

ENGAGING THE ADOLESCENT LEARNER

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What Happens
After the
Reading?

The adoption of the Common Core Standards by the majority of U.S. states has provoked much discussion about what occurs before and during the reading of texts.

In large part, discussion has centered on the practice of building background through pre-teaching. Many interpret this as a firm directive to virtually eliminate the kind of questions that may warm readers to the text, especially in asking them too soon about personal experiences (Wilson & Newkirk, 2011). As well, there are cautions about frontloading vocabulary instruction, and even on the knowledge of teachers on how to lead a class to deeply analyze the text (Gerwitz, 2012). Although we do not subscribe to a prescriptive formula for teaching, we do believe there is merit in approaching pre-reading activities cautiously, especially in determining whether readers can do some of the cognitive heavy lifting that teachers have customarily done for them.

A popular and enduring three-part model for thinking about reading instruction has dominated secondary instructional practice for decades. The before/during/after reading mindset

of text-based lesson planning has led to the development of some excellent instructional routines. Before-reading activities such as anticipation guides and think-pair-share discussions cause students to consider relevant background knowledge. During-reading routines such as Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA; Stauffer & Harrell, 1975) and reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) require students to pause throughout to review what they have derived from the text thus far, and what they will read about next. After-reading activities often involve writing, such as exit slips, or response writing.

However, the after-reading portion of the lesson has historically received comparatively little attention. Even now little ink, virtual or otherwise, has been devoted to after-reading practices in the debate about implementation of the core standards. There seems to be an assumption that *after-reading* is interchangeable with *independent work*.

Yet teachers are often confronted with the reality of having students who are not immediately ready to move to independent work. In fact, we think that doing so jeopardizes the chances for students to further consolidate their understanding of the text. Writing, of course, is important. But we should broaden after-reading practices to include time for critical discussion, productive group work with peers, and writing for purposes of research and presentation. But first, we need to consider the task demand itself.

The Task Demand: How Rigorous?

In order for an after-reading activity to deepen understanding of the text, it should cause students to return to it. When students are confronted with a task that takes them far away from the text too soon, the likelihood that they will ever return to the text is diminished. We have discussed in previous columns that re-reading the text is critical for deep comprehension. Although many of these events occur during the reading portion of the lesson, the tasks themselves should continue to prompt students to return to the text.

It is important for students to see that understanding doesn't end when one is "done" with a piece of text. Rather, a worthy piece continues to resonate as other people, ideas, texts, and tasks are encountered. Indeed, it is this enduring quality that makes certain texts worthy in the first place. An after-reading activity that asks for students to select a playlist that might appear on



a character's iPod, or asks the students what they would have done if they had been present at an historical event, is probably going to take them away from the reading too soon. These may be suitable for culminating activities or as part of an end-of-unit assignment but not immediately after the reading.

An appropriately rigorous after-reading task is one that has a level of complexity that offers learners a challenging but not overwhelmingly difficult undertaking. Campbell (1988) defines task complexity across four dimensions:

- ◆ **Decision tasks**—selecting the best alternative from many possibilities
- ◆ **Judgment tasks**—making a prediction about a future event
- ◆ **Problem tasks**—choosing the best path to achieve a desired outcome
- ◆ **Fuzzy tasks**—the most difficult kind, because there are multiple judgments, paths, and outcomes to select from

Although Campbell's work was written with the business world in mind, it has implications for the classroom.

Decision tasks require students to make a selection, and therefore draw students back into the reading. For example, Daniel Carlson's sixth-grade social studies students completed such a task when they selected examples and non-examples of present-day laws in an informational article on the Code of Hammurabi. Similarly, ninth-grade English teacher Mick Quinn's students had finished Chapter 2 of *Call of the Wild* (London, J., 1903). He asked his students to select examples of the protagonist farm dog Buck's psychological and physical shock enduring a new life as a sled dog in Alaska. In each case, students return to the text to locate evidence from the text.



Judgment tasks require students to consider what they have read so far in order to predict what will occur next. Unlike reciprocal teaching and DR-TA, which occur during the reading, this task type further extends their predictions to a later chapter or another piece of text. For instance, 11th grade environmental science students in Kenya Montrose's class read an excerpt from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which is often credited with launching the environmental movement. Students made predictions about two reviews published at the time of publication, one critical and the other in praise of the book. Ms. Montrose used these predictions as the basis for comparing the two reviews.

Problem tasks require students to resolve conflicting information in order to determine a decision path that will lead them to a single desired outcome. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the mathematics classroom. Extended word problems often feature information that is not relevant, and at times may even suggest an incorrect line of reasoning. However, the end product is well defined, as there is usually a single correct answer. Eighth grade pre-algebra teacher Joseph Cisse challenges his students to solve complex

mathematics problems by presenting productive group work teams with several pieces of text to create a scenario. In one such case, he provided teams with a monthly household electricity statement, a list of the family's major appliances and their energy ratings, and the electric company's new time-of-day pricing plan that discounts usage during off-peak hours. Each team worked together to propose a plan for the family that would result in the greatest overall savings. Importantly, this problem task required students to read closely and for detail, and caused them to consult the texts repeatedly.

Although decision, judgment, and problem tasks are ideal for after-reading activities, fuzzy tasks are usually not.

Fuzzy tasks are intentionally ill-defined and possess all of the features mentioned previously: multiple decisions, multiple paths, and multiple outcomes. Problem-based learning is built on the assumption of resolving fuzzy tasks. As such, they are better suited for end-of-unit or culminating projects.

For example, Kenya Montrose divided her environmental science class into teams and gave each team a \$5,000 budget to create a plan for raising awareness of sustainable resources in

Text-Dependent Questions

- ◆ General understanding questions examine the overall view of the text, whether it be the story arc (narrative), sequence of information (expository), or main claim and evidence (persuasive).
- ◆ Key detail questions invite students to determine the importance of ideas, find supporting details, or answer who, what, when, where, why, how many, or how much queries.
- ◆ Vocabulary and text structure questions bridge literal and inferential meanings by examining word choice, connotations, and organizational structures.
- ◆ Author's purpose questions include those about the genre, point of view, and critical literacy topics.
- ◆ Inference questions probe each argument in persuasive text, each idea in informational text, or each key detail in literary text, in order to observe how these build to a whole.
- ◆ Opinion, argument, and intertextual connections examine claims and counterclaims, evidence, rhetoric, and links to other texts.

More information about text-dependent questions can be found in the [April 2012 IRA Members Only column](#).

their community. The students had studied xeriscaping, soft path water conservation, solar and wind energy generation, and green technologies. One team wrote a plan for producing a public service announcement on the importance of replacing invasive exotic species with native plants, and made a prototype film. Another team developed an audio message on driving habits that increase gas mileage, and would automatically play at fuel pumps while customers filled up.

Projects such as the one Ms. Montrose assigned are sure to engage students. However, they are the product of numerous after-reading activities that foster deep comprehension of texts. When students have accumulated a deep understanding of multiple texts on a topic, they can fruitfully engage in projects such as this. But without attention to after-reading experiences, students are likely to skate on the surface, without fully understanding the complexities of the topics you're teaching.

After-Reading Critical Discussions

The discussions that follow readings are most effective when they ask students to use textual evidence to support their statements. This is foundational to formal argumentation, as students apply rhetorical structures to written text. However, argumentation begins with its use in discussion. These start with asking students simple probes that follow your initial questions:

- ◆ Where did you find that?
- ◆ What does the author say that caused you to think that way?
- ◆ Are there other places in the text that lend support to your statement?
- ◆ Can you find an example?

These follow-up probes serve as a series of decision tasks, and when used consistently, remind students to look closely at the text to find evidence. By asking text-dependent questions and follow-up probes, students are more fully immersed in "what lies within the four corners of the text" (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4). These queries are designed to encourage students to re-examine a text or passage they have read in order to extract essential information.

However, a narrow view of text-dependent questions can lead to an equally narrow view of what the text offers, and what the reader expects of the experience. Text-dependent questions that only require low levels of comprehension will result in superficial comprehenders. Text-dependent questions that fall short of critical thinking will not build critical thinkers. These questions should build a strong foundation of understanding of the text itself so that it can be used as a springboard to other texts, concepts, and topics. In this way, critical thinking becomes a habit of mind.

Meaningful questions gird classroom discussions but are limited in their effectiveness if only a handful of students participate. A shortcoming of whole-group discussion is that it seems like the same six students answer the majority of the questions. In order to overcome this, we interleave small-group discussions within the whole-class construct. After posing a text-dependent question, we direct students to locate information and discuss possible answers at their tables before bringing the discussion back to the whole class. As students work in their groups, we listen in on the conversations. Although not every student responds to the large group, the number of students willing to participate increases. As well, we know that the majority of them have participated in discussion at the small group level.

Socratic seminars. Some texts demand longer discussions: "an ambiguous

and appealing short story, a pair of contrasting primary documents in social studies, or an article on a controversial approach to an ongoing scientific problem” (Filkins, 2012, ¶ 4). Socratic seminars can be a type of judgment task, especially when students are asked to speculate and make predictions. Students sit in a circle so they can face one another, text in hand. The teacher serves as the facilitator of the discussion, posing open-ended questions to the group. If the conversation begins to veer off-track, the teacher can restate the open-ended question. This can be a challenge for students, who are conditioned to direct their comments to the teacher, not to one another. As the facilitator, the teacher should resist the urge to interject more than is necessary, or to offer evaluative statements. The Paideia Society advises that closing questions focus on the students’ personal experiences and insights, so that they can make connections to their own lives.

Writing for Research and Presentations

As students amass a body of knowledge about a topic, they can begin to lose track of points made in earlier readings. This can pose a problem when developing the necessary materials needed for the fuzzy tasks that comprise many culminating assignments. Teaching students how to compose précis writing develops their ability to understand the text more deeply, and to learn essential content.

Précis writing. This form of written summarization of a text or passage requires students to distill the main points, “but also selecting, rejecting, and paraphrasing ideas” (Bromley, 1985, p. 407). The overall length should be about one-sixth of the original, so that students do not sacrifice details for the sake of brevity. The text type should dictate the specific requirements. A



Précis Writing

A written summary of a piece of text

- ◆ Approximately 1/6th of the original in length
- ◆ Contains the author’s name, the title, and the source of the reading.
- ◆ Paraphrase of key ideas
- ◆ Maintains the tone of the text
- ◆ Contains only information derived from the text
- ◆ No outside information or critical analysis

précis for a narrative piece should include the plot summary, rising and falling action, and other elements of literary analysis. However, a persuasive piece should include the author’s arguments and supporting evidence. What is essential in précis writing is that it does not contain the student’s opinions or questions, and should not include any information not discussed in the text itself. These written summaries provide the teacher with formative assessment information about how well each student understood the text and whether additional teaching is required. For students, these précis writings cumulatively provide them with

the information they need to assemble information they will need for research projects and presentations.

During a unit of study on short stories, Todd Cantor had his seventh-grade English students develop précis writings each time they read and discussed one. Short stories in this unit included O. Henry’s “Gift of the Magi,” Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” and Liam O’Flaherty’s “The Sniper.” In addition, students read several informational pieces on the history of short stories and the enduring popularity of short stories with surprise endings. Using the accumulated

Debate Schedule

Round 1: Initial Presentations

- ◆ Five-minute position presentation in favor of the proposal
- ◆ Five-minute position presentation in opposition to the proposal
- ◆ Five-minute work period for both teams to prepare rebuttals

Round 2: Rebuttals

- ◆ Three-minute rebuttal from the pro team
- ◆ Three-minute rebuttal from the con team
- ◆ Three-minute work period for both teams to prepare responses

Round 3: Response to Rebuttals

- ◆ Two-minute response to rebuttal from pro team
- ◆ Two-minute response to rebuttal from con team
- ◆ Two-minute work period for both teams to prepare for summary statements

Round 4: Summary of Position

- ◆ One-minute summary of position in favor of the proposition
- ◆ One-minute summary of position opposing the proposition

précis writings on the narrative and informational pieces, students created multimedia presentations profiling a contemporary short story of their choice and comparing it to one they had read as a class.

Debates. Although there are a number of competitive debate structures used by formal debate teams, a classroom debate relies more on developing sound arguments and persuasive techniques. Debates are effective after students have closely read and discussed opposing pieces of text, often on a controversial issue. A debate is a problem task, requiring students to synthesize and analyze arguments

across texts. Teams of four students are organized in either support or opposition to a proposition.

For instance, students in Hilda Alvarado's tenth-grade world history class debated several propositions related to their study of World War II. One team's assigned proposition stated that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were justified because it ended the war with Japan. Each team revisited readings from the textbook, primary source documents, and historical accounts to develop an initial presentation. Importantly, their preparation also included anticipating what the other team might argue. On the day of the debate, the teams followed

a set debate schedule, while audience members and the teacher judged the soundness of the arguments.

When the teams concluded, Ms. Alvarado reminded her students that they should vote on the validity of the arguments, not on one's personal support or rejection of the proposal. The feedback from their peers and Ms. Alvarado prepared students for their formal research papers on the topic, especially in considering opposing views and addressing them through evidence.

Conclusion

It is important to recognize that learning doesn't end with the turning of the last page. After-reading experiences help students consolidate the meaning of texts, and deepen their comprehension far beyond what they would be able to accomplish on their own. However, after-reading activities often rely on independent work, with little interaction. One consideration involves the complexity of the task. Tasks that require students to make decisions, arrive at judgments, and resolve problems are well-suited for after-reading experiences, and fuzzy tasks should be reserved for end-of-unit culminating activities. Critical discussions using text-based questions jumpstart student thinking by asking them to form a solid foundation of knowledge before moving beyond the text. In addition, Socratic seminars are ideally suited for ambiguous texts or for comparing multiple texts. As students become more familiar with the complex concepts you are teaching, they utilize précis writing to thoroughly summarize texts. Debates raise their critical thinking skills even further, as they consider information from multiple, often conflicting pieces of texts. By giving after-reading experiences the same careful attention and planning as we do to those that come before, we can ensure that they move from superficial understandings to transcendent ones.



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Palincsar, A.S., & Brown, A.L. (1984). Reciprocal teaching of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities. *Cognition and Instruction*, 1(2), 117–175.

Stauffer, R.G., & Harrell, M.M. (1975). Individualized reading-thinking activities. *The Reading Teacher*, 28(8), 765–769.

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Additional Resources From IRA

Filkins, S. (2011.) *Facilitating student-led seminar discussions with The Piano Lesson*. Retrieved June 24, 2012, from www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/facilitating-student-seminar-discussions-30584.html

In advocating for an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning about literature, Mark Ensrud suggests that mundane questions about due dates and classroom procedures are "hardly the kinds of questions we teachers hope for" (p. 79). To develop students' ability to ask questions that facilitate student-led seminar discussions, Ensrud shares this framework with students: "Opening questions begin a discussion and invite a reexamination of the text. Closed-ended questions seek particular information, while open-ended questions invite authentic inquiry. And core questions attempt to get at the meaning of a text" (p. 80). The ability to conceive of questions of these four types forms the basis for an introduction to inquiry-based student-led seminars about literature.

Filkins, S. (2012). *Socratic seminars. Differentiating Instruction Strategy Guides*. Retrieved June 24, 2102, from www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/socratic-seminars-30600.html

This strategy guide explains Socratic seminars and offers practical methods for applying the approach in your classroom to help students investigate multiple perspectives in a text. Socratic seminars are named for their embodiment of Socrates' belief in the power of asking questions, prize inquiry over information and discussion over debate. Socratic seminars acknowledge the highly social nature of learning and align with the work of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Paulo Friere.

Boyles, N.N. (2010). Teaching struggling readers to respond in writing to open-ended questions: Making the writing and reading strategic. In J.L. Collins & T.R. Gunning (Eds.), *Building struggling students' higher level literacy: Practical ideas, powerful solutions* (pp. 125–161). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

This chapter describes research-based practices for helping struggling readers respond in writing to open-ended comprehension questions. The chapter begins by explaining how to make the *writing* strategic using a sequence of scaffolds for gradually leading students to independence as they respond to a comprehension question. The chapter concludes with a similar series of scaffolds for making the *reading* strategic in order for students to retrieve appropriate evidence to support their response. The chapter includes classroom-ready rubrics, samples of the answer organizers and frames, and charts that illustrate the gradual release of responsibility as it applies to written response.

Nussbaum, E.M. (2002). The process of becoming a participant in small-group critical discussion: A case study. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 45(6), 488–497.

A case study examined language-minority and other students' participation in small-group critical discussions. Participants were two language-minority and two language-majority students in sixth grade in an inner-city school. Results revealed that the language-majority students dominated early small-group discussions by arguing extensively with one another but that the amount of talk by these two students decreased over time and that the amount of talk by the language-minority students tended to increase. Results suggested that the class teachers may have facilitated the inclusion and participation of the language-minority students by fostering critical questions, by using ill-defined and complex tasks that encouraged students to talk and interact with their peers, and by teaching sequential discourse norms that allowed only one student to talk at a time.

