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Concept Question Chain: A Framework for Thinking and Learning About Text

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Teaching students to think and teaching students to develop concepts from text are important parts of reading instruction (Brozo and Simpson, 1991; Herber, 1978; McNeil, 1987). Teachers can guide students' conceptual learning by designing questions that focus on a specific concept and use these questions to stimulate postreading discussion. Research indicates the positive influence questioning has on students' comprehension and retention of prose (Anderson and Biddle, 1975).

Since questioning can enhance comprehension, it is useful to create a framework for developing a coherent set of questions focusing on a specific concept. The Concept Question Chain provides such a framework for thinking and learning about text. It is a set of questions, used for discussing narrative or expository text, that enables students to develop, learn, and apply a text-based concept (Barr and Johnson, 1991). It is based on Gagné's (1970) premise that details are linked together to form concepts and concepts are then linked together to form generalizations, and on theory espoused by Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1971) that learning is enhanced when adults gradually direct and build a framework or "scaffold" for students. Through the use of the Concept Question Chain, the teacher provides a
scaffold for developing concepts from text. When the strategy is used with different texts over an extended period of time, students learn to recognize the relationships among questions and can be encouraged to model similar questions as they read and think about text.

The Concept Question Chain consists of three levels of questions: literal, interpretive, and applied. The literal level might also be called *reading the line*; it is concerned with facts and ideas either explicitly stated or paraphrased. The interpretive level might be called *reading between the lines*; the reader makes inferences or perceives relationships about the author's ideas. The applied level is known as *reading beyond the lines*; the reader is expected to apply, create, or evaluate text-based information. All questions in the Concept Question Chain are designed to help students discover the text-based concept and apply it to another situation. Each question serves as another piece of the puzzle, so when questioning is concluded students understand and can apply the concept.

**An overview for developing and implementing a Concept Question Chain**

To develop a Concept Question Chain, read the text selection and identify one important concept students can develop from text. Use the text-based concept as a framework for writing literal, interpretive, and applied questions. Begin by designing questions for the interpretive level, since this level provides direction for developing appropriate literal and applied questions. Write questions that cause students to connect important information together and interpret it so they develop the concept.

Literal questions should derive from the interpretive questions; these should be designed to identify the essential
facts or details students need to answer the interpretive questions. Do not design literal questions that are not pertinent to developing the concept. This type of questioning detracts from the goal.

Finally, develop the applied questions. These should encourage students to apply the concept beyond the text selection, to create and expand the concept learned from text, and to evaluate the concept based on a set of criteria. Applied questions should cause students to think about the text-based concept in a broader perspective than the limited scope of the text selection.

Now consider implementation of the Concept Question Chain technique. After the students have read the text selection, initiate a discussion by asking the literal questions, followed by the interpretive, and concluding with the applied. Ordering the questions in this manner can help students to focus initially on the important facts or details, then weave together the literal information to formulate the concept, and finally apply the concept beyond the text selection.

The Concept Question Chain has some fundamental relationships to Herber's (1978) three level reading guide. In his guide, literal, interpretive, and applied statements, rather than questions, are written to illuminate the text-based concept. However, questions and not statements are a predominant tool teachers and students use for comprehending and learning from text. Thus, questions seem to be a more pragmatic tool to facilitate comprehension and learning. The Concept Question Chain differs from other instructional strategies that employ questions such as QAR (Raphael, 1982), Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar and Brown, 1986), and Response (Jacobson, 1989). The goal
of QAR is to enable students to label and find the appropriate source for responding to questions as well as providing an acceptable answer. This instructional strategy may be helpful to employ in conjunction with Concept Question Chain if students have great difficulties answering questions. Both Reciprocal Teaching and Response strategies are more comprehensive than questioning but focus on students developing their own questions rather than teacher-designed questions. Both student- and teacher-driven questions are important to instruction. Teachers need to establish models and students need opportunities to demonstrate and receive teacher feedback on designing and responding to questions.

Developing the Concept Question Chain

The Concept Question Chain shown in Figure 1 was developed for the article "Deciding Who Shall Come" from Cobblestone, a magazine written for fifth through eighth graders. (The text selection is shown in the Appendix.) The first step in developing the Concept Question Chain is to read the text selection and identify an important text-based concept students can learn from reading this article. Of course, there is more than one concept to be learned from any text. The teacher simply chooses one to be learned by all students.

For this article, I selected the concept Immigration policy is affected by social, political, and economic needs that continuously change throughout history. This concept is important within this selection because since the author emphasizes how immigration policy has changed from the 1700's to the present and gives the reasons for such changes.
The second step involves writing questions. Begin by writing interpretive questions, using the text structure to help develop the identified concept about immigration. The author uses the time-order pattern to help readers understand this concept, so the interpretive questions follow the sequence of immigration policy changes in history, encouraging students to hone in naturally on the text structure. Questions 12 through 17 in the Concept Question Chain
illustrate how the text-based concept and time-order pattern are used in the development of interpretive questions. Questions 11 through 13 focus on economic factors (jobs, wages) while questions 14 through 18 highlight the social aspects (people, culture and humanitarianism). Questions 15 through 17 also reflect the political factors involved in immigration during war time. For each historical problem, an interpretive question is designed so students can put the information together and discover the concept.

To design the literal questions, I analyzed the interpretive questions to identify explicit facts and details students must know to answer them. For example, to answer question 11, students must be able to define the term *xenophobia*; thus, the first literal question requires a definition for this term. To answer question 12, students need to know that many Chinese immigrants built the transcontinental railroad; they need this information in order to understand the ensuing policy, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and what this act meant. Can you see the link between each subsequent interpretive question and one or two literal questions? In Figure 2, the linkages among the literal and interpretive questions are provided. Frequently, there is more than one literal question associated with an interpretive question.

<table>
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<th>Figure 32 Links between literal and interpretive questions</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Literal</strong></td>
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To design the applied questions, consider how students might apply the text-based concept beyond the text selection. Look at questions 19-21. Questions 19 and 20 require students to integrate their present knowledge about this topic with the author's ideas; in question 21, students must apply their knowledge and information from the text to current changes in immigration policy. Note that all questions go beyond a yes or no response and require more critical thinking. Students must explain and provide reasons for their responses if they are to remember what they have read and to note its importance in everyday life.

To use the Concept Question Chain for "Deciding Who Shall Come," remember to order the levels of questions beginning with literal, continuing with interpretive, and concluding with the applied. This set of questions is only a plan that may require adjustment as it is used in discussion. Depending on the students' responses, you may add, delete, or rephrase questions to ensure that students develop the selected concept.

One group's discussion

Consider one teacher's implementation of the Concept Question Chain as part of the instructional framework of pre-, during-, and post-reading instruction provided for the selection "Deciding Who Shall Come." Prior to reading this text, the seventh grade teacher, Ms. Kent, conducted a brainstorming discussion that focused on immigration. The seventh graders identified and explained vocabulary and ideas related to immigration. To guide the seventh graders' reading, Ms. Kent described different types of text structures authors employ in their writing and suggested that the text structure often highlights important text-based ideas. She pointed out that the author of the text "Deciding Who Shall Come" used the time-order pattern to organize
reading and learning. Ms. Kent then modeled for her students how to use the time line to construct meaning from text. A time line was drawn on the chalkboard, and students were directed to draw their own time lines. She read aloud the first two paragraphs stopping and explaining how dates and words indicating a time period provided clues for immigration changes. On the chalkboard, Ms. Kent noted the specific time period and wrote a short phrase to label it. The students read independently the remainder of the article, and noted the immigration changes on their own time lines. The teacher told them to consider the reasons for such changes as they read.

For postreading instruction Ms. Kent used the Concept Question Chain in discussing the article. She suggested that the time line they constructed during reading could help them as they discussed the article. Ms. Kent began the discussion with literal questions and the time line enabled the seventh graders to answer the literal questions quickly and easily. The answers to these literal questions focused students’ thinking on the important and relevant details from the text that were to facilitate inferences and concept development for the major and latter part of the discussion.

To learn how these seventh graders developed an understanding of the selected text-based concept, read the discussion that occurred in Ms. Kent’s classroom. Ms. Kent asked the interpretive questions to continue class discussion. As you read this classroom dialogue, note how the students “pulled out” the text-based ideas to focus on the social, economic and political factors affecting immigration.

"Ms. K.: What are the causes of xenophobia? You have already told me what the definition is, but what do you think are the causes? Molly?"
Molly: A lot of people have xenophobia because they are so afraid of spies and people who are going to come into their country illegally and the foreigners are going to change their country.

Ms. K.: OK. Andy.

Andy: Basically, there are a few reasons. One is they are not Americans. People aren't usually ready to take things that aren't like them. Another reason is that they took their jobs from them. And they were afraid if they ever went on strike, the owners would say forget it. And the foreigners would take their jobs. Basically, it was just malice towards them because it wasn't good for them when the immigrants came in.


Terry: That's when the Chinese settled in California and took the jobs from the Americans who already had been there and so they decided that because they took their jobs while working on this railroad they wouldn't allow the Chinese to come in anymore.

Ms. K.: Kim, do you want to add to that?

Kim: It also says that in the early 1870's there was organized violence in the Chinese communities. So there was also a lot of violence and that's why they also decided not to let any more Chinese in.

Ms. K.: Why did the industrial companies hire immigrants?

Megan: They might want to see how good workers they were.

Ms. K.: That's a good idea but that's not exactly why they hired them — not to find out how good they were, but... Kim, go ahead.

Kim: Because they didn't have enough workers so they needed to look for more workers.

Ms. K.: OK, but it wasn't just more workers. Let's reread the second paragraph on page 34 and think about the reasons industrial companies may hire immigrants.

Andrew: The immigrants did get more money in America, but the factory owners didn't have to pay the immigrants as much as they would have to pay the American workers. They got better pay in America but not as much pay as they would if they were Americans.

Ms. K.: Right. So it was cheaper for industry.

Kim: They cheated sort of.

Margaret: They cheated them.
Mark: Not necessarily cheated them. I guess they did kind of cheat them. But, it's not like the immigrants didn't know about it, and they were mad at them because of it. They were happy to get it because it's more than they had at home.

Ms. K.: But were the Americans cheated?

Andrew: The Americans felt very cheated because number one not only did they take their jobs, but it kind of guaranteed they wouldn't get them back.

Ms. K.: You've already answered my next question so I'll move on. America has been known as the "melting pot." Why was this concept being challenged in the late 1800's?

Andy: The Americans felt that everybody is going to learn English and the customs and everybody would live happily ever after type thing. But, in the late 1800's things turned into a small disaster. There were too many immigrants coming in and the Americans were jealous that the foreign immigrants were getting their jobs and so it wasn't becoming a "melting pot."

Margaret: The melting pot ideas were that everyone should speak English if they came to America, but the immigrants who were coming in said, "No, we don't want to speak your language. We'd like to speak our native language and maintain our own traditions and customs and language and everything." So they, the Americans, were being challenged because these people were saying they just don't want to do it.

Ms. K.: Good ideas! Let's go on. How did World War I affect immigration?

Bill: After the world war, they didn't want the immigrants to come in and that's why the quota of 1910 came in. There were just too many immigrants coming to America so they decided on a quota allowing so many in.

Ms. K.: Does anyone want to add anything?

Andrew: In World War I, it wasn't really a popular one, people were suspicious of immigrants at the time. They were really paranoid towards foreigners. They were our enemies.

Ms. K.: Contrast that with World War II. How did World War II affect immigration?

Mark: That was a more popular war, and they felt sorry for the Jews and all their homes being seized in Europe. That was a popular war. Everyone knew what they were fighting against. They thought they were right; therefore, they allowed these people to come in.
Before continuing with the final part of the discussion, consider the students’ thinking as they discussed the interpretive questions. Molly’s response provided an initial indication of the social factors associated with immigration. Andy’s response supported Molly’s ideas but also went beyond the social factors associated with immigration as he explored the economic effects immigrants have on American citizens. As other interpretive questions were discussed, other students provided additional evidence that increased their understanding of the text-based concept. Each of the students’ responses reiterated the central components of the text-based concept and provided additional elaboration. Typically, students used examples from different time periods which acted as building blocks for concept formation.

During the discussion, Ms. Kent also asked students to look back at text, encouraging them to refine their ideas by accurately describing the social, economic, and political factors influencing immigration policy changes. She then deviated from the set of questions to refine students’ thinking about industry’s main interest for hiring immigrants.

Ms. Kent concluded the discussion with the applied questions. Her task was to engage her students into applying the text-based concept to ideas and events that occur in daily life. As you read this dialogue, consider how the seventh graders were able to apply the text-based concept to daily life.

Ms. K.: Now let us consider another set of questions. There are three in number, and these get a little bit tougher. Do Americans still exhibit xenophobia? I want you to think about how we exhibit it, if you believe that we do, or if we don’t exhibit xenophobia, provide examples to support this point of view.
Andrew: Well, it depends on... there are certain kinds of xenophobia and who does it. It's not like America is the perfect country where nobody does it. It's a very racial country where people are prejudiced. Well, there's not any more violence than there was. If there is violence it's probably in one - jobs and two - politics. You don't see too many immigrants in high political status. It's especially true in jobs especially in big companies. The factories will have the immigrants working in the low class jobs and the Americans working in the high class jobs. It's so hard for a person from another country to come in and go right into a high class job.

Ms. K.: Why?

Andrew: Many don't speak English.

Margaret: It's always going to be exhibited because there's always some people who have constant fear of terrorists, and these people are coming into their country.

Mark: I think it still does exist, and I think that people still get upset and even just jokes. There are some really nasty jokes against some countries and their people.

Ms. K.: Why is that?

Mark: Because they are different and a lot of people have problems with people who are different. It's not only in America. It's all over! Like Hitler. He had a problem. Anybody who wasn't German he didn't like. It always exists.

Ms. K.: What are the causes for anti-sentiment for today's immigrants?

Ben: Well, one of the reasons is jobs. They think the immigrants are going to come in and take their jobs. Well, that's what happens because the American bosses can cheat the immigrants out of their wages. There is xenophobia which causes people to feel anti-sentiment toward immigrants.

Andy: It goes two ways. Basically it's fear. The Americans don't feel good about them coming into their country because they are not like themselves. Any race is like that. But, it also works the other way around too. Like races stick together. They really don't socialize with other races naturally. It's not just the Americans and the immigrants. You have all kinds of immigrants. And even the Americans were once immigrants. Nobody is really an American except the Indians. Even the immigrants feel funny about it because they are from different countries.

Ms. K.: Why has the US provided amnesty to illegal immigrants?

Kim: What's amnesty?
Margaret: No penalties for being here illegally.
Ms. K.: Give them the ability to become US citizens saying there is no penalty or imprisonment for confessing to being here illegally.
Nathan: To give these people a chance, to stop possible violence against these people.
Margaret: You have to know the story behind it. Some of these immigrants are here because they were forced or had to get out because they were going to get killed. There is a lot of that going on such as wars.
Andy: One of the main reasons is jobs. If somebody hires someone who is illegal, they can be fined and they are trying to get it so lots of these people can make a contribution to this society, and they can really work hard. But nobody is going to give them a chance because they suspect that they are illegal. There is also so many people that the government wants to get it out of the way. You might as well have them live here legally.

In this latter part of the discussion, Ms. Kent helps the students apply the text-based concept to events and ideas that are occurring in their daily lives. Students are integrating their prior knowledge and experience to what they have learned in text so that concepts are easily remembered. Moreover, the students recognize the relevance reading can have for their own lives. Reading serves a function and purpose.

Ms. Kent’s use of a time line to guide independent reading and her class discussion employing the Concept Question Chain developed conceptual thinking about a text selection. Depending on students’ responses to specific questions, the teacher may need to eliminate or ask additional questions that cause students to focus, extend, or lift thinking so that the text-based concept can be formulated. Therefore teachers need to observe and assess students’ responses.
The Concept Question Chain provides a framework for thinking and learning about text. The questions direct students' thinking about a particular concept so that important facts are identified and woven together during class discussion to highlight the text-based concept which is then linked to daily events and ideas. Such a framework focuses students' thinking, develops a coherent understanding of text, and promotes conceptual learning. In addition, teachers may want to use Concept Question Chain with an instructional strategy as Ms. Kent did. Focusing students' reading on text organization may enhance comprehension and further facilitate concept development.

References

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Appendix

Deciding Who Shall Come*
by Elizabeth Hagner

Has the United States always lived by the words on the Statue of Liberty? From the start, immigration policy was a widely debated topic in America. People could not agree whether limits on immigration were needed. George Washington viewed unrestricted immigration with caution; Thomas Jefferson thought it unwise to encourage immigration from countries that were monarchies. The subject of immigration has always caused controversy.

Originally the English settlers believed our new nation was a “melting pot” where immigrants would learn the English language and “American” customs. We had both an enormous frontier and rich natural resources, and our nation was underpopulated. Immigrants were needed to work in the mines and factories, to build the railroads, and to settle the towns along the railroads.

But in the 1800’s, feelings that limitations on immigration were needed began to increase. There were several reasons for this. One was xenophobia (ze-no-FO-be-uh), which is a fear and distrust of foreigners. Another reason was the fear of unemployment.

After the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, many people were out of work. Large numbers of Chinese immigrants, who had helped to build the railroad, settled in California where they were resented by the people who believed the Chinese had taken their jobs. In the early 1870’s, organized violence against the Chinese communities broke out. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act which prohibited Chinese immigration for many years.

In industry, other concerns about immigrants surfaced. Many immigrants had been encouraged to come to this country by American companies looking for workers. The companies offered wages which were higher than what the immigrants could earn in their countries, but lower than what the companies would have had to pay American workers. Because of this, American workers resented the foreigners. Americans also feared the immigrants would be given their jobs if Americans went on strike.

Objections grew stronger in the years 1890 to 1917 as a result of what was known as the “new immigration.” During this period, a tremendous number of immigrants from southern and eastern European countries came to the United States. These newcomers generally preferred to maintain their own languages, traditions, and neighborhoods. Americans were uncomfortable with their different ways. The idea of the “melting pot” did not seem to be working.

To restrict this wave of immigration, Congress passed a law in 1917 requiring that all immigrants must pass a literacy test in order to be admitted in this country. Each immigrant would have to be able to read and write in his or her native language, and many could not. Many poor immigrants had not had the opportunity to attend school in their homelands.
During World War I, even more people began to disagree with the idea of allowing immigrants to come to this country. After the war, in 1921, the government began using a new means for limiting immigration – the quota system. A quota is a limit set on the number of people who may be admitted to a particular place or organization. For its quota system, Congress used the United States population figures from the year 1910. Congress decided on a three per cent quota, which meant that for every one hundred members of a certain group in the United States in 1910, three new members of that group (three per cent) would be allowed to immigrate to the United States each year.

In 1924, Congress carried the new policy a step further by reducing the quotas to two per cent. This time the population from the year of 1890, instead of 1910, was chosen. Because there were far fewer immigrants from southern and eastern Europe living in America in 1890, the new quota meant fewer new immigrants from those areas would be allowed to come. It also now became necessary for any person wishing to immigrate to the United States to obtain a visa from an American official in the immigrant’s native land.

The removal of such barriers to immigration began in 1943 when Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion laws. Further strides were made as a result of World War II when sentiment toward helping war refugees was strong. The new spirit of “internationalism” led to acts of Congress which enabled more than 4,000,000 refugees to come to the United States.

In the 1960’s, Americans became particularly interested in issues of human rights, both at home and in other countries. In 1965, Congress ended the system of individual quotas for each country and created a single quota for countries of the Western Hemisphere, and a single quota for the rest of the world. This system was changed once more in 1978 when a single, worldwide quota was established. This is the basis of our immigration policy today.

America is no longer seen as the “melting pot” where cultural differences vanish, but as a place where a rich variety of cultural backgrounds can exist together. The United States today has the most lenient policy toward immigration in the world. Still, our government faces a constant challenge to enforce old immigration laws, to create new ones, and to try to control immigration as well as to welcome it. How to open the door, and to whom, remains a complex problem.