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The perplexing delight of questioning strategies in comprehension

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Introduction

The day I encountered a deli sandwich with a delightful pile of French fries on it was a profound day in my appreciation of sandwiches in general. *How can this be? Why would the fries not be on the side like usual?* This particular deli in downtown Pittsburgh not only offered an amazing array of meats, but this signature gimmick for which they are known. *How long have they been doing this? How could this be popular enough to last?* This particular eating experience did not jive with my existing sandwich knowledge. Not that I have been uninventive with my eating throughout my life, but typically the side dish is always where it belongs. Once devoured (a word chosen very intentionally) I reflected upon what I learned; it raised new questions. *How could I not have experienced this before? Where else could I find something like this outside of Pittsburgh?* Not only do I remember this experience fondly, but for the past seventeen years I have never thought about sandwiches in quite the same way.

At one point in my learning I most certainly remember wanting only to surge forward in my reading process. I can recall very specifically that this meant *not* taking the time to do anything more than experience the words on the page, see a few brief images from the story in my mind—hopefully also laugh (and of course find out how it all ends). This was somewhere around 2nd or 3rd grade. One fateful day in 4th grade, a shipment of book orders arrived with a demo copy of the then-new title, *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*. During the distribution process in what was a very tidy classroom, it was impossible to miss it, along with the titles each of us ordered. It was also impossible to miss how our teacher—who we all perceived as serious, rigorous, tough, and rather old-school—grabbed it in order to review it before letting us see it. *What could this mean? Why, whatever was he doing in there? Is that what I thought it said on the cover? With a title like that isn't it inappropriate?* What we later learned was that our

teacher delighted in the hilarity of it at home and soon thereafter delivered a monumental and memorable read-aloud over the next several weeks, following the long and chaotic post-lunch recess. I remember the questions piled up in advance (among the first was probably when we would get to read more of it); those questions helped us remember the previous day and predict or speculate what we might find in the next installment. Questions even allow us to interact with the author's thinking.

They Put *What* on the Sandwich?

Sadly, the delightful intensity of this process did not continue at full throttle over the next eight years of school, though I do recall it popping up again from time to time. As I look back on *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, I see not only a very solid layer in the reading process, but also something that locked the knowledge of that text into my mind with an impressive shelf life. Without questions in connection to that text, I would not remember it so fondly so many years later. And it wasn't long after that 4th grade text that I started to become the kind of high school student who grew up and became an English major, who then became an English teacher.

What is the point of questioning in the comprehension process, anyway? During my later teenage years, college, and the busy start of my teaching career, I simply did not dwell much on questions. *Instead of stopping me to do something now when I want to see what happens next, can I just hear what the story is about?* If we could read our students' minds at the onset of the reading process, their thoughts might reveal something like this. I remember feeling that way, seeing the end of the book as the end goal of reading the book, and I even remember starting my teaching that way; I was initially the textbook version of a Socratic English teacher. What I denied myself at the time, and what I denied some of my students, was the greater potential of

knowledge construction. Fundamentally, when we connect major units of thinking in new ways, we synthesize new knowledge. Commonly, those major units are prior knowledge (schema) and the new knowledge about a text (learning). The beauty of asking questions is that the process *compels* us to form these very specific connections. Sometimes it's what a reader wants to know—the “W” in the “KWL,” (Ogle, 1986)—sometimes it's a prediction or a more specific hypothesis, and sometimes it's even more emotionally charged—a gut feeling, a hope, a desire or wonder to see something in the text. If we want to make sure students connect their learning to their schema then at the very least we must involve questioning of some kind.

While my original methods classes as a secondary English preservice teacher put a dent in my resistance to questioning, it was more about the years of graduate school and my teaching as a doctoral candidate that put me in the grip of questioning strategies. Interestingly enough it all helped me reconnect with something in my very nature—perhaps a part of what compelled me to become an English major and teacher and literacy professor. I like to ask questions. I want to ask questions. I need my students to ask me questions. *Where would I be in my teaching without questioning? And how did I manage to enjoy it as much as I clearly must have before I understood questioning?* Early on, I simply didn't understand what pedagogical purpose the questioning served. And I didn't quite do the best job initially, despite the resurgence of my love of questioning, at modeling it and integrating it into my teaching.

QAR: A Menu of Questions

When my friend and I sat down at our table at the deli, he was already enthusiastically at work on his sandwich while I was busy trying to return the stray fries to their proper place under the top of the hoagie bun. Indeed, he had been there before and his prior knowledge of the place

compelled him to devour his own sandwich in a way that put my process to shame. *Still, will I like this sandwich? Once I'm done will I feel that I wish I'd had a hamburger instead?* It was impossible not to experience questions that centered on myself. Many frameworks for questions exist, but literacy tends to group them around those larger gravitational bodies that hold the reading process in orbit: ourselves, the text, the author, and the greater world around us. While some of these questions do try to take us farther away from ourselves, and while they may offer a wealth of knowledge production, it is tempting to only deal with only the more local knowledge: ourselves. In practice, I tend to prefer a clearly articulated framework that promotes a variety of options. And it is crucial not only to consider a menu of types of questions, but also strive to sample the entire menu.

Raphael and Au (2005) describe a framework for “helping teachers guide all students to higher levels of literacy” (p. 206). Question Answer Relationships (QAR) “provides a framework that offers teachers a straightforward approach for reading comprehension instruction with the potential of eventually closing the literacy achievement gap” (p. 208). In this strategy that makes some very invisible questioning processes visible and pedagogically sensible to model, they add that it “first and foremost provides teachers and students with a much-needed common language” (p. 208) as any explicit framework should. This very familiar and popular framework involves asking where information (e.g. the answer to a question) is in relation to the text (“Right There” vs. “Think and Search”) or in the reader’s head (when they know “On my Own” vs. through a mix of “Author and Me”). This can be further applied throughout the reading process—before, during, and after a visual encounter with the text. Cortese (2003) took this in an interesting direction, for example, that extended the potential of this framework to very early ages and the use of picture books (P-QAR) for “practicing task demands associated with

comprehension questions” and also for “heightening student awareness of the metacognitive strategy” for considering information alongside the framework’s questions (p. 375).

Interestingly, Cortese claims that pictures may serve not only to “reduce the cognitive linguistic burden” that comes with traditional text, but further “provide a more apparent way for students to approach answering comprehension questions” (p. 376). Raphael and Au (2005) see a potential in this framework, to reform not only school approaches to literacy, but also to support assessment results and student improvement. Ultimately, they feel that QAR yields major benefits from little time and effort, benefits which lie “in gaining access to reading comprehension and higher-level thinking with text” (p. 220).

QtA: Interrogating the Author

Back in Pittsburgh my mind spent some time on that deli, itself. *How did this deli come up with this idea? What do the other customers think? Do they plan to expand the deli, or what other side dishes they put on the sandwich?* To my delight, I was devouring this unique sandwich at a prime window seat, surrounded by their artifacts and décor to one side of me, and the downtown skyline to the other. But at this point it all I had was my initial response in mind, and what I had left to eat in front of me. When I involved the deli itself in my questions, effectively taking myself out of the picture, the nature of my questions changed entirely. Something interesting and engaging happened when I tried to get inside the deli’s inventive mind, inside what experience they had in mind for my mealtime. The deli wanted something to resonate with me—and perhaps they hoped I would be able to leave a preference for hamburgers behind as I experienced their creation. As the nature of my questions changed, though not literally engaged with the owner or manager, I may as well have been in conversation with the management as the

depth of my knowledge on the subject grew. When we involve the author, we truly take it up a notch in our questioning. Ideally, we interrogate the author in a much more intensive way than merely making a basic connection to the author's thinking. *What were you thinking when you decided to launch such a crazy idea before the public?*

McKeown, Beck and Worthy (1993) give us one of the strongest frameworks for questioning that involves the text author, emerging from social studies texts and “getting young readers to *engage* with text—to really consider ideas deeply” and wanting to “have students make texts understandable to themselves—which is what mature readers do when they read” (p. 561). Interestingly enough, the authors who developed Question the Author (QtA) encountered student hesitation to “take on the author” in their first trials with their work (p. 562), yet also “saw them become active participants in constructing meaning from text” (p. 563). While some strategies set up a framework for comprehension, these authors set up something that might otherwise be a narrowed vision of a comprehension strategy and put the agency in students' hands. Liang and Dole (2006) summarized QtA well as a four-tiered framework of:

- 1) viewing the text as a fallible product written by fallible authors, 2) dealing with text through questions that are directed toward making sense of it, 3) questioning as students are reading, and 4) encouraging student collaboration in the construction of meaning. (p. 747).

They further caution that this approach involves a high degree of teacher preparation, modeling, and transfer of responsibility to the learner. The lure in this strategy is how McKeown, Beck, and Worthy (1993) create “an entrée to text ideas by guiding students to think of the meaning of a text as something to be negotiated, as if setting up a dialogue with the text's author” (p. 561).

Beck and McKeown (2002) are adamant that “questioning the author begins by taking stock of what we want students to learn from a text and noticing what might interfere with that understanding” (p. 47). Comprehension of any text involves far more than decoding and far more than memorization of content. When situating reading in the content areas, they warn, “readers can easily get distracted by facts, because content areas *are* facts...but learning the facts does not equal understanding” (p. 47). VanDeWeghe (2007) called their process one where “rather than discussing their interpretations of text after reading, they engage in collaborative construction of a text while reading” (p. 87)—and while doing so for the *first* time. Ultimately, they offer this process as one that “not only helps students comprehend specific content-area texts, but also teaches them to view reading as an active process of constructing meaning rather than a passive process of extracting information and answering questions” (Beck & McKeown, 2002, p. 47).

A Layer of Something Different, Something Unique, Something Powerful

Like many approaches to reading comprehension, half the battle is getting out of the mud of the lower levels of Bloom’s taxonomy. While knowing and understanding are perfectly valid cognitive domains, they ultimately support the higher levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—and without these higher levels, knowing and understanding are merely a bare foundation. These higher domains require that thinking be laid out on the table, so to speak; they require knowledge is made ready for manipulating, for growth and building. Questioning strategies and frameworks offer an absolutely ideal setup for the construction of knowledge (e.g. comprehension itself). With questioning, we are forced to set various units of thinking out on the table. Some of these units are not merely our questions, but they are the basis for the formulation

of our questions, which are rooted in our prior knowledge. Other units are not merely our questions, but an array of early evidence supporting a claim. Many forms of questions involve digging deep into one's self, while others involve digging deep into a perception or an understanding of an author. With this array of options on the table, the odds of escaping the bog of merely knowing and understanding will increase substantially. *Did I really enter a new realm of sandwich eating by connecting this new unit of French fries to the sandwich?* Thus, questioning strategies become our "gateway" to greater cognitive domains and our gateway, to synthesizing knowledge.

In order to appreciate the flavor and experience of comprehension fully we *must* include questioning strategies. Not only does it make the comprehension process as delightful as the unexpected French fries on a sandwich, but it also has a pedagogical power to transform the experience of the practicing educator, as well. *Are these fresh cut, and not as processed as fast food fries?* Multiple opportunities to deploy these approaches to questioning in my teaching and in my later work as a professor have only deepened my appreciation for reading comprehension. Questioning lets us take comprehension up a few levels, and also lets us build more knowledge in the process. Questioning truly adds a colossal and unique layer to comprehension, much like that pile of fries inside my deli sandwich.

The more I dwell on comprehension, the more I want a major layer of something different, something powerful, in the process of making meaning with a text. And I want there to be a significant response to the connection between the standard sandwich filling and the new, unique layer. *Am I really eating this?* I can think of no greater irony than the fact that Beck and McKeown conducted their key work in literacy at the University of Pittsburgh, 3.4 miles from where I devoured the sandwich that started all of this. Having taken a rather significant journey

through questions, it's hard to not land on more philosophical ground. *Was it fate that I experienced that sandwich in that city, so close to those authors and their university?* Yet, as much as I love food like hamburgers, and as much as I also love a good deli sandwich (especially with the fries on it), I must confess that sometimes I just need something different.

Sometimes I just need a good hot bowl of soup.

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