Title: Sentence stems as supports for students' interpretative thinking and writing
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Strand of Work: Design and Design-Based Research on interventions

Question Investigated
A significant challenge to students—especially inexperienced literary readers and writers—is in moving from literal to interpretive readings of literary texts. Beyond the cognitive complexities of interpretation, expectations about "right" answers, beliefs about "purposes" of literature, and lack of access to disciplinary language may lead students (and teachers) to reductive understandings of theme as a single message or moral statement.

The current study pursues research on both sentence stems and understanding of theme by asking the following questions:
1. When students use sentence stems where theme is framed as worldview or judgment, are they more likely to make thematic inferences?
2. When students do make thematic inferences, are those inferences less likely to be clichéd or happiness-bound?

Methodology
Middle and high school students (N=185) from three urban and suburban schools were divided into three conditions, counterbalanced in each class: Control, Worldview, and Affect. The students all read a short story and responded to several questions about the story, and then completed a sentence stem designed to prompt thematic interpretation in one of three ways:

    1. "Control" condition: *Some of my interpretations of themes in this story are _____.*

    2. "Worldview" condition: *Reading this story helps us see that the world can be a place where ____.*

    3. "Affect" condition: Students were asked to choose one of the following:
CHOICE ONE: By the end, reading this story leads us to feel that the author has a <u>positive</u> outlook on life, because the author seems to believe that _____.
OR
CHOICE TWO: By the end, reading this story leads us to feel that the author has a <u>negative</u> outlook on life, because the author seems to believe that _____.

Independent raters coded the responses as "literal" and "interpretive," based on codes adapted from other studies of literary interpretation. Chi square and follow up tests were used to analyze the frequencies of different responses.

General statement of Findings
Results show that students using interpretive sentence stems (Worldview and Affect) constructed more thematic interpretations of a complex story, as opposed to the Control group, who constructed more summaries. Students in the two experimental groups also constructed fewer "happiness-bound" responses.

Students in the experimental groups also chose more interpretively salient words as "most important" to their interpretations.

Implications
These results have immediate implications for the teaching and learning of thematic interpretation. First, the results suggest that students may experience richer interactions with literature if they can consider a literary text to be a representation of a particular world. Second, if students evaluate texts in terms of positive or negative impact, they may be better able to construct interpretive understandings. Third, teachers may need to help students articulate their expectations and schema for literature and literary reading. If students frame fiction—especially texts read in school—as moral tales with happy endings, or generally expect protagonists to be sympathetic, they may be less likely to engage with and build nuanced interpretations of those texts. One possible way to help students expand their schemata for stories is to explicitly explore questions such as "What's a story 'for'? Why do I even like stories?"

It seems reasonable that this kind of language has the potential to act as a form of scaffolding, helping students to understand literary texts as representations of some version of their own world, which they can experience, evaluate, interpret, and compare with their own. Less significantly, but still importantly, these stems may act as scaffolds to help students become acculturated to discipline-specific discourse – the language that experienced readers might use to talk about literature. Hopefully, further research in these areas may contribute to approaches to teaching and models of interpretive response that can ultimately help students find meaning and pleasure in the texts they read.