author's tone—serious, comic, ironic—in a movie). Such sequencing—from that which is known to that which is speculation, from

that which is concrete to that which is abstract, from simple notions to more complex ones—is of great importance in structuring a successful discussion, for it allows each stage of the discussion to prepare the next. Such sequencing also allows students to "see" where the discussion originates, rather than to feel that the questions they are being asked are arbitrary or haphazard.

As a related aspect of sequencing, note the repeated use of the imperative "décrivez" in the suggestions for class discussion. Asking students to describe is an extremely effective discussion-promoting technique and is a particularly good way to start a discussion. First, it is an appropriate task for intermediate-level students, given the oral proficiency level they can be expected to have attained. (Description is a basic Intermediate and Advanced level task according to the ACTFL scale, and most students in intermediate courses fall within the Intermediate to Advanced range on the scale [Magnan 430].) Secondly, it is less "threatening" than many discussion starters simply by virtue of the fact that it is not really a question—and if it is not a question, there is not a right or wrong answer. Thirdly, as VanPatten notes, guided information-gap activities that involve narrating or describing events are an effective means of moving intermediate students beyond the word and sentence level to where they can string together discourse (62). Description is open-ended and allows for variable, and even maximum, student talk—as much as the student who responds can generate on the subject. When the initial respondant has described all that he/she can, with only a very brief intervention from the teacher, the discussion can be continued by having other students add to the description or indicate their agreement or disagreement with it. Finally, having gotten a firm foothold on the topic by describing, students can move to comparing, contrasting, and, eventually, analyzing.

Let us now consider a more lengthy example of structuring a successful class discussion around another type of text typical of intermediate-level readers—a La Fontaine fable, "Les Animaux malades de la peste." In order to promote student interest in the fable (and to overcome the fact that it is poetry—anathema to many students!), we need to find an angle to anchor our eventual discussion. Indeed, as Vande Berg convincingly points out, "at the intermediate level, when brief literary passages often begin to appear, students may be ill-prepared to approach the texts with a view to artistic appreciation." One solution she proposes is to draw upon the provocative ideas or universal questions about the human condition embodied in most literary texts to promote "authentic communication" among students. The idea is to give them something inherently interesting to talk about and focus their attention on messages they themselves want to convey (664–65). Since "Les Animaux malades de la peste" (and many of La Fontaine's other fables) are thinly disguised commentaries on the monarchy and the court, in which the figure of the lion represents Louis XIV and the other animal characters various ministers and courtiers, one possible angle would

be the notion of the national hero. Louis XIV was not only the most powerful man of his time but is still one of the great figures commonly associated with the French nation, a figure in relation to whom the French gauge other heroes and define their national identity. To discuss the fable in this light, we first need to give students an opportunity to formulate opinions and articulate their thoughts about the notion of national heroes—in general, their own, and those of the French. Thus a preliminary discussion is called for in which these notions can be explored and in which a context can be established for discussing the fable itself. As preparation for this preliminary discussion, we might give students the following questions to ponder and prepare at home:

> Nommez deux ou trois de vos héros personnels et expliquez pourquoi, à votre avis, ces gens sont héroïques. Nommez plusieurs héros américains (traditionnels et contemporains). A votre avis pourquoi est-ce qu'un individu a besoin de héros? Et pourquoi un peuple a-t-il besoin de héros? A votre avis, quel est le rôle de ces institutions dans la création des héros: le gouvernement, l'église, le militaire, la presse? Imaginez que vous êtes peintre et que vous faites le portrait d'un héros militaire; décrivez le portrait (décor, pose, geste, vêtements). Qu'est-ce que vous changerez si vous faites ensuite le portrait d'un héros politique? Citez des exemples de cas où un écrivain ou un artiste a "démystifié" un héros et expliquez comment il a réalisé cette démystification (exagération, satire, caricature).

These questions are sequenced to start at a concrete personal and then national level before becoming more general and abstract. Thus, when students encounter the question about why people or groups need heroes, they can use their responses to the two previous questions as the starting point from which to make this sort of generalization. Some of the questions also include "helpers" to suggest possible avenues for students to explore in formulating a response. The questions also rely heavily on the technique of describing and the related descriptive task of listing.

In class, during the preliminary discussion, we could ask students questions that draw upon the notions they have considered and the ideas they have formulated at home:

> D'après vous, qu'est-ce que c'est qu'un héros? Quelles sortes de héros créent la presse, l'église et le militaire? A votre avis, pourquoi chaque institution veut-elle créer des héros? A votre avis, qu'est-ce que les héros américains révèlent au sujet des attitudes américaines? au sujet de "l'identité" américaine? Pour quelles raisons est-ce qu'un groupe (un individu) entreprend de démystifier un ou plusieurs héros?

We could also have several students describe the portrait they have imagined, while the other students look for similarities that would seem to define constants in the image of a particular type of hero.

Note the phrasing of the discussion prompters: description again plays a major role ("qu'est-ce que c'est qu'un" being simply a variation on the imperative "décrivez"), as does listing (the types of heroes, the attitudes

revealed). Students are asked for their own opinions (which, since they are opinions, cannot be right or wrong) rather than asked to make global generalizations that might be immediately challenged or refuted. Furthermore, since there are no right or wrong answers, other students can address the same notion without appearing to attack those who have spoken first.

For the next night's homework we need to prime students to think about Louis XIV as a particular hero, and as preparation questions, we might ask them:

> Dressez une liste d'événements et de lieux (villes et monuments) que vous associez avec Louis XIV. Imaginez son caractère et son apparence: dressez une liste de 5–10 adjectifs que vous lui associez.

In the next class we can have students describe what they know, or have imagined, about the king and what is "heroic" about him: his appearance, his personality, his accomplishments. We could then show them several different portraits of Louis XIV, asking them to describe these pictures using the same categories (setting, pose, gestures, clothing) they had used previously in the "imagine the portrait of a hero" preparation question. Finally, we might ask them:

> Qu'est-ce que chaque portrait apporte à la notion du roi-héros? Quelles qualités semblent revenir dans chaque représentation du roi? Quelles différences notez-vous entre l'image du roi dans ces portraits et son image telle que vous l'avez imaginée?

At this point it would be time to have students read the La Fontaine fable, and, in preparation for our discussion of the fable itself, we could assign them the following preparatory tasks and questions:

> Nommez les personnages principaux. Dressez une liste de deux ou trois adjectifs pour décrire chaque personnage. Quel est le problème décrit au début de la fable? Quelle solution à ce problème le lion suggère-t-il? Quelle est la moralité que le poète nous présente à la fin de la fable? A votre avis, quelle est la signification de cette moralité dans le contexte de la fable? A votre avis, qu'est-ce qu'il y a d'héroïque chez le lion? Quels défauts notez-vous dans son caractère? A votre avis, quel est le but de l'auteur (soutenir ou critiquer la monarchie; instruire ou divertir ses lecteurs) et comment est-ce qu'il le réalise (humour: ironie, farce; didactisme: prédication, suggestion; etc.)? Refaites la fable en prose, en vos propres mots.

To begin our class discussion we could have one student read aloud his or her prose version of the fable, asking the other students to add to it and then compare it to the original poem in terms of tone, detail, impact, etc. We could then ask them all, in turn, to describe each character with the adjectives they listed while doing the preparatory assignment. As the students present their lists, we could put on the blackboard a master list of all adjectives mentioned so as to determine which adjectives recur most often.

We could then continue the discussion with the following sequence of questions:

> A votre avis, quel est le mobile du lion quand il propose sa "solution"? du renard quand il répond à la "confession" du lion? de l'âne quand il se confesse? Expliquez pourquoi la moralité est vraie dans le contexte de la fable. Citez des exemples de situations où cette moralité s'applique à d'autres contextes (non-littéraires, non-français) et à d'autres époques. A votre avis, qu'est-ce que cette fable apporte au mythe du roi-héros? Pensez-vous que dans cette fable La Fontaine a voulu soutenir l'image de Louis XIV comme héros ou qu'il a plutôt voulu démystifier l'héroïsme du roi. Indiquez les aspects de la fable sur lesquels vous basez votre jugement. Comparez l'image du roi présentée dans la fable avec les deux portraits que nous avons discutés, en indiquant si les trois représentations du roi se reflètent, se complètent ou se contredisent. Expliquez comment la fable a changé ou a renforcé votre opinion de Louis XIV.

In order to break up the rhythm a little (and to maximize the amount that each individual student speaks during the discussion), we could intersperse pair or small group mini-discussions with the larger whole-class discussion. For example, pairs could discuss the various images of the king/hero presented in the paintings and poem and come up with a composite verbal portrait to be presented to the class. The whole-class discussion could then focus on similarities and differences between composites, and groups could be asked to explain and justify their choice of characteristics to highlight/downplay. As a different type of activity, a preliminary survey (through a show of hands) could be done on the question of whether the author's purpose was primarily to entertain, instruct, or propagandize. The class could then be divided into three groups, with each preparing a list of "examples" to support its case and formulating a general statement as to why the students in the group believe as they do. One representative from each group could then present that group's "case" to the rest of the class, followed by a whole-class discussion of the overall effect of the fable.

What will we accomplish in our series of discussions about the La Fontaine fable? We will situate this poem written long ago and far away within a context that is relevant to students in both temporal and personal terms, thereby stimulating student interest and simultaneously illustrating the continuity of certain basic cultural notions. Why is it likely to be an effective and productive series of discussions? It will be effective because we have taken care to adjust the level of language in our questions and the types of tasks these questions ask students to perform to the proficiency level already attained by the majority of students in the class. It will be effective because we have also sequenced questions in such a way that students can use what has already been said at each stage of the discussion as the basis for formulating subsequent remarks, as the discussion moves from the personal to the more general and from the concrete to the abstract. Our discussion will be productive because we have asked questions in such a way as to encourage maximum student expression with min-

imum intervention on our part. It will also be productive because we have provided specific tasks for students to perform outside of class in preparation for the discussion. These tasks go beyond merely reading the text and understanding who did what to thinking about historical and social contexts, forming reactions, and making comparisons with other treatments of the same notion. These tasks will give students something to say that they will really want to communicate. Finally, our discussion will be productive because we have avoided asking questions whose breadth might intimidate students or whose narrowness would inevitably limit student expression. As teachers, we may not always have the right answers, but by asking the right questions we can certainly improve the effectiveness and productivity of our class discussions and turn student silence into student participation.

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Notes

[1]The first question comes from a second-year reader's "Discussion et Compréhension" questions about La Fontaine's fable "La Laitière et le pot au lait"; the second from a different second-year reader's "Sujets de discussion ou de composition" at the end of a unit on "La Langue."

[2]The philosophy of questioning described below reflects many of the principles that underlie *Images* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1990), an intermediate reader I co-authored with William J. Berg.

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