

Stephanie & Anne
Harvey & Goudvis

Strategies *That* Work

second
edition

*Teaching Comprehension
for Understanding
and Engagement*



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Chapter 1

Reading Is Thinking

Thirty sixth graders crowd onto a woven area rug in the reading corner. A brass floor lamp casts a warm, amber glow onto their faces. Steph takes a seat in the rocking chair in front of them. "Today, I am going to read you a picture book called *Up North at the Cabin*, by Marsha Wilson Chall. I wish I had written it. I'll tell you why. This book reminds me exactly of my own childhood. It is the story of a young girl about your age who left the city every summer to spend time in a cabin on a lake in Minnesota. Minnesota is called the land of ten thousand lakes. I grew up in the neighboring state of Wisconsin. We had our share of lakes, too," Steph tells them as she points out the location of these two upper-midwestern states on the wall map.

"Writers write best about things they know and care about," Steph says. She reads from the inside flap that the author spent her summers on northern lakes and was inspired by her own experience as a child and later on as a mother when she returned to this cabin with her own children. "I was a kid who loved summer," Steph says while a dozen heads nod in agreement. "Like the young girl in the book, I spent summers on a lake where we fished, swam, water-skied, hiked, and canoed." Steph mentions how fortunate she feels that Marsha Chall wrote a book with which she identifies so closely. "Have you ever read a book that reminds you of your own life?" she asks. Hands wave wildly as kids share their favorites.

"*Koala Lou*" (Fox 1988), Shelby blurts out. "I have a whole bunch of brothers and sisters, and sometimes I get really jealous of them, just like Koala Lou did."

"*I Hate English!*" (Levine 1989), Jen-Li chimes in. "I couldn't understand a word of English when I first came from Korea. School was really hard. I know exactly how that girl felt."

Steph points out that Shelby and Jen-Li have made a connection between books and their lives. "If we connect to a book, we usually can't put it down. Good readers make connections between the texts they read and their own lives. Let's try something. I am going to read you *Up North at the Cabin*. As I read the words, I am going to show you the thinking that is going on in my

head. I'll use these sticky notes to jot that thinking down and mark a connection. I'll mark the sticky note with the code T-S for text-to-self connection because it reminds me in some way of my own life and prior experience. Then I'll place the sticky note on the appropriate passage or picture. I'll let it stick out of the book a little, like a bookmark, so I can find it easily if I want to come back to it later on."

Steph reads through the book page by page sharing her thinking about waterskiing, the local bait shop, pruney fingers from too much swimming, and portaging canoes. She marks the text and illustrations with sticky notes coded T-S and jots down a few words such as, "Sometimes we even used peanut butter for bait when we ran out of night crawlers" or "Boy, was I mad when my dad made me carry that canoe."

When she comes to a page that shows the main character in an orange canvas life jacket with two white cotton closures, she laughs and stops to share a brief story. "I can't help but think of my mom when I see this orange life jacket. There were five of us kids, and we lived right on the edge of the water. When we were toddlers, my mom was wracked with worry that one of us might fall into the lake and drown. Her solution: the day we started to walk, she wrapped us in those orange life jackets. We wore them everywhere. We ate our cereal in them. We watched TV in them. Sometimes, we even slept in them. We looked like five little bulldozers!" Two kids in front grab the book to take a closer look at the tell-tale life jacket.

"How embarrassing," Josh murmurs.

"You'd better believe it. But I think my mom was onto something. We learned to swim quicker than any kids around just to get rid of those goofy life jackets!"

When Steph finishes reading out loud, she encourages kids to find a book they connect with and to use sticky notes to mark their text-to-self connections and jot down their thinking. We urge teachers to do the same. Find one of those books you really connect to. Unless you are one of Steph's life-jacket-bound siblings or a Wisconsin ice fisherman, it may not be *Up North at the Cabin*. Read it to your students, sharing your connections as you read. When we connect our past experience to new information, we are more apt to engage in the reading as well as understand it. There is nothing more powerful than a literacy teacher sharing her passion for reading, writing, and thinking.

The Reader Writes the Story

Reading out loud and showing how readers think when they read is central to the instruction we share in this book. When we read, thoughts fill our mind. We might make connections to our own life, as Steph did. We might have a question or an inference. It is not enough to merely think these thoughts. Strategic readers address their thinking in an inner conversation that helps them make sense of what they read. They search for the answers to their questions. They attempt to better understand the text through their connections to the characters, the events, and the issues.

Readers take the written word and construct meaning based on their own thoughts, knowledge, and experiences. The reader is part writer. The novelist E. L. Doctorow says, “Any book you pick up, if it’s good, is a printed circuit for your own life to flow through—so when you read a book, you are engaged in the events of the mind of the writer. You are bringing your own creative faculties into sync. You’re imagining the words, the sounds of the words, and you are thinking of the various characters in terms of people you’ve known—not in terms of the writer’s experience, but your own” (Plimpton 1988).

Active readers interact with the text they read. Getting readers to think when they read, to develop an awareness of their thinking, and to actively use the knowledge they glean are the primary goals of the comprehension instruction outlined in this book. In this way, reading shapes and even changes thinking.

When we walk into classrooms, we often begin by asking kids to describe reading for us. “What is reading?” we ask. A variety of answers bursts forth, and we record these on a chart. “Figuring out the words,” “spelling the words,” “knowing the letters” are common responses. Fourth grader DeCoven answered that “reading is thinking.” He went on to explain that “when you read, you have to figure out the words and what they mean. Sometimes it’s easy. Sometimes it’s hard.” DeCoven hit the target. He understood that reading is about more than decoding words.

Reading encompasses both decoding and the making of meaning. The first entry on the word *read* in *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (1991) defines reading as “getting the meaning of something written by using the eyes to interpret its characters.” We’re inclined to add “by using the brain” to that definition. Reading demands a two-pronged attack. It involves cracking the alphabetic code to determine the words and thinking about those words to construct meaning. Ask your students to define reading. Keep a chart posted in the room with their responses. The nature of their answers may evolve as your class begins to explore thinking when reading and as you provide explicit instruction in comprehension that helps readers better understand what they read.

Comprehension as a Means to Understanding

Teachers have never been under more pressure. Pressure to perform. Pressure to cover the curriculum. Pressure to meet standards. Pressure to ensure high scores on standardized tests. The political climate surrounding education is more demanding than ever before. Teachers are overwhelmed with state mandates, tests, and rubrics for every task. With all these expectations, one might ask why take the time to teach comprehension at all? “I already have to teach kids to decode words, spell them, learn vocabulary, and respond in writing. And now you’re asking me to teach one more thing?” is a common refrain.

The truth is, we sympathize. It has never been tougher to be a teacher. But after many years of studying and teaching reading comprehension, we are convinced that comprehension instruction is not just one more thing. In fact, when it comes to reading, it’s the most important thing. If the purpose for reading is anything other than understanding, why read at all? Researchers Linda Fielding and P. David Pearson describe the shift in our thinking about compre-

hension: “Once thought of as the natural result of decoding plus oral language, comprehension is now viewed as a much more complex process involving knowledge, experience, thinking, and teaching” (1994).

Why the shift? In 1979, Dolores Durkin jolted the reading world when she concluded, after many hours of observation in classrooms, that the questions in basal readers and on worksheets were the primary focus of comprehension instruction in classrooms. Teachers thought they were providing instruction in comprehension through the use of story questions. Durkin suggested that teachers were assessing rather than teaching students to better comprehend what they read.

Research on and ideas for teaching reading comprehension have exploded in the almost thirty years since Durkin’s study. Comprehension instruction is ubiquitous in schools across the country. We recognize that there are a myriad of ways to teach what we label as “comprehension,” and, moreover, we understand that there is no one right way to go about it. But we have found that teaching the reading/thinking strategies described in this book is an effective way to help students engage in and understand what they read.

Central to all of the recent research is the idea that comprehension strategies are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Teaching strategies for strategies’ sake is simply not the point. According to Sinatra, Brown, and Reynolds, “Comprehension strategies are no more than tools that readers employ in the service of constructing meaning from text” (Block and Pressley 2002). So our goal when we work with teachers and students in classrooms is to explicitly teach a repertoire of thinking strategies that are used to further the cause of understanding and engagement.

Constructing Meaning as the Goal of Comprehension

We believe that constructing meaning is the goal of comprehension. We want students to

- Monitor understanding
- Enhance understanding
- Acquire and actively use knowledge
- Develop insight

When we began our teaching careers, we typically checked children’s story comprehension by evaluating their answers to oral or written questions. Dolores Durkin might have completed her comprehension studies in our classrooms! Initially, comprehension for us was about literal understanding of stories and narrative text. And, of course, this remains one goal of reading comprehension instruction. But this is not the only goal. True comprehension goes beyond literal understanding and involves the reader’s interaction with text. If students are to become thoughtful, insightful readers, they must merge their thinking with the text and extend their thinking beyond a superficial understanding.

As we read the research about reading, we also noticed that strategies such as determining importance or synthesizing information helped students as they read for information, particularly in social studies and science content areas. Comprehension came to mean more than merely literal story understanding. A new definition of understanding involves acquiring knowledge as

I thought this article was astounding! 200 buffalo ambushed and killed! I almost fainted when I heard how many lbs. of meat they had, 57,000 lbs. of meat for a tribe of 100. 10,000 lbs. of organs plain organs no fat included! How could have Indians thought of the ambush plan? How long did it take to eat? I imagine how much food, tools, robes ect. they'd have. Why is this the only tribe that thought of this ingenuity? I thought this was one of the most fascinating article I've ever read! I hope to learn more about the history of Colorado!

Jonathan

Figure 1.1 Jonathan's Response to "The Great Buffalo Hunt"

When I read about The Great Buffalo Hunt I tended to get a lot of pictures in my head. I feel I know what it would be like as an Indian. I painted myself in my head and made myself an Indian. It fascinated me.

Also when I was reading I found some interesting facts. Here are some of them. There was a great buffalo hunt, 57,000 pounds of meat was left! 10,000 pounds of fat and organs were left afterwards. The herd had 200 bison. This subject is a very interesting to me.

Amanda

Figure 1.2 Amanda's Response to "The Great Buffalo Hunt"

well. Isabel Beck and others define a constructivist view of understanding as "being able to explain information, connect it to previous knowledge, and use information" (1997).

Comprehension means that readers think not only about what they are reading but about what they are learning. When readers construct meaning, they are building their store of knowledge. But along with knowledge must come understanding. Professor Howard Gardner, known for his theories on multiple intelligences, states simply, "The purpose of education is to enhance understanding" (1991).

By enhancing understanding, we mean that readers go beyond the literal meaning of a story or text. A reader who understands may glean the message in a folk tale, form a new opinion from an editorial, develop a deeper understanding of issues when reading a feature article. Acquiring information allows us to gain knowledge about the world and ourselves in relation to it. We build up our store of knowledge not so much for its own sake but in order to develop insight. With insight, we think more deeply and critically. We question, interpret, and evaluate what we read. In this way, reading can change thinking (Harvey 1998).

Content or Process: Why Not Both?

In light of our view of reading, we believe that the national content/process debate, still raging at present, is a smokescreen. Why argue that teaching content (what students learn) is more important than teaching process (how students learn), or vice versa? You can't think about nothing. We believe that we must teach our students to think when they read so they *can* access information and learn, understand, and remember what they read.

When we use the term *constructing meaning*, we refer to building knowledge and promoting understanding. We all remember times when we've had to work hard to gain meaning or when a startling piece of information or outrageous opinion has jolted our thinking. Meaning doesn't arrive fully dressed on a platter. Readers make meaning. But they can't do it alone. Our students need to be transformed by great

literature (Harwayne 1992) as well as be given opportunities to explore their passions, interests, and questions to bring the world into focus (Harvey 1998).

In Mary Buerger's fourth-grade classroom, student responses to a Colorado history lesson illustrate how acquiring knowledge and enhancing understanding go hand in hand. While reading a nonfiction trade book called