



**Make Room for Essential Conversations** is a reading reminder excerpted from *Reading Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques* by Jim Burke.

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# Make Room for Essential Conversations

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### RATIONALE

We spend a lot of time talking about *how* we read or *what* we read but we need to make room for the essential conversation, the one that answers the question *why* we read. Each discipline has at its heart certain vital questions its practitioners have spent decades, even centuries, trying to answer. When we make room for the essential conversations in our disciplines, when we invite students to enter into those discussions, we create opportunities for deep learning and thoughtful reading. As Arthur Applebee (1996) writes, “Learning is most effective when classrooms emphasize knowledge derived from active participation in meaningful conversations within important fields of study.”

No wonder the really powerful men in our society, whether politicians or scientists, hold writers and poets in contempt. They do it because they get no evidence from modern literature that anybody is thinking about any significant question.

SAUL BELLOW

### WHAT TO DO

Encourage students to enter into the essential conversations with themselves, with classmates, with their teachers, with society, and with the authors/thinkers you are studying. Such conversations can be carried on through writing (journals, e-mail, online threaded discussions, letters, imaginative fiction), discussions, or interviews. Central to the idea of curriculum as a conversation is the notion that a book, regardless of its genre, is a conversation between:

- The reader and the author
- The reader and themselves
- The reader and the characters/events/ideas in that book

Depending on your discipline or the ideas your students are studying, consider how you might fit any of the following conversations into your curriculum:

- What is the nature and role of story?
- What role does or should the imagination play in our lives and work?
- How does character determine the outcome of events?
- What is true?



- What is beautiful?
- What is good?
- What are the meaning and implications of liberty, equality, and justice?
- What is the value of doubt?
- What is the importance of failure and what it teaches?
- Why are we here?
- What is my role, my obligation, my purpose in relation to myself and my community?
- What matters?

Discuss the criteria by which ideas, skills, or subjects are deemed “essential” given that others are necessarily excluded when judgments of this kind are made.

Make room for students to initiate and learn how to use books to support inquiries of serious personal importance. This means teaching them how to frame such inquiries and how to pursue them using a range of texts and other sources as tools for thought and investigation.

Invite a range of perspectives to participate in any such discussion. This might mean having others from outside the class visit to complement the discussion of a text or it might mean bringing a range of other texts to the discussion to allow for more voices on the subject.

Keep in mind that participating in the essential conversation requires that people know how to think out loud and elaborate on their thinking. See Reminders 93 and 94 for helpful ideas.

**STUDENT EXAMPLE**

Sophomore Ross Webber wrote the following short essay after reading one of his SSR books.

LIFE

Everybody must go through life getting thrown some rough deals and hardships. No matter who you are, life always gives you an obstacle, and you must somehow find a way to overcome that particular obstacle. Then, right when you think that the worst is over, life hits you again.

*Hocus Pocus* shows an especially brutal side of life in all of its many characters. The main character, Gene Hartke, handles all of his obstacles particularly well, which is surprising because of how difficult most of his life has been. He had

fought in the Vietnam War, where he was nicknamed “the Preacher” for all the encouraging speeches he made. He killed so many innocent people without even thinking about it at the time. Later in his life, it shocked him how coldhearted he had once been. He was an adulterer because he liked older women and he didn’t see any problem with what he was doing. He lived with his wife and mother-in-law, whom he loved dearly, but who turned insane because of a genetic defect in their family, in a small valley across the lake from a black prison. He taught at a college for challenged students. He was fired for many things including discussing inappropriate topics with the students, making them question their government, and being an adulterer. He had two children who hated him because he did not send their mother and grandmother to a mental hospital. And he had an illegitimate son whom he had never met. And that is just the main character.

*Hocus Pocus* was written in 1990 and begins in the year 2001. Throughout this book, the author describes the current state of the United States and its government. Many of the things that are said are exaggerations, but on the other hand, many are true. It made me think about what’s going on in this country, as well as the rest of the world, and how it affects me. It also made me question many things, such as racial barriers, government, and social classes, which I would not normally think about. It made me realize that while a lot of things are made to look good and innocent, they are still corrupt inside.

Almost every character in *Hocus Pocus* has led a very tough life. For example, a Japanese man working in the same place as Gene Hartke opens up to him and tells Gene about when he was a young boy in Japan. He lived where the atom bomb had been dropped. He was in elementary school playing on the playground with his friends during school. The ball rolled away and into a ditch. He went to go get it, and when he bent over in the ditch to pick up the ball, he felt a hot wind and heard a weird sound. He immediately stood up to see that everyone he knew had died, and the city he had lived in had been completely destroyed. He was the only one around so he had to walk to the next town just to find somebody to help him. He lived the rest of his life wondering why he had survived. He also never forgot the graphic images of the people, young and old alike, lying dead on the ground, their skin detached from their bodies except for a few pieces where the sinew was burnt to the muscle. He never really got over it.





It's almost depressing to read this book. It made me think about how tough their lives had been compared to mine and people around me, and how much I and the people I know complain about the little things that really aren't all that important in the long run anyway. It also made me realize that life is an endless cycle of obstacles that is escapable only by death. And that is just taking the easy way out.

Take a moment to reflect on your reading and teaching. You may find the following discussion points useful, or you can come up with your own:

- Write a summary of the last section. Include in this summary three main ideas—techniques, strategies, tools—that relate to your own classes.
- Which reminders from the preceding section might help you the most?
- Looking ahead to the next section, consider its title and, before you begin reading, create your own list of reminders for this topic. After checking yours with mine, discuss which of these reminders—from your list and mine—will help you and your students the most.