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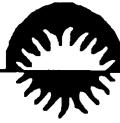


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EMPOWER: A Framework for Teaching and Learning with Text in High School and College Classrooms

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Students are frequently expected to deal with information that does not fit into their current schemata or cognitive structures. For example, students are often frustrated when asked to make sense out of challenging expository text. Such a high level demand often results in dissonance that may deter many learners. This may be due to a lack of knowing how to impose order on information found in text and often results in a lack of comprehension and understanding. Many instructors at all levels currently resort to round robin reading, lecturing, and reading texts aloud in their classes because of their frustration with the inability of students to read the texts.

EMPOWER is a framework for teaching that allows the instructor to become a facilitator of learning rather than the source of knowledge. This framework for teaching is also a structure for learning that encourages social construction of knowledge and independence. EMPOWER combines several

strategies to scaffold students through a metacognitive organizing process. This process enables them to reduce emotional and cognitive dissonance while making connections between textual information and their own cognitive structures. Thus, when employed reflectively by the instructor and students, EMPOWER provides a powerful framework for students to learn how to structure their own learning.

The process

EMPOWER provides instructional keys to the steps we, as experts, use to reduce frustration while constructing meaning and gaining knowledge. EMPOWER involves seven stages: Elicit, Monitor, Pose, Organize, Web, Engage, and Reflect. These stages help instructors take their students through a prereading strategy, a during reading strategy, and a post reading strategy that include heavy doses of metacognitive reflection. The seven stages are designed to help instructors move away from the "assign and test" mode of teaching and empower students to become effective and efficient constructors of meaning when interacting with complex expository text.

Stage one: elicit

Learners elicit prior knowledge by participating in a pre-reading strategy. This strategy builds a bridge between students' cognitive structures and the material to be covered in the text. For example, in a college literacy methods class the instructor used List, Inquire, Note, and Know or LINK as a pre-reading strategy (Vaughan and Estes, 1986). When preparing students to read *Reading Without Nonsense* (Smith, 1985), he began by asking students to list in three minutes all the words they associated with the cue "reading comprehension." When using LINK the cue word should be a concrete object or a term that serves as a central concept to the topic at

hand, will trigger responses in all students, and is written on a chalkboard or transparency.

Once each student had completed his/her list, the instructor gave each student the opportunity to share while recording the associations on a chalkboard. Students listed terms such as "testing," "understanding," and "meaning." Once the list was completed, the students were encouraged to inquire about the words. The instructor modeled a question that inquired into the reason why a word was listed. After the student explained, the instructor shifted to the role of moderator. Students then asked one another about the associations that had been made and asked for clarification/reasoning. This step in the procedure serves to heighten prior knowledge, allowing students to self-correct, and raises questions about the material to be read.

Upon completion of the discussion, students were asked to turn over their paper and note in one minute all the words they now knew in relation to the initial cue word. The quality of associations improved while the quantity of associations increased because students were able to draw upon a combination of prior knowledge and class discussion. Thus the eliciting stage, in this case the LINK strategy, magnified what students knew about a topic because they had established multiple links to their prior knowledge.

Stage two: monitor

The purpose of stage two is to get students to actively monitor their comprehension. A combination of Interactive Notation System for Effective Reading and Thinking (INSERT by Vaughan and Estes, 1986) and concept squares (Vaughan, 1990) is used to heighten comprehension monitoring during independent reading. INSERT serves as a formal method of assisting readers to interact with the text in a

meaningful, productive manner. The instructor asks students to monitor their comprehension by placing the following marks in the margins of the text while they are reading:

- I knew that
- * I didn't know that
- ? I just don't understand
- ! That's worth remembering

To combine concept squares with INSERT, the instructor gives students a sheet of paper that is divided into four squares. Each square is titled with one of the above headings. When students have finished reading a chapter, they review their marks and list at least three items in each box. This monitoring/categorizing process allows students to move forward when they don't understand something while critically evaluating the importance of the information gained from the text.

In the literacy class the instructor began stage 2 by asking what questions participating in the LINK strategy had brought to students' minds. The students generated questions about reading comprehension, shared them with the class, and thereby set their own purposes for reading. The instructor then modeled how to monitor comprehension using INSERT and concept squares by placing a paragraph from the text on a transparency and thinking aloud through the comprehension monitoring process before assigning the chapters to be read for homework.

Stage three: pose

The purpose of stage three is to get students to pose their questions. To begin the next class session, the instructor asks students to share their concept squares in small groups. When the text is conceptually dense and challenging, students

may have minimal information for the "I knew that" square and have lots of questions about the "I didn't know that" and "I just don't understand" squares. When this happens, students often feel overwhelmed and may believe that they "can't get anything out of" their reading assignment. This occurs because they are unable to see connections to their prior knowledge or they feel that they do not have the ability to make sense of the text. This "tunnel vision" and feeling of inadequacy may limit their opportunities to make meaning from the text.

To dissipate the tunnel vision and develop a risk-free environment for asking questions, students share their questions in small groups. This small group sharing gets some of the easy questions answered while it permits individuals to recognize that they are not alone in their confusion or frustration. Each group prepares a list of questions, that they cannot answer, to share with the entire class. The instructor then scribes as each group takes turns sharing their questions until all questions have been exhausted, listed, and the dissonance is out in the open.

Stage four: organize

The purpose of this stage is to get students to organize or sort their questions (adapted from Vacca and Vacca, 1993). The instructor, or topic expert, serves as a facilitator to assist the students in categorizing what they don't understand. Questions that help students create powerful categories and get at conceptual substance should be asked. As students identify relationships among questions, the instructor color codes the categories. For example, in the literacy methods class the instructor asked, "Which questions are similar? How? Why?" As students volunteered a connection between two questions and explained their reasoning, the instructor circled the questions in red and restated the connection with more

specific conceptual terminology. The process continued with students creating new categories and adding to the original category until all questions were categorized. Then the instructor asked, "How would you label the categories of questions you have identified? Why?" Students were then able to identify topics for each category of questions and give reasons for their categorization. This process facilitated the organization of dissonance, dissipated student frustration, and prepared students to focus on what was learned and what was important.

Stage five: web

The purpose of this stage is to have students create a web of information. The students return to small discussion groups and each group develops a combined list of all that they knew, found out, and thought was worth remembering about the textual material. The instructor then gives each group the opportunity to take turns and share their list with the whole group one item at a time. The instructor records the information on the chalkboard or overhead transparency until all groups have shared all non repetitive information. Students are then encouraged to clarify items on the list of information developed by the whole class and explain why they are important. First the instructor models a question that inquires into the reason why concepts/ideas were listed and the group members explain their reasoning. Then the instructor shifts to the role of moderator and students ask one another why the information shared was perceived as important. This step encourages students to clarify their reasoning, allows students to self-correct, and solidifies important concepts from the reading.

After all student questions have been exhausted and concepts have been rationalized the instructor serves as a facilitator once again to assist the students in categorizing their

information into a web or semantic map. For example, in the literacy methods class the instructor asked, "Which bits of information appear to go together?" The students were able to create distinct categories of information that were color-coded by the instructor. Then the instructor asked the class to discuss why they were categorizing things the way that they were. This step enabled students to further organize and clarify their thinking so that they could explain overarching concepts and logically web the information. While a fair amount of dissonance still persisted, students began to see links between their categories of questions and the web of information.

Stage six: engage

Now the students are ready to engage or hook up the categories of questions with the web of information. The instructor once more acts as a facilitator by asking which parts of the web of information and which concepts connect to the categories of questions that were previously asked. At this point most students readily see multiple connections that the overwhelming dissonance and tunnel vision prevented them from seeing during Stages 2 and 3 and lively discussion of these connections ensues. If the discussion bogs down before all logical connections are made, the instructor can direct formation of cognitive links by noting a particular concept and a specific question and asking how they might be connected. However, during this stage the instructor shifts mainly to the role of valuing the knowledge students constructed from the text and congratulating them on answering their own questions. This stage helps to build self-efficacy while emphasizing that the meaning construction process resides within the student.

Stage seven: reflect

In a final stage, students are asked to reflect on: 1) how they felt; 2) why they had problems understanding the material in the beginning; 3) the process they used to construct meaning from text; 4) strategies they learned to EMPOWER themselves as learners, and 5) what they understood as a result. Once again, the instructor asks questions to help students recognize each of the stages and the various processes employed to remove blocks to comprehension during each stage. Discussion on how EMPOWER helped them to structure their own learning typically emerges. This reflection stage helps students to recognize the combination of strategies employed to monitor and regulate their feelings and understanding. The final stage also provides insight into how students can structure their independent learning more effectively and efficiently.

Conclusions

Although the total amount of dissonance is increased initially, students are able to share the questions they had over the material to reduce the negative feelings that may block cognitive connections. The problem of being overwhelmed is mediated by the instructor who serves as a facilitator to structure this dissonance. The structuring or categorizing process reduces the incongruities and permits students to move to a metacognitive level. This movement later empowers students to construct connections between their questions and the information in the text.

By sharing and discussing the cumulative knowledge that had been comprehended, students notice that comments from other groups answer some of their questions. Thus information from others' perspectives allows them to fill gaps in their own cognitive structure. While the discord is magnified by sharing the questions, so too is the collective

knowledge. The metacognitive categorizing helps them to structure what they know so that they are able to form links between the categories within their cognitive structure and the categories of dissonance. In so doing, they are able to answer the questions raised, reduce the dissonance, and structure their own learning. Thus, students see how to use metacognitive categorizing to facilitate their own learning so that their questions and textual information become a web of knowledge.

Admittedly, this is a somewhat lengthy process, but so is constructing meaning from demanding expository text. A key benefit of this framework is that it scaffolds instructors and learners through all the stages necessary for successful personal and social construction of meaning from challenging expository text. This is important because many content reading strategies focus only on the beginning, middle, or end of the meaning construction process involved in reading expository text. EMPOWER combines an entire meaning making cycle in seven easy-to-understand steps: **Elicit, Monitor, Pose, Organize, Web, Engage and Reflect.**

The pace of introducing the steps and stages is left to the discretion of the instructor because the understanding of how to use this framework will depend on the sophistication of the learners. For example, a seventh grade teacher might introduce and develop the use of this entire framework over the course of three weeks. A college instructor might choose to push through the entire framework in two class periods but continue to facilitate discussion in future classes using only steps three through seven. Regardless of the introductory and reflective pace the instructor chooses, this framework provides a complete cycle of the strategies necessary to help learners effectively structure their thinking and empower themselves as independent learners.

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