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Developing Higher-Level Comprehension with Short Stories

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Developing Higher-Level Comprehension with Short Stories

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Abstract

The instructional guides described in this article are designed to raise students' thinking about short stories beyond factual recall to interpretation, application, synthesis and evaluation of material suitable for those levels of cognitive behavior. They are also designed to foster positive affective responses as concomitant reading behaviors. The objective of the guides is to teach students to apply their best thinking to short stories just as they do to the games they play, the movies they watch, the decisions they make about spending or saving money, and other matters in their lives that stimulate their best thoughts and strongest feelings.



DEVELOPING HIGHER-LEVEL COMPREHENSION WITH SHORT STORIES

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Publishing companies rely heavily on short stories as a source of reading material for basal series, the most widely used resource for teaching reading comprehension in the elementary grades. Anderson, et al, (1984) say, "There are good reasons why reading instruction begins with simple stories. One is the need to control vocabulary. A deeper and more subtle reason is that children readily acquire an understanding of the whole structure of stories and, therefore, stories are especially comprehensible to children" (p. 65). They go on to say, "Research has shown that most children's sense of the structure of stories develops rapidly. By the time children who have heard a lot of stories enter elementary school, they have a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of story structure. They know about characters, plot, action and resolution" (p. 66).

While reliance on short stories for the development of reading comprehension skills is for good reason, authorities in the field of reading curriculum and instruction have been critical of the approach to the teaching of reading comprehension advocated by publishers of basal series. Durkin (1978-79), after a series of observations, reported her finding that relatively little direct teaching of reading comprehension is occurring in grades three through six by teachers following the teachers' manual. In a later study (Durkin, 1981), she found from examining the teachers' manuals published for use through grade six that most teaching of reading comprehension is attempted through questions that are more suitable for testing comprehension.

The kinds of questions typically used to test comprehension have long been a subject of concern for reading educators. These questions have been faulted for eliciting responses to text at cognitive levels no higher than literal recall and for ignoring affective responses to text.

All in all, there seems to be a need for another look at the "tools" classroom teachers use with short stories when their objective is the development of reading comprehension. In summarizing two reports produced by the National Assessment of Educational Progress released in 1981, Purves and Niles (1984) comment:

These two reports clearly indicate that while many students can read a text in the sense of making some general statement about what it says, they have great difficulty in reading a text in the sense of drawing inferences about the text, in examining the tone or structure, or in thinking in other ways about what they read. Students appear to have acquired a superficial skill but not the skill associated with being a fully functional literate member of society (p. 2).

The instructional guides described in this article are designed to raise students' thinking about short stories beyond factual recall to interpretation, application, synthesis and evaluation of material suitable for those levels of cognitive behavior. They are also designed to foster positive affective responses as concomitant reading behaviors. The objective of the guides is to teach students to apply their best thinking to short stories just as they do to the games they play, the movies they watch, the decisions they make about spending or saving money, and other matters in their lives that stimulate their best thoughts and strongest feelings. Students should learn to read in school as they will read out of school for information and pleasure. One of Durkin's (1981) concluding comments based on her examination of teachers' manuals for published basal reading series is: "One possible consequence is that the children receiving the instruction never do see the relationship between what is done with reading in school and what they should do when they read on their own." The guides I mentioned are an attempt to avoid that consequence and should be used in addition to, or in place of, the questions provided in teachers' manuals when the questions in the

manuals do not tap students' best thinking potential.

The primary characteristics of the guides are the following:

1. They allow for choices.
2. They ask for responses that cannot be judged as correct or incorrect.
3. They request personal feelings.
4. They promote speculation.
5. They solicit evaluation.

Obviously, the five characteristics above overlap. Perhaps the essence of these characteristics is that students are more in control of their reading behaviors, and they are asked to interact with the author in the assimilation of a story. That is, the items on the guides demand more than a retelling of what the story was about or the answering of literal-level questions about the story content.

The three guides that follow have been field tested in classrooms by teachers. The findings of the field tests are the following:

1. Students who are taught with the guides score as well on tests of literal recall as students who are taught with the more traditional method of asking post-reading, literal-level questions.
2. Students who are taught with the guides score similarly to students taught with more traditional method on inventories that measure attitudes toward the reading selection.
3. Students who are taught with the guides participate in post-reading oral discussions more enthusiastically than students taught with more traditional methods. Their discussion is also more student-to-student and more reflective of higher-level thinking behavior.
4. The reading-related written products of students who are taught with the guides are longer and more thoughtful than those of students taught with the more traditional method.

In summary, the guides appear to have a highly positive effect on students' thinking, discussing and writing behavior with no adverse effect on their literal recall or their attitudes toward the selections themselves.

Mental images can be "imposed" by the presentation of pictures or illustrations to accompany a reading selection, or they can be "induced" by asking students to create their own mental pictures to accompany their reading. To clarify the difference, television imposes images, the radio induces them. There is substantial research evidence that a high and positive correlation exists between image production while reading and reading comprehension.

The first essential for inducing mental imagery with short stories is a story that has good potential for image production. All stories have imaging potential, but some have more than others.

The following passage has considerable potential for the inducement of mental images.

Manuel was daydreaming on the couch in his family's small living room. The television was on, but his mind was far away from the ten p.m. news. He was belting out a homer with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth.

Suddenly, Bandito, who was on the other side of the room, growled and moved closer to Manuel. Manuel tensed and listened to whatever it was that had awakened Bandito. He felt cold under the flannel shirt that had been keeping him warm just seconds earlier.

There was a strange sound coming from the bedroom he shared with Joseph, his baby brother. The sound was not coming from Joseph's crib. Manuel had all of those sounds memorized from other times he had babysat while his mother worked the late shift.

Manuel's hand slid off the couch and felt for the baseball bat he always kept nearby, just in case.

His hand clenched the handle of the bat, and he lifted himself from the couch. Bandito growled again. Outside, a bus pulled away from the curb.

Manuel moved to the side of the living room that was opposite Joseph's and his bedroom. He could see the night light behind the mostly-closed bedroom door. Tomorrow's weather was coming from the TV set, but Manuel wasn't hearing it. He felt his feet move toward the bedroom door.

An activity for inducing mental imagery is to place

passages with good imagery potential like the one above in the context of television production. Television is a medium children are familiar with and toward which they generally have positive attitudes.

The teacher may either read the passage (which should not be longer than three or four paragraphs) to the students or ask them to read it silently, trying to get pictures of the scene in their minds.

Then the teacher asks them to read the passage again with the following conditions and questions in mind:

Pretend this is a scene from a script for television; and you are the director of that script.

1. Describe the actor you would want to play the part of Manuel (age, size, general appearance).
2. Describe how you would dress Manuel (shirt, pants, shoes, colors).
3. Describe the dog you would select for Bandito (breed, size, colors, general appearance).
4. What camera close-ups would you want for this scene? What distance shots?
5. Make a list of sounds the audience should hear during this scene.
6. Would you use background music during this scene? If so, for what parts? Describe the music you would use (fast, slow, scary, peppy, sad).

After the students have completed the written work, the teacher may choose to have them share their answers in a whole-class discussion, or divide them into pairs or groups of three to four, to share responses.

A Guide for Examining Personal Responses to a Story

The questions below challenge students' thinking about a short story in ways that the typical questions in the teachers' manuals for basal series do not. The pronoun "you" is prominent in each question.

1. Which character(s) in this story did you especially like? What qualities appealed to you?
 2. Which character(s) in this story did you especially dislike? What trait(s) displeased or angered you?
 3. Did you find any humor in this story? Describe the part(s) that make you smile or laugh.
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4. What feelings did this story arouse in you? What part(s) made you feel sad, worried, frightened, angry, envious, excited, surprised, or other feeling?
5. What was your favorite part of the story? Why do you think it was especially appealing to you?
6. What mental pictures did you get from this story that were especially vivid?
7. Were there any words in this story that you felt were particularly well chosen?
8. Were there any parts of this story that you found boring or difficult to read?
9. What guesses can you make about the author of this story? What do you think he or she is like?

Teachers may choose to use all or only some of the questions that comprise the guide. Students may immediately after reading be arranged in small groups to discuss their responses or the teacher may prefer to have each student think about or write his or her responses before they are shared in groups or whole class discussion.

Story Award Guid

Many, if not most, students have some familiarity with the Grammy, the Emmy and the Oscar awards; the form below allows students to give awards to authors of short stories. In making the awards, students must think carefully about the story and the author's craft as well as the overall appeal of the story.

If authors of stories received awards for the following categories, for which award(s) would you nominate the author of this story?

- _____ creating characters that are true-to-life
- _____ developing exciting plots
- _____ inducing vivid mental images
- _____ promoting thoughtfulness
- _____ writing stories that hold readers' interest
- _____ writing humor
- _____ evoking readers' emotions
- _____ other

All things considered, how would you rate this story on the following scale:

5 4 3 2 1

After the students have read the story and made their decisions, they may be asked to explain their decisions in a whole-class discussion. Students may also enjoy staging a mock awards ceremony after they have read five or six stories. By casting ballots they can determine a winner for each of the "categories" on the award form

A Final Comment

The guides described in this article are designed to foster thinking that extends beyond literal comprehension. The student is asked to "interact" with the author at a personal level in keeping with Irwin's (1986) definition of reading comprehension as, "an active process to which each reader brings his or her individual attitudes, interests, expectations, skills and prior knowledge" (p. 7).

Peters, Seminoff and Wixson (1985) add to this perception of the reading process by offering a similar definition of reading. Their definition emphasizes the interactive, constructive, dynamic nature of the reading process. They explain as follows:

1. Interactive--The term interaction is used in the new definition to indicate that reading is an act of communication that is dependent not only on the knowledge and skill of the author, but on the knowledge and skills of the reader as well.
2. Constructive--The term is used to indicate that meaning is something that cannot simply be extracted from a text, but rather that it must be actively created in the mind of the reader from the integration of prior knowledge with the information suggested by the text.
3. Dynamic--is used to indicate that the reading process is variable, not static, adapting to the specific demands of each particular reading experience (e.g., to a particular type of text, or reading assignment) (p. 5).

A distinguishing characteristic of the items in the guides above is that responding to them requires students to make the decisions based on their personal knowledge and evaluations. They must, indeed, think along with the authors of the stories they read. They are more in control of their responses to short stories with these guides than they are with the traditional questions found in teachers' manuals. With the guides described above they must be

interactive, constructive, and dynamic readers to satisfy their reading assignments.

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