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# READING COMPREHENSION IS CRUCIAL BUT NOT CRITICAL

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Reading and English teachers are often aware that many adults who dislike reading in general and literature in specific learned their dislike through being required to memorize and parrot the teacher's interpretation and evaluation of pieces of writing. Countless articles and books have reported this phenomenon and called on teachers to foster democratic principles by encouraging individual responses and divergent thinking in their classes. These same teachers, however, see many of their students unwilling or unable to offer *any* response to what they have read. The resulting dilemma requires that teachers either make negative value judgments about the thinking of their students and risk turning them off to reading, or make no attempt to stifle their students' individuality and risk allowing them to get nothing from their reading. Most teachers are unable to allow the latter and insist that students obtain something even if it is the teacher's ideas. The misunderstanding which unites reading comprehension and critical reading leaves the teacher little choice but either to ignore inaccurate and insufficient comprehension to prevent suppressing critical reading or to suppress critical reading to improve reading comprehension.

## *A Philosophical Task Analysis*

Philosophers have subdivided all knowledge and pursuits of knowledge under several headings. Reading comprehension belongs in the division called *epistemology* which is the study of how any and all knowledge is acquired. One comprehends to the extent that he or she comes to know the meaning(s) of what is read. Critical reading, on the other hand, belongs in the division called *axiology* which deals with the question and assessment of value and with sets of values. One reads critically to the extent that he or she comes to assess the value (ethical and aesthetic) of what is read. By subsuming critical reading under comprehension, its true nature, is misunderstood. Comprehension is gaining meaning(s) from the page, while critical reading is evaluating the meaning gained and its implications. Critical reading assumes comprehension as comprehension assumes decoding and all three occur almost simultaneously.

## *A Strategy*

Because the misunderstanding has caused the dilemma, the dilemma may be resolved by correcting the misunderstanding. If reading comprehension and critical reading are divorced and seen as two distinct but related processes, the teacher can then remediate and extend the students'

comprehension *and* urge them to arrive at their own divergent interpretations and evaluations.

A lesson which is designed to improve students' abilities to respond critically to a piece of literature or journalism or even to part of a content-area textbook should have two phases. The first phase should result in the students having the fullest understanding possible of the meaning(s) of the text, including both literal and inferential comprehension. Knowledge of word meanings, knowledge of the relationships between concepts as cued by grammatical information, and the use of reason to follow the logical progression of ideas of the discourse are all required for comprehension to occur. Whether using the Directed Reading Activity (Betts, 1946; Pietras, 1976), the Guided Reading Procedure (Manzo, 1975), the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (Stauffer, 1969) or some other comprehension-oriented lesson plan, the teacher should be sure that the students fully understand what they have read. Final decisions about what is said in a piece of writing should be based on the text itself and the rigorous exercise of logic on the part of teacher and students. Here the teacher has the responsibility to make value judgments about the quality of the students' comprehension of the selection. Here the teacher has the duty to lead students to an understanding of the material. Ideally this process would be an inductive one for the students, but, in the case of a difficult piece, students may very well have to be given an explanation of the meaning and then be asked to accept or reject it based on the text and their knowledge and logic.

The second phase of the lesson would be the traditional critical-reading or response-to-literature lesson plan. This phase should be more successful, because steps have been taken to build a solid understanding of the piece to which students will now react and respond in a critical fashion. Moreover, the teacher can be tolerant of a full range of opinion as to the value and implications of the piece, confident that the students know it from a comprehension standpoint.

#### *Sample Lesson Plan*

Using a short story or other selection which can be read by the students in 20 minutes or less, teach the selection to the students the first day using Stauffer's (1969) Directed Reading-Thinking Activity:

1. Students are asked to read the title of the selection silently and to examine pictures and illustrations (if any).
2. Students are then asked to volunteer guesses or predictions as to what the selection will say or be about. (Books should be closed during predictions—use bookmarks.)
3. The teacher records each prediction on a chart or on the chalkboard (putting the name of the student who made the prediction in parentheses after the prediction, if desired).
4. When there are no more predictions being made, the teacher asks the students to read from the beginning of the selection to some stopping point which the teacher chooses. When a student reaches the stopping

point, he or she is expected to close the selection or book with the book-mark and look up at the teacher until everyone finishes.

5. When everyone reaches the stopping point the group examines each prediction in light of what has been read. Taking the predictions one at a time, the students are asked to say whether or not each was a good prediction.
6. When a student expresses the opinion that a prediction was or was not a good one, he or she must read a part of the text which everyone has just read which supports or refutes the prediction. The text itself is the only source of verification or refutation of predictions. Some predictions will be verified and marked as such by the teacher; some predictions will be refuted and erased by the teacher; still other predictions will remain possible but unproved and will be marked with a question mark by the teacher.
7. Based on what they have already read, students are then asked to volunteer new predictions about what the rest of the selection will say or be about.
8. Beginning with Step 3 (above), continue the reading/verification/refutation process. For some selections you may choose to have only one stopping point for evaluating old predictions and making new ones. For other selections you may choose to have several stopping points throughout the selection.

If the selection can be read by the students in 20 minutes or less, the full lesson should be completed in less than 45 minutes. The students can then be asked to reread the selection as review before the next class.

In this next class, a critical reading lesson of the type described in *Cunningham, Arthur & Cunningham (1977)* will be taught:

1. The teacher begins a class discussion by asking the students if they liked the selection they read the day before. It is assumed that some will have liked it and some will not. After some argument between the holders of these two positions, the teacher should ask how one can know whether a selection is good. (In the rare instance where the students unanimously like or dislike the selection, the teacher should describe a hypothetical attitude toward the selection which is at odds with that of the students and ask them how they could prove their attitude is correct and that the other is not.)
2. To continue the discussion, the teacher asks several questions: "Is the quality of a book just a matter of opinion?" "Is everyone's opinion as good as everyone else's?" "Is it enough to say you like or don't like a book?"
3. Each student in the class is asked to choose two selections other than the one being discussed which the student has recently read. One of these should be a selection that the student liked very much and one of these should be a selection which the student disliked very much.
4. Each student is asked to give the name or source of the two selections and to give the major differences in them which the student feels make

one likeable and the other not. The teacher records the characteristics or standards the student claims to have used in developing a like or dislike for one selection relative to the other. (The teacher should not question or criticize a standard or allow the other students to do so.)

5. When all the standards which students have suggested have been recorded on a chart, the chalkboard, or on an overhead projector, the task is for the students to rank the standards in their order of importance. To do this, each of the standards is applied by the class to the selection taught the day before using the DR-TA. If, for example, a standard is *quality of illustrations*, each student is asked to rate the quality of the illustrations. It is expected that there will be students whose ratings of the quality of illustrations for the selection will differ from their overall opinion of the selection. How many students have conflicting judgments and how certain they are of their opinions of the selection will determine how well the standard of *quality of illustrations* will eventually fare in the rankings.
6. After each standard has been applied by each student to the selection being studied, the students will be asked individually to rank all the standards as to their relative importance in determining the value of a piece of writing of that type.
7. The students can be asked to reconsider selections of that same mode of discourse which have been studied previously in light of their rankings of the standards. It does not matter what standards a student uses as much as that students become *aware* of the standards they are using to evaluate pieces of writing.

Of course, a large number of other possible lesson plans could be developed by combining an appropriate comprehension technique with an appropriate critical-reading or response-to-literature technique. With this approach, a teacher can require rigorous, convergent thinking about the meaning of the text while allowing imaginative, divergent thinking about the value of the text. Many good teachers have already been able to juggle these two types of reading in the same lesson. Unfortunately, the linking of critical reading with reading comprehension in courses, books, and articles has caused other teachers to select between them rather than teaching them both. Critical reading and reading comprehension should be divorced then reunited in a two-part lesson plan to insure that students learn both to understand and to evaluate pieces of writing.

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