# THINKING Classroom

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*Thinking Classroom* serves as an international forum of exchange among teachers, teacher educators, and others interested in pro-moting democratic teaching practices. The publication encourages profession-al development, research, and reflection. *Thinking Classroom* features articles that foster learner-centered teaching strategies in-cluding critical and creative think-ing, active and cooperative learning, and problem solving. The journal also publishes articles about the institutional structures that support these practices.

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*An International Journal of Reading, Writing and Critical Reflection*

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# Significant Learning

*David Klooster and Patricia Bloem are partners in teaching, writing, and living. David is Professor and Chair, Department of English, Hope College, Holland, Michigan, USA. Patricia is Associate Professor of English Education, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Michigan.*

In our previous column, we reflected on the notion of *critical lessons*, the subject matter and topics that are most pressing in our world today. Inspired by the work of Nel Noddings, the author of *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach,* we focused on the idea that the content of our classes and of the school curriculum should examine the great moral and social issues of the day. We invited readers to move beyond critical thinking as the means of teaching and learning in any field in order to ask fundamental curricular questions: What is critical? What should we be teaching? Education for what purposes? Can we agree on what topics are critical for our students' learning?

This time, we approach the topic from a somewhat different angle. What makes learning significant for our *students*? Last time, the focus was on the decisions *teachers* make about what to teach. This time we focus on *students* and the ways they make their learning significant in their lives.

At the beginning of the spring semester, we asked our students to write for five minutes about their view of an ideal learning experience. Our students are in their second or third year of university-level literature study, and some of them are in a teacher education program, so they have twelve years of schooling plus several years of university learning experiences on which to base their answers. We gave them a clean sheet of paper, the beginning words of a sentence—"For me, the perfect class is ...."—and five minutes of class time. What would they say?

We were curious to find out, because we have been reading the book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* by L. Dee Fink. Near the beginning of the book, the author reports the results of a similar survey he had offered to university professors. He asked them to complete this sentence: "My dream is that students, one to two years after the course is over, will be able to…." The professors' answers did not stress simply memory of course content, but rather the many ways they hoped students would put their learning to work in the world. Among other goals, professors dreamed that their students would:

- Apply and use what they learn to solve real-life situations.
- Find ways to make the world better.
- Engage in lifelong learning.
- See the connections between their own beliefs, values, and actions, and those of others.
- Stay positive, despite the setbacks and challenges of life and work.
- Think critically, to incorporate this thinking in their daily lives, and to share knowledge and skills with others to work towards a just world for all.

*(Fink, 2003, pp. 9–10)*

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Their responses make it clear that these university teachers aspire to design courses that offer students much more than the factual knowledge of their content area, that go beyond content knowledge to provide skills and attitudes they will need to live productive lives. Such teachers, whether they are in a primary school or a university, aim to influence the kinds of people their students will become, and the kinds of citizens they will be in their societies.

So what did our students think would make a perfect class? First, they want the classroom experience itself to be engaging, interesting, and fun. One student wrote that she wants "a class I'm excited to go to, where I learn something so interesting that I have to go home and tell my roommate." Several said that they want a teacher who demonstrates passion for the material, and whose excitement is contagious. Many wrote about enjoying those classes in which the work is interesting to them—where the homework is something they look forward to doing, "not out of obligation but because of passion and joy." Several students remarked that the perfect class is one that makes personal growth and change an exciting process. One student wrote, "For me the perfect class is one where I fall in love with something new. I will wake up in the morning knowing that I have the class that day, and I will be excited for it to begin. It will teach me more than just the subject itself; instead I will look at my life differently. When the class is over, I'm different from when it began. And I'm better for having taken the class."

For our students, the perfect class is not only enjoyable, but also challenging. They valued those classes that really stretched them to think in new ways, that put difficult and complex material in front of them, and forced them to think carefully about it. They were dismissive of coursework that they perceived as busy work, too easy, or a waste of time. "The perfect class challenges me not just to learn but to think," one student wrote. "It involves opposing viewpoints, requires me to define my thesis and amend it as I learn more, and it asks and earns my attention and careful intelligence."

For some students, a perfect class is one that offers multiple ways of learning. "Every day offers an activity, a challenge, a lively discussion, or unexpected excitement." Students called for a mix of lectures, discussions, experiments, small-group work, film—as many ways of learning as there are students in the class. Within this diversity of methods, students asked for freedom to make their own choices about what works best for them. One student put it this way: "I like to be led, but permitted to wander."

The social dimension of learning was often at the forefront of our students' minds. They called for classes that invite students to be engaged, but do not force them to be involved unwillingly. "I *beg* not to be put in the spotlight against my will, but rather I like being comfortable enough in my surroundings to volunteer myself." Even more important were the learning goals that stress learning about oneself and others. "For me the perfect class is one where I learn about others and I also learn more about myself." Another wrote, "The perfect class is one that teaches me about the world and makes sense of things that are confusing to me. It is one where I am able to grow as a person and better my relationships with others."

What was finally most important for these 20- and 21-year-old students was gaining a better sense of direction for the future. While they care deeply about the experience of the class itself, they are also keenly aware of how a class can contribute to their lives and careers. "Ideally

© Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers, photo

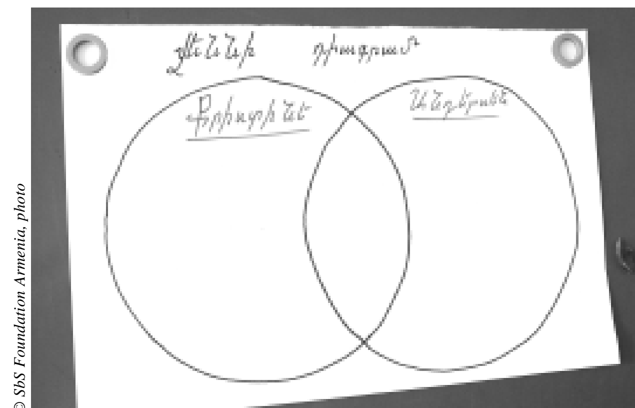
a class could show me what I wanted to do in the future, or at least point me in the right direction," said one. Another put it this way: "A perfect class is one that feeds my passion. It opens my eyes to how I can better impact the world and encourages me to dream and follow through on those dreams."

All these dreams from professors and from students about the ideal learning experience have a great deal in common. At the root of their shared desires is their understanding that learning must become *significant*. Both teachers and students dream about learning experiences that go beyond the acquisition of knowledge and lead instead to changed lives and a better world. There's a profound optimism expressed in these dreams. And that optimism is rooted in experience: Teachers and students dream of these powerful changes because they have experienced similar changes somewhere in their lives in schools, and they want more of these beneficial outcomes.

Fink's book focuses on the decisions teachers at every level can make as they design learning experiences to make learning significant. His book is one of many recent books by progressive educators that focus on active learning, service learning, critical thinking, problem-based learning, and other strategies. (A basic outline of Fink's approach, as well as a list of recommended readings on other compatible approaches, can be found at the website www.signficantlearning.org)

Fink's approach is built on a taxonomy of learning, six interlinking values that together make learning significant. It begins with **Foundational Knowledge,** the information and ideas that students encounter in the course. For too many teachers, instructional design begins and ends with this question of what students need to learn. Yet the comments of both the teachers and the students surveyed reveal a desire for much more than this. The next element in the taxonomy is **Application**, the skills and thinking habits that students need to solve problems or complete projects. The third is **Integration**, the lessons of a course that encourage students to make connections between ideas within the course and the ideas, people, and parts of life they have encountered outside the course.

Fink's taxonomy includes as its fourth element the **Human Dimension**, which concerns learning about oneself and others. The next element is **Caring**, the student's interest, passion, and energy for the work. Finally, the taxonomy stresses **Learning How to Learn**, the skills necessary to become a self-directed learner and a life-long learner.



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Learning becomes significant for our students when the new knowledge acquired in the classroom becomes useful for solving the problems they face in life, and when they are able to care deeply and passionately about what they learn. The lessons we teach in the classroom become significant for students when they find pleasure in the work we do together, and when they recognize that our courses help them to find direction and meaning in their lives.

*Critical thinking* is a powerful means of teaching and learning, and it is an attitude towards knowledge that is essential in open, democratic cultures. *Critical lessons* focus school learning on the most pressing issues of our day. *Significant learning* occurs within the hearts and minds of students who are empowered and enriched by their classroom experiences to lead successful lives, lives fulfilling to themselves and meaningful in the contributions they make to others. Most of us who are teachers today can identify those moments in our own education when learning became significant in our lives. Our challenge is to design our courses so that learning becomes significant for all our students.


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Perspectives

# *Is War an Appropriate Topic for Elementary School?*

*Answers from Burma, Canada, Georgia, and Russia*

*Eyes of Hope*

*© Nikhil Gangavane (India)*

*The Burmese children from the Karen refugee camp in Thailand celebrating the Mae Khon Kha Refugee Day*

*© Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers*

## Is war an appropriate topic for elementary school?

© Photos from the authors' archives

**Thein Lwin,**
*Director of the Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers (TTBT), Thailand-Burma*

War is an appropriate topic for the elementary school. However, knowledge about war should not be given to children from a particular point of view. Children should be encouraged to talk about war from different perspectives, and to learn from it. This statement has been demonstrated in the context of Burma, which is governed by a military regime and has had civil war for about 60 years.

Burma participated in World War II, joining its long-time British colonial masters in fighting against the new colonial rulers, the Japanese. Then civil war broke out in Burma after its independence in 1948. Ethnic minority groups have been fighting for freedom against the central government ever since then. Fighting in the areas controlled by ethnic armies has killed many people, and villages have been burnt down. Villagers flee to neighboring countries for refuge. The most vulnerable are the children.

Nang Lum, one of our RWCT teachers, once told us the story of her childhood. There was fighting near her village in northeastern Burma, and later the village was burnt down. She was ten at that time. Her mother took her and her six-year-old sister into the jungle. Then the mother left her daughters in the jungle and went back to the burning village to retrieve her cattle. Nang Lum and her sister were frightened that night. In the ethnic minority areas of Burma you can hear thousands of similar stories.

The people on both sides of the civil war today were victims of these wars when they were young. Some people think that they might not have learned the lessons of war, or they learned only one-sided views presented in the name of patriotism, because schools in Burma have traditionally practiced passive learning.

If children are forced to learn passively, it is better not to include the topic of war in a school curriculum dominated by one-sided ideas. Today, we are creating thinking classrooms and it is appropriate to include the topic of war. Children in the war zones have already learnt about war through their own experiences. They can reflect on their experiences in the classroom. I believe that children will think about war, to learn from war and to create a peaceful world.

**Yekaterina Vishnyakova,**
*teacher of Russian language and literature, RWCT certifier, Moscow, Russia*

This is a hot question for many people. A few years ago, while delivering an RWCT workshop I suggested that participants plan a class session on the question, "*Do Russians strive for war"?* (This is a line from a Russian song popular in the 1960s.) The Realization of Meaning stage included reading mass media texts that discussed the Chechen War. I vividly remember the argument that immediately broke out among the participating teachers. Some of them expressed doubts that it was appropriate at all to touch upon this painful theme with students, some of whom knew about it all too well, and not only by hearsay. Most of the teachers tended to think that it was better not to disturb children's souls with such complicated, adult issues.

However, I think that we should talk about war with children. We should—because such talks are much needed. Being a mother of two boys, I see that my own children consider war to be fun. For them it is a sort of engaging entertainment, a game, in fact. They often fail to notice that in real life war is connected with human death and suffering. And how can children come to know about it if we, parents and teachers, carefully avoid the topic? I believe this conversation needs to be started early in a child's life, and it has to be continued not only at school, but in the family as well.

I also think that we need to talk to children about war because it is a way to make them feel responsible for all those around them, and for the future. There may be fewer wars in the world if we, the adults, realize—and make our children realize—that saying *Yes* or *No* to war depends not only on politicians, as many people tend to think, but on our own willingness or unwillingness to take part in it.

Unquestionably, war is not a simple thing to discuss with children. But who said that only simple topics are suitable for children?

**Laly Lomtatidze,**
*Department of Slavonic Studies, Shota Rustaveli Batumi State University; RWCT trainer, Batumi, Georgia*

Of course the answer is yes. There was a lot of bloodshed in my country after the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was even outright war. Children saw people being killed and robbed, both their loved ones and strangers. They saw houses, villages and cities being bombed and burned. Today in Georgia the word *refugee* has lost its original meaning and has come to mean something different: *outcast*, *loser*, a homeless person doomed to live in poverty and hunger. Children who grew up in the cramped and rundown dorm rooms and abandoned hotels of the Soviet times are the first to suffer from this perception.

In our city, Batumi, there are refugees from Abkhazia. Some of them attend the Saint Andrew Protocletos Seminary, where I teach Russian, and this has given me an opportunity to get to know them a little better. I have been deeply touched: These children's eyes are full of sorrow and fear. They don't try to distinguish themselves in class as they don't see any prospects for the future.

I tried talking to them about the war. To my surprise, the boys were eager to participate and related war stories that should have been forgotten by now. But apparently the adults in their families often talk about the war, so the sinister images do not fade from the children's memories. Once I asked them what they would do to change this tragic situation.

I have received a variety of answers. Some of them said that what was lost in the war can only be regained through war. Others have faith in the international community and its role in settling the conflict. Still others, and there are quite a lot of them, have no hope of seeing their homes again. After all, it has been sixteen years since they were forced to leave.

But it was the girl refugees that amazed me most. They refused to talk about war. They couldn't even bear to think about it or hear about it! I've given this considerable thought and have come to the conclusion that the female psyche is not attuned to the topic of war and destruction. A woman is a source of life! She can't continually think about war. She needs peace. And to achieve peace, she is capable of forgiving even her worst enemy.

**Mary-Wynne Ashford,**
*School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Canada. Co-President of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War from 1998 to 2002*

At the peak of the Cold War a young mother came to see me in my medical office about her small daughter Maria, who had just celebrated her seventh birthday. After her party, Maria watched the evening news with her family.

"Mama," she said quietly, "am I going to die in a nuclear war?"

Her shocked mother replied "Of course not darling! Whatever has made you ask such a question?"

"But… How do you know I am not going to die in a nuclear war?"

Children are exposed to images of war and suffering on television, radio, and computer games. Often they overhear conversations about war and tragedy because relatives are in danger. Sometimes they have classmates who have come as refugees from war-torn countries. What children learn is often deeply disturbing to them because they lack the context to interpret what is happening and where.

Teachers in countries not at war often ask if they should avoid the subject of war because it frightens children, or because it may burden the child with a sense of responsibility to stop war. When we teach young children about war we must be honest, because they trust us not to give false reassurance. At the same time, we must also offer them the information they need to understand the news they hear, and we must provide them with hope. They are often concerned that they are in immediate danger or that their house may be bombed like the houses on television. They may be afraid that their parents are going to leave them. They may also be worried about a family member who is serving or living in a war zone.

Children need help to process information about war, so that they can understand why countries are in conflict, and they need to know what is being done to end the violence. The most hopeful information today is the fact that, in terms of statistics, the world is moving away from war. Teachers can help build a culture of peace in the classroom knowing that [this process] is also happening in the world.

*Patrick Clarke*

# Teaching Controversial Issues: A Four-Step Classroom Strategy[1]

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***Patrick Clarke** is a past President of the British Columbia Teachers Federation and Director of the Professional and Social Issues Division, BCTF, Canada*

For the past decade, one of the most popular continuing education workshops offered by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation in Canada has been "Teaching controversial issues—without becoming part of the controversy." The popularity of the workshop reflects a growing awareness of the need to teach social issues. Yet the motivation for teaching about environmental sustainability, limits to economic growth, animal rights, or euthanasia is tempered by an understandable wariness of controversy. So while our workshop on teaching controversial issues is well subscribed, we know that the pedagogical danger zone such social issues present is one many teachers avoid.

Teachers may be discouraged from tackling controversial topics by lack of familiarity with the issues. They are uncomfortable if they do not feel they are "experts", or at least well-versed. Furthermore, teachers may be concerned that it would take too long to cover complicated issues, and that the regular curriculum would be neglected. With increasing standardization and calls for "accountability," teachers are not inclined to venture down the so-called side roads of learning, where social issues can so often lead.

We live in a time of general decline in the protocols of civil discourse. Television talk shows bristle with outrageous behavior, which teachers are understandably reluctant to see reproduced in their classrooms. We may be disinclined to take on "hot" topics for fear of the classroom chaos that might ensue.

Also, we sense that we are living in particularly cantankerous times, when our actions as teachers are under close and often uninformed scrutiny. If we teach about an issue, we can easily find ourselves accused of bias or ulterior political motives. In other words, in teaching about a controversy, we become the controversy. Teachers in the Victoria, BC, suburb of Esquimalt, where the Pacific fleet of the Canadian navy is based, experienced this phenomenon during the first Gulf War in 1990 when they attempted to have their students consider multiple perspectives on that war. They quickly found themselves at the center of a controversy when several parents and students with ties to the Navy expressed the view that there were no "perspectives." There was only the right side and the wrong side, and they didn't see any merit in spending time talking about the wrong side.

In spite of these impediments to addressing controversial issues, the fact remains that one of the major challenges for contemporary teaching is the problem of relevance. The value of a formal education is increasingly measured according to the degree to which it meets certain current expectations: that it should be future oriented, and should help students think critically and act upon social issues and problems.

Further, there is a growing belief today that a good education is an education that concentrates on helping students understand connections and interdependence. A good education is focused on developing an awareness of the planetary condition, and prepares students to act as effective, responsible citizens in a complex world. In that context, the relationship between education and public issues is apparent. Such an education, often described as a *global* education, turns to contemporary issues for its content. We could well ask, what are our chances of becoming global educators if we remain averse to taking on controversial public issues as part of our teaching practice?

What is needed is an approach to teaching issues that overcomes the obstacles—specifically, our concern for the influence of our own biases, our fear of becoming a lightning rod for controversy simply because a controversial issue is discussed in a class, and our lack of confidence because of unfamiliarity with an issue.

The approach to teaching controversial issues put forward here tries to answer at least part of those concerns. It does not deal directly with the role of issues in prescribed curricula. The possibilities for teaching issues as permitted or encouraged by curricula vary from province to province. However, it would not be extreme to suggest that any teacher who wants to can find a way to integrate consideration of controversial issues into regular course work. Every social studies program in our country, for example, encourages consideration of current events.

The teaching approach described here is a process that should help students make sense of a complex and confusing world. It is a method of analyzing an issue, considering the merits of an argument, and forming an opinion on the basis of critical analysis. The strategy is based on four steps or elements. Each provides students a set of questions that gives them a number of ways of looking at an issue as well as a sound basis for making a judgment.

As an essentially inductive process, the strategy is student centered, and the teacher's role is primarily that of monitor or resource person, so the teacher's bias should be less of a concern. Public concern over teaching a controversial issue is addressed because the strategy itself constitutes a demonstration of fair consideration. As an inquiry method, it provides a framework for classroom activity that discourages one-sided argument or ill-informed opinion.

To demonstrate how the strategy and related questions might work as applied to a controversial issue, we outline a set of possible lessons on Canada's role in Afghanistan. The central question would be, is this a situation where Canada should have its army engaged in combat?

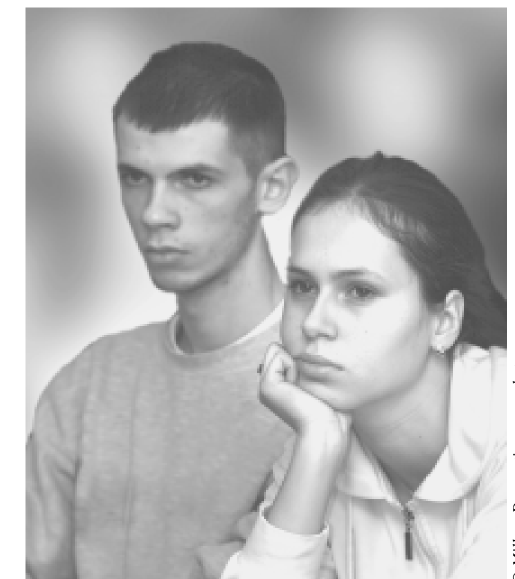
**Step One: What is the issue about?**

The first step in the process is to identify the key questions at the center of the controversy. Virtually every controversy turns around three types of questions: those relating to values—*What should be? What is best?*; those relating to information—*What is the truth? What is the case?*; and those relating to concepts—*What does this mean? How should this be defined?* In short, what is this controversy about? *What values, what information, and what concepts?*

By responding to these questions, students begin analyzing an issue by identifying the nature of the controversy. In doing this, students can fairly quickly get to the heart of the issue. This element of the strategy helps students get past some of the frustration often experienced in trying to understand an issue. It also gives them a chance to analyze the issue dispassionately before any consideration of the merits of a particular case.

Applied to the question of Canada's role in Afghanistan, the inquiry starts by determining the extent to which this is an issue of values. *Is the controversy in this question centered on what Canada should do in a moral sense? What is the right action for Canada in this case?*

The next question has to do with the available information regarding the issue. Is this an issue that arouses controversy because it is difficult to know what or whom to believe? *What are the contending voices and what are they saying?* At this stage of the discussion students are not considering the merits of the information, only what it is and how it represents the issue. In the case of the Afghanistan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[1] This article and the BCTF workshop "Teaching Controversial Issues" are based on *The Media and Public Issues: A guide for teaching critical mindedness*, by Walter Werner and Kenneth Nixon, 1990, Althouse Press, London.

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question, there are military information sources, NGOs working in the country, government and opposition sources of information. All of these can give students a sense of how varied views can be on a single issue, and render the question of who to believe rather complex.

With regard to Afghanistan, there could also be controversy due to disagreement over the concepts involved. What are *peacekeeping* and *peace making*? What is meant by *reconstruction*? What is the concept of *security* as it is applied in a place like Afghanistan? Any one of these terms or concepts can be a source of contention in a situation as complicated as Afghanistan. Students can develop a deeper appreciation for the nuances of an issue by realizing that there can be fundamental disagreements over the meanings of the terms used in debating it.

**Step Two: What are the arguments?**

Once students have determined the nature of the controversy, they consider the arguments supporting the various positions on the issue. The key concern here is determining just what is being said, and whether there is adequate support for the claims being made. This step is largely analytical in that it calls for examination of the content of an argument. It is also judgmental to a degree. At this step, students can begin judging the validity of various positions on a controversial issue. If students have determined that the controversy surrounding an issue involves information, then they should ask questions about the information available or provided. *Is there adequate information? Are the claims in the information accurate? Is the information appropriate to the issue? Are the sources primary or secondary? In general, are the conclusions presented in the argument reasonable, given the information available?* Most controversial issues are rooted in values, and there are critical questions students can ask about the values stated or employed in an argument. Specifically, what criteria are being used to make a judgment? In general there are two types: moral and prudential. Moral criteria for judgment are based on a concern for how all people will be affected. Prudential criteria are concerned mainly with how an individual person or group will be affected.

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Other questions students can use to test the acceptability of values claims are well known and universal in application: *Would you like it if this were done to you? What if everybody did that? Are there any situations where you would feel different or disagree with this value?* These questions give students a set of criteria for making judgments that can take them beyond relativism and, because of their universal application, help them reflect on the validity of dogmatic positions.

If the controversy involves definitions, meanings, or concepts, then students should try to determine whether the arguments presented use meanings or definitions that are clear. Also they should test to see whether these meanings are used consistently, and whether they are used appropriately and in a proper context.

The question of Canada's role in Afghanistan does raise the moral question of what Canada ought to do. The question of whether our role there is prudential or moral will likely elicit a quick response that it is a moral presence, where there is little prudential benefit. On this basis Canada appears to be doing the right thing. But students might ask to what extent a combat mission in Afghanistan actually serves the prudential interests of the military and commercial interests that benefit from military engagement. They might also reflect on how they might feel if they lived in Afghanistan and had this military presence imposed on them. Various factions in Afghanistan hold a wide range of views on this matter, and students would be well advised to investigate these perspectives before deciding what the "right" thing to do is.

**Step Three: What is assumed?**

Once students have considered the arguments in an issue, the critical question becomes, what are the underlying assumptions, or what is being taken as self-evident in the presentation of these arguments? It is at this stage that crucial matters of principle are employed to determine the validity of a position.

This framework or process has at its heart a fundamentally important concept, and that is that there is no relativity of values. It is not true that any opinion, position, or point of view is equally acceptable or legitimate. If the assumptions taken to justify an argument are based in prejudice, if the attitudes behind an argument are ethnocentric, racist, or parochial, then these assumptions are grounds for criticism, and reduce the legitimacy of the argument. Examples of this in relation to Afghanistan could be the notions that the people there are prone to violence or incapable of self-governance. The question for students to pose is, *what are the assumptions behind such arguments? Are they based on prejudice? Do they contradict universally held human values* such as those set out in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights?

A second element students can use to evaluate the assumptions behind an argument is the voice of the argument. Who is making the argument? Insiders or outsiders? Insiders may have particular information and interests that could give an argument a certain shape or orientation. Outsiders may have less information, but on the other hand may have an advantage in that they have no special interest. Often the assumptions behind an argument can best be tested by hearing views of both insiders and outsiders. In Afghanistan, information is often provided by the military. Are they "insiders"? Do they have a particular interest to protect or advance? What about NGOs, whose information is often contrary to military information? What are their interests? Are they "insiders" or "outsiders"?

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Once the arguments have been analyzed and the assumptions scrutinized, the final step is to examine how the issue and the arguments pertaining to it are presented or manipulated. This final question in the process helps students judge the quality of the information they are receiving.

**Step Four: How—and by whom—are the arguments manipulated?**

This is the stage of the process when questions are asked on the politics of the issue. This step is particularly important for students because it can help them understand how control of information can be used to influence opinion. To determine how an argument is being manipulated, students must first determine *who is involved and what their particular interests are in the issue. What is their rationalization for their position? What are their reasons for taking this position?*

By considering these questions, students begin to see how information can be selected or ignored, emphasized or downplayed, according to its value to various positions on an issue. The degree to which the parties involved are acting in self-interest and using only information that supports that interest could affect the legitimacy of their position. On the other hand, a strongly supported position, or one with a strong moral foundation, could add credibility to an argument. A growing contemporary concern is the role of the media in controversial issues and how media can engage in argument manipulation. It is very important for students to have an appreciation of how media are involved in issues. Media literacy has become an essential survival skill as the influence of the media increases. The question for students to address is, how

can the media both reflect and create reality? On any given controversial issue, to what extent is the media either creating the issue or manipulating the arguments?

Argument manipulation is usually accomplished through such strategies as scapegoating, false analogies, extreme examples, etc. Students should recognize that the degree to which the media or advocates of a position rely on such strategies provides an indication of the validity of an argument. Detecting such tactics gives students a useful tool for assessing an argument and making a judgment on an issue.

As far as the Afghanistan question is concerned, there is lots of manipulation of the arguments to go around, and in the end it may not lead to any conclusion, only an awareness that manipulation happens. That in itself is a worthy learning outcome. Nevertheless, it is evident that some time spent looking at examples of statements on the various sides should allow students to form an opinion on where the manipulation is taking place, and whether one side is more prone to it than the others.

### Conclusion

At the end of such an inquiry and discussion process, students may be less certain of their position than when they began. This outcome is entirely expected, since they now have more information and have engaged in a process that requires critical reflection and open-mindedness. Most importantly, they will have arrived at their conclusions through their own deliberation, and we teachers will have provided the lamp of learning, not the pointer and the answer book.

**Common strategies for manipulating arguments**

***Ad hominem strategy***: judgment based on who said something rather than on the merit of the statement

***Either/or tactic***: forcing a choice by presenting only two possibilities when there may be others

***Extreme examples***: non-representative examples used to prove a point, to slant an argument, to support a prejudice

***False analogy***: an analogy that makes an inappropriate connection or comparison.

***Irrelevant appeals***: appeals to emotion, patriotism, tradition.

***Leading statements or slogans***: statements designed to damage credibility, encourage hostility, create a false impression.

***Polarized thinking***: presenting limited and false choices, e.g., us/them, strong/weak, rich/poor, good/bad (encourages distrust, suspicion)

***Scapegoating***: assigning blame for a complex situation to a specific person or group

***Straw man***: a caricature of a person or group, set up to represent an easily defeated opponent

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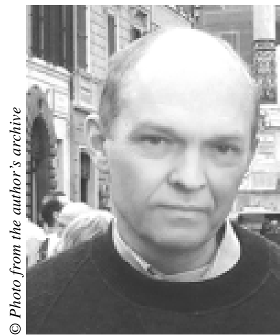
*Alexander Fedorov*

# Media Study in the Classroom: Creative Assignments for Character Analysis[1]



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"Did you like yesterday's episode?"
"Yeah."
"What did you like about it?"
"Everything."
"What do you mean—everything?"
"Well, just everything..."
"Well I liked it that Maria didn't desert her friend in need. She supported her, and looked after her, and helped her recover… What about you?"
"Me too."
"Cool, isn't it?"
"Cool, yeah."

I don't know about you, reader, but I've often overheard this kind of dull, empty dialogue between young people discussing the media—films, TV shows, newspaper articles… Can we help our students more perceptively analyze media characters and media texts as a whole? This question is the focus of the following article.

The *Russian Pedagogical Encyclopedia* defines *media education* as a trend in pedagogy toward teaching students about "the mechanisms of mass communication (print, TV, radio, film, video, etc.). The primary goals of media education are to prepare the new generation for life in the current information age and to teach young people to perceive and understand various forms of information, to become aware of the consequences of its psychological influence, and to master various…nonverbal means of communication through technology" (*Russian Pedagogical Encyclopedia*, 1993, p. 555).

In both high schools and universities, media education can develop students' critical thinking through analysis of the characters featured in various media forms and genres. Various assignments can be effectively used to stimulate students' media awareness, or perception of both (a) the feelings and ideas conveyed and (b) the mechanisms by which they are conveyed.

The method of media character analysis described below was employed in various courses for students of Media Education in the Social Pedagogy Department of the Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute.

**Concise media glossary**

*Media awareness* is the perception by the audience of the authors' attitudes and perspectives, which are conveyed through various expressive means inherent in a particular form or genre of media.

*Media text* is a message expressed in any media form (print, radio, TV, cinematography, video, Internet) or genre (article, broadcast, film, video clip, soundtrack).

*Character analysis* is the analysis of the character, motives, values, and behaviors of media characters.

*Media agencies* are editorial staffs, TV studio heads, etc.

*Media categories* are forms and genres of media.

*Media technologies* are technologies used in creating media texts.

*Media language* is an expressive means used in creating the images.

*Media representation* is concepts of the facts of reality in media texts.

[1] The article was written with the support of the Analytical Special Purpose Program of the RF Ministry of Education and Science for the "Development of the Scientific Potential of Universities" (2006–2008), Project 21.3.491 "Development of Critical Thinking and Media Competence of Pedagogical University Students within Specialization *Media Education*."

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However, the suggested approaches can also be effectively used by high school teachers, particularly in literature courses, as a supplement and extension to traditional methods of textual analysis. Our method is designed to develop not only critical and creative thinking as applied to particular media texts, but also media competence in a broader sense[2].

The analysis of media characters is based on a variety of creative assignments outlined here: literary imitation, dramatic role-playing, and graphic representation[3]. For each of these categories, a "bank" of creative assignments is provided from which a teacher can choose activities best fitting the form, genre, and content of a given media text, as well as the age, level, and needs of their students. The three categories of assignments correspond to stages in the process of creating a media text. The literary imitation assignments are related to the script-writing stage (devising a plot, development of characters, writing screenplays for scenes in well-known literary works). Role-playing assignments, involving games based on plots and characters, help students better understand the processes involved in staging a production. Graphic representation assignments are primarily concerned with the advertising of a media product, its representation in the press, on TV, radio, etc. Based on our experience, we recommend presenting the different types of assignments in the order noted above (although the sequence of particular assignments in each category may vary depending on the given text and students' needs). All of the suggested assignments are intended to develop the students' awareness and understanding of media: They help students delve into the inner world of the characters and better understand their motives, personalities, temperaments, and moral values.

**Literary imitation assignments for the analysis of media characters**

- Describe and analyze a particular event in a media text, including a description of the characters and an explanation of their actions and statements.
- Make up a story from the perspective of the main character or a minor character in a media text, maintaining the features of the character's personality and linguistic style.
- Make up a story from the viewpoint of an inanimate object featured in the text, thus shifting the narration towards a paradoxical, imaginary perspective.
- Place a character from a media text in a different situation (by changing the title and genre of the text; the time and setting of the action; composition elements—beginning, climax, denouement, epilogue; or the age, sex, nationality or other characteristics of the hero).
- Invent some original characters. Describe their physical qualities, and create dialogues that reveal their personalities. Incorporate them into a synopsis for an original script (a brief sketch, one or two pages long).
- Think up new physical, emotional, or moral trials that could be encountered by the main character in the text being analyzed.
- Write an original mini-script that demonstrates character development.
- Write an original piece (report or interview) for a newspaper, magazine, or website about a particular character.
- Make up "letters" (to newspapers, magazines, TV, the Ministry of Culture, etc.) from the perspective of readers or viewers of various ages and various social, professional, and educational backgrounds (see the "Monologue by a Woman-Pensioner" below).

Role-playing activities in the classroom can be organized in the form of creative contests, either for individual participants or for groups of two or three. For example, students first become familiar with the characteristics of a particular media text (they may do this at home or, if the text is not too long, during class) and then write a story in the voice of a given character. After all the students have written and presented their stories, the class engages in discussion about the strengths and shortcomings of each. The winners in this contest would be the stories that, according to the collective judgment, are most faithful to the style and characters of the original text.

Of course, there can be many different approaches to evaluating students' creative products, all of which will at some point involve the evaluator's own taste and subjective preferences. Even professional literary and film critics often disagree in their judgment of the same work. Therefore, when organizing such classroom contests it is important to involve students in establishing the criteria by which their work will be evaluated. In our opinion, the best criterion of success for assignments such as "create a story from the viewpoint of a particular character" or "make up a scene placing a character in a different situation" is the ability of participants to identify with the character, to understand the character and reveal his or her psychology through language, and to provide motives for the character's acts and gestures (including those not described in the original text).

Especially popular with students are the assignments that require them to make up a story from the perspective of an inanimate object or animal featured in the text. Possible examples include a bank note being passed from one person to another; a mirror in the main character's room; a car used by the hero to pursue criminals, etc. When working on such assignments, students often find parallels with other art forms (for example, many students remember—and draw inspiration from—a song by Vladimir Vysotsky, "I'm a Fighter," written from the perspective of a fighter plane).

Our students definitely enjoyed composing stories from the viewpoints of inanimate objects such as a revolver in a gangster film, the ocean liner *Titanic*, a feather in the film *Forrest Gump*, Harry Potter's magic wand, etc. An especially successful example is this story written by Yelena C.:

*Hi! First let me introduce myself, I'm the one who played the leading role in the film* Perfume. *I'm the vial in which my brilliant master first mixed up all the ingredients of the perfume he created. I could feel every drop slowly sliding down my glass sides. Each one was magnificent! When I was filled to the brim I felt very important, I would even say, great! My feelings at that moment were indescribable! At last my master uncorked me at the site where he was to be executed... Well, you know the rest. The effect was amazing! At that moment I realized that I was a real star! But alas, quite soon I had to come back down to earth: I found myself trampled in the mud, empty and deserted... And I played the entire role without a stunt double—I hope the audience appreciates what I had to go through!*

(The same student, Yelena C., even contributed some black humor about popular media characters: *Jean-Baptiste from* Perfume *comes to visit Hannibal Lecter from* The Silence of the Lambs. *'Will you dine with me?' Dr. Lecter asks. 'No thanks,' Jean-Baptiste answers, 'I'll just enjoy the smell.'*)

We believe that such assignments are in line with the teaching methods of V.S. Bibler, a Russian philosopher and author of a comprehensive philosophy of culture: "Students in the classroom recreate possible variants of mankind's accomplishments, as well as alternative versions of these accomplishments, and, most important, they arrive at a conscious stopping point [to think] through what has already been accomplished, invented, and created by other people" (Bibler, 1993, pp. 13–14).

In a similar way, we use creative assignments to help students better understand the particulars of audience awareness: Students engage in actions that help them experience other people's reactions through their own. One such assignment is to write letters to various organizations from the viewpoints of filmgoers and TV viewers of various ages, tastes, and education levels. The criterion of success in this assignment is the writer's ability to identify with the imagined author of the letter or monologue.

The "Monologue by a Woman-Pensioner about a Soap Opera," by student Irina O. is, in our opinion, a successful example:

*Yesterday I even skipped the laundry to watch the next part. Poor girl, so nice and kind-hearted she is, and so many troubles*

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[2] For the statistical analysis of the method's effectiveness see Fedorov, 2005, pp. 150–181.
[3] Some of the assignments were described previously in: BFI, 1990; Semali, 2000, pp. 229–231; Berger, 2005, p. 125; Fedorov, 2004, pp. 43–51; however we considerably supplemented and developed the series of assignments.

*raining down on her head! And that rascal, Leoncio, how is he even allowed to live? Never in my life have I seen such cruelty! I'd strangle him with my own two hands if I could... Poor girl, she seems so sincere, she does. I can't look at her without starting to cry. And her eyes are so sad that it breaks your heart! You just feel how miserable her life is... I say she should turn round and bash him right on his mean head, and run away with her boyfriend. Though I guess they'll get together all the same! Such a lovely couple... And look at that Rose, so nasty, mean, and greedy! Where did they find such an ugly mug, I wonder? I hated her the minute I saw her. ... But January, she's something else—so fat and so dark, but so warm-hearted. And always willing to help. Oh my, will I live to see the end of the last series? I really hope everything turns out OK. Our TV people need to learn how to make good shows. The kind that when you watch them, you want to watch more and more!*

Creative writing of this type develops students' imaginations, and their ability to identify with the persona of the invented character (the purported author of the letter or monologue). Comparing students' letters and monologues with actual letters from TV viewers and filmgoers in Russian newspapers, we repeatedly observed obvious similarities in both language and ideas. This suggests that the student authors successfully caught certain aspects of the popular perception of the media: an obvious preference for entertaining and "satisfying" media products; a desire on the part of older audience members to return to the ideals of the past; and the desire to find in media texts a rosy view of life.

Our observations have shown, though, that many young people, including the students in Media Education, also tend to favor an idealized reflection of reality in media texts, as shown in the following example:

*This is a story of a juvenile delinquent. Basically his character is clear to me. He grew up without a father so he became hardened and embittered against the whole world... Yes, unfortunately, we often encounter such people in real life. But I don't think we need to show them on the screen. What we should be showing is the accomplishments of the young. We need optimism, and prospects for the future!* (Oleg G.)

As seen from the excerpt above, the writer seems ready to give up truthfulness in representation for the sake of uplifting models and positive examples. In our opinion, Oleg G.'s position reflects the naive hopes of a certain part of the audience who believe that life would change for the better if only we would ban negativity from the screen and stick to showing ideal heroes.

However, the majority of today's high school and university students are not inclined to demand ideal heroes from the contemporary media. What they are after is high-grade entertainment. They want lavish melodramas and adventure stories set in the past (or, as a variation, in the imaginary future), preferably about the lives of aristocrats or foreigners—fairy tales for grown-ups, that have nothing to do with the burdens of everyday reality.

Nevertheless, there are some young people who prefer realistic portrayals of characters in media texts:

*The film vividly conveys the heroine's psychology: She lost real contact with her mother long ago; she feels deprived and unhappy, and attempts to express herself through scandalous actions. She is sick and tired of her family's constant reproaches and quarrels. She wants to get away from home, to live her own life. She is excitable, nervous, rude, and often cruel. She may even be capable of murder—say, in a street fight... At the same time she is clever in her own way, and she longs for happiness—which, for her, means sex, dancing, and entertainment. She is sick and tired of living among factory smokestacks and associating with foul-mouthed thugs, and watching her stupefied mother constantly fighting with her drunkard father. It's all a vicious circle for her... I know a lot of girls like this in real life, too. Other girls, their friends, seem to live only for themselves. They are often indifferent to the suffering they cause.* (Lyudmila D.)

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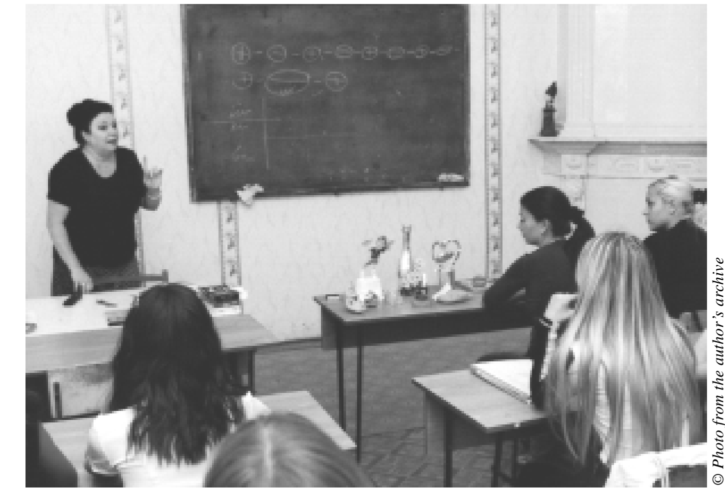
Lyudmila D.'s description provides a moral evaluation of the characters' behaviors, although it is lacking in nuance and fails to explore the author's intent.

This whole complex of literary imitation assignments expands and supplements the students' available knowledge and skills, at the same time giving them a practical framework: Students have an opportunity to develop their interests, imaginations, associative, creative, critical, and individual thinking, as well as their media competence. Further, the assignments call for the practical application of concepts already familiar to the students from courses in literature (for example, *theme, idea, story*), art (*color, light, composition, perspective*), and music (*tempo, rhythm*).

**Dramatic role-playing assignments**

- Dramatized interview (or press conference) with various media personalities.
- Dramatized "International Conference of Media Critics" with comprehensive discussion of media figures and their personas.
- "Legal" role-playing sketch, including an investigation of the crimes of a negative protagonist, and his trial.
- Actor sketches: Create and perform a sketch using roles described in the text (e.g., an official and a visitor, children and parents, an investigator and a suspect, a detective and a witness, a teacher and a student, a doctor and a patient). Students work in groups of two or three. Each group prepares and presents a role-playing project, which is recorded on video and shown in class. The teacher acts as an adviser. The projects are discussed and compared. This assignment not only offers the participants an opportunity for creative work, but also provides rich material for discussion. In the course of this discussion students willingly share their viewpoints, explaining how they would behave in a similar situation and why.
- Role-playing game: Create a TV broadcast, working through all the stages of preparation and production, including casting and rehearsals.

Many of our students especially enjoyed role-playing games based on popular media characters (Batman, Cheburashka, Shrek, etc.). Below is the text of "Shrek Visits Radio Station *BLOT,*" a dramatic sketch created by Yekaterina F. and Daria K. (as hosts) and Dmitry S. (as Shrek):


*© Photo from the author's archive*

*Hi, dear listeners! Daria and Yekaterina present the weekly program "Guests of the Blot." Today our guest is the well-known animated character Shrek.*

*"Tell us please, how did you manage to win the hearts of so many millions of girls?"*

*"First, I don't bathe like ordinary guys do. I only take a mud bath once a month. Second, I have a beautiful suntan all year round. I also have lots of other virtues of course, but I prefer to let my admirers talk about them, rather than recounting them myself."*

*"Do you have any bad habits?"*

*"Oh yes! Picking my nose."*

*"What is your relationship with your friend Donkey off-screen?"*

*"He talks too much, and it gets on my nerves..."*

*"What's your favorite food?"*

*"I'm fond of slugs in their own juice. My wife Fiona is the best cook when it comes to slugs."*

*"What are your plans for the upcoming animation season?"*

*"I'd like to star in a good thriller. But mind you, I'd only agree to be a star—supporting roles are out of the question..."*

*"That's certainly a worthy aspiration. Good luck to you!"*

*"Ciao, babes!"*

*"Today our invited guest has been the big, friendly animated character Shrek, with Yekaterina and Daria as your hosts. See you next week!"*

Creative role-playing assignments enrich and develop the skills acquired by the students at the previous, literary imitation stage. They also help students become more confident and develop their social and improvisation skills; the actors' speech tends to become more natural and fluent.

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*A fantasy photo collage created by a group of Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute students. It is based on the popular reality-show* The Last Hero.

**Graphic representation assignments**

- Designing advertising posters, with a focus on presenting media characters
- Making collages based on a media text
- Creating a series of pictures for a comic book based on a media text
- Taking photos of friends for an imaginary glossy magazine, with a focus on the unique personality of the model

This series of assignments focuses students' attention on the graphic aspects of media texts and on visual features of the characters.

In completing the assignments in all three categories, students learn to perceive and critically analyze the character and actions of media figures, looking at them not only from the detached perspective of a reader or viewer, but also from the artistic perspective of their creators.

By learning to perceive, interpret, analyze, and evaluate media texts, and by mastering various forms of self-expression involving technology, young people learn the ways of media culture. In contemporary society, media competence helps a person take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the information resources of TV, radio, video, cinema, Internet, and the press, and better understand the language and techniques of media culture.

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## *Appendix* — Questions for the Analysis of Media Characters in the Classroom

*Questions on how media agencies influence the characteristics of media figures*

- Can characteristics of media figures be defined by the thematic/genre/political and other biases of particular media agencies? In what way?

*Questions on how media categories influence the characteristics of media personages*

- What are the similarities and differences between the characters in a tragedy, drama, and melodrama?

*Questions on how media technologies influence the characteristics of media figures*

- Does a character's appearance depend on the media technologies used? If so, in what ways?

*Questions on how media languages influence the characteristics of media figures*

- How are exaggerated gestures and facial expressions of the actors connected to the genres of comedy, musical, or fantasy?
- How can the authors of a media text demonstrate that a certain character has changed?
- Can you think of a scene where the events are seen through the eyes of one of the characters, or reported by one of the characters? Does this perspective help to create a sensation of danger or surprise at certain moments in the scene?
- Why are certain objects (including the clothing of characters or presenters) depicted in a particular way? What do these objects tell us about the characters, their lifestyles, their attitudes to each other? Does the setting indicate anything about the nature of the people living in it? If so, how? How are personalities revealed through dialogue and language?

*Questions on how media representations influence the characteristics of media personages*

- How are characteristics such as family, social background, gender, and race represented in popular media productions in different genres, and from different countries?
- What political, social, and cultural trends are represented in a given text? Do you see evidence of rebellion, sexism, conformism, anxiety, stereotypical thinking, generational conflict, arrogance, snobbery, isolation, etc.?
- How do the characters in a given text express their viewpoints and ideas?
- What are the relationships between the characters; what are their motives and the consequences of their actions, and how does the media portrayal influence our perception of them?
- How do the characters develop? Do the protagonists change as a result of the events described in the text? How do they change and why?
- What did the characters learn in the course of the story?
- Can you provide examples of texts in which certain characters are portrayed in deliberate contrast to each other?
- How, and in what scenes, are the conflicts between characters in this text revealed?
- Who plays the most active role in the given text, a male or a female protagonist? What actions does this character perform?
- Are there any connections between minor plotlines that help the viewer understand the characters and their ideology, as well as furthering the themes of the text?
- Should the authors of a media text depict negative characters as the embodiment of evil?
- Does the ending logically follow from the characters' personalities and philosophies? If not, how should the story end, considering what is known about the characters? What ending would you propose and why?

*Questions on how different characteristics of the media audience—gender, social, psychological and others—influence the perception of media figures*

- What is your opinion of the character N.? Do you approve of his/her behavior? Would you do the same thing as N. in a similar situation?
- What makes you sympathize with some characters and pass judgment on others?
- What is the contribution of each character to your understanding of the main protagonist?
- Can you give an example where your sympathies for a character changed in the course of the plot?
- Ideally, what qualities and character traits would you like to see in a hero or heroine? Would you characterize your favorite hero as an active and energetic person?
- Can the reaction of the audience prolong or cut short the lives of characters in media series?

*Kathryn L. Bauserman, Susan E. Israel, and Cathy Collins Block*

# Metacognitive Vocabulary Instruction: Helping Children Think About Word Meanings

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On average, school-age students gain vocabulary at a rate of about 3,000 words per year through reading, oral language, and listening to auditory and visual media (Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002; Stahl, 2003). But not all students learn vocabulary words at the same rate. By second grade the word knowledge gap between high and low students was found to be about 3,900 words (Biemiller & Slomin, 2001). This figure can be extrapolated to a difference of almost 20,000 known words between good and less able seventh graders. Why is a varied and rich vocabulary important for students? Students' struggles with word meanings often cause breakdowns in comprehension. They try familiar strategies such as rereading, using context, and reading to the end, but they still fail to understand word meanings.

### What can classroom teachers do to help students learn new word meanings?

Research has demonstrated that increased vocabulary improves reading comprehension (MacLean, 2000; Stahl, 1999). "Teachers (in elementary and middle-school classrooms) are aware that many students continue to struggle with comprehension because of limited vocabulary knowledge and ineffective strategies" (Harmon, 2002, p. 606). And yet vocabulary instruction has received little emphasis in schools (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

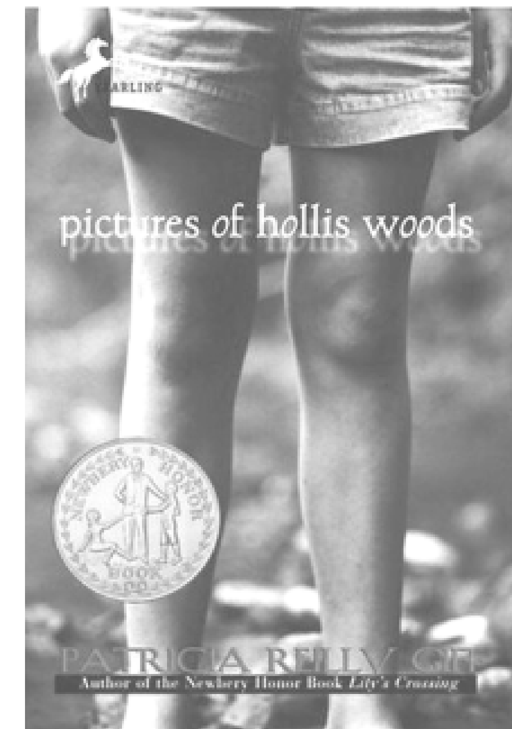
The acquisition of vocabulary is important to students' construction of the meaning of text, and consequently familiarizing teachers with principles that increase students' vocabulary is critical. The five principles presented in this article were synthesized from seminal work by Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002); recommendations from the National Reading Panel (2000) and some of the leading researchers in vocabulary instruction (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2001; Block, 2004; Block, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2003; Block & Mangieri, 2005); and recent research in metacognition in literacy learning (Israel, Bauserman, & Block, 2005; Israel, Block, Bauserman & Kinnucan-Welsch, 2005; Paris & Flukes, 2005). Strategies that focus on students' interests and not on comparative performance increase students' motivation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). These strategies help students learn new vocabulary words by (a) adding ownership to the learning process (Ruddell & Shearer, 2002), (b) providing new, creative, and metacognitive ways to learn (Israel, Block, Bauserman & Kinnucan-Welsch, 2005; Levin, Levin, Glasman, & Nordwell, 1992), and (c) varying learning environments (Almasi, 1996; Harmon, 2002; Malone & McLaughlin, 1997; O'Connor, Notari-Syverson, & Vadasy, 2002).

*Metacognition* is defined as being aware of one's own learning or thinking processes; therefore *metacognitive* means having the characteristic of being aware of one's thinking processes. An illustration of metacognitive thinking would be a mental conversation in which a learner asks, "What was I thinking (or what strategies did I use) when I figured out the meaning of *dollop*?" The learner would then proceed to answer the question by thinking about the mental processes that took place. This article describes and illustrates five principles of metacognitive vocabulary instruction that, when utilized, can increase students' vocabulary knowledge and comprehension abilities. A word of caution should be noted, however: Metacognitive activities can be very demanding of a learner's thinking abilities; and while we encourage teachers to challenge all students to participate, success cannot be guaranteed.

### Five principles of metacognitive vocabulary instruction

Typical instructional methodology for teaching vocabulary has consisted of looking up a word in the dictionary, writing the definition, and using the word in a sentence. This strategy is not effective in motivating students to increase vocabulary (Stahl, 1999). Furthermore, when students remain unmotivated, teachers will not see evidence of transfer of knowledge from word lists to reading, writing, or oral vocabulary usage (Block, 2004). Application of recent research in the areas of vocabulary instruction, metacognition, and student-centered learning can help increase students' motivation to learn new vocabulary. When teachers and students are engaged in high quality learning activities following research-based principles of best practice, effective vocabulary learning takes place. Metacognition helps students build on connections, as described by schema theory (Piaget, 1969), for long-term learning of new words. For example, the learner can reflect on other times when he or she has heard the word used, thus making connections to the current usage, increasing contextual examples of the word, and building understanding of the new word. (See examples using the word *dollop,* in Table 1.)

In the following section, each of the five metacognitive vocabulary principles is explained and a metacognitive activity is described.

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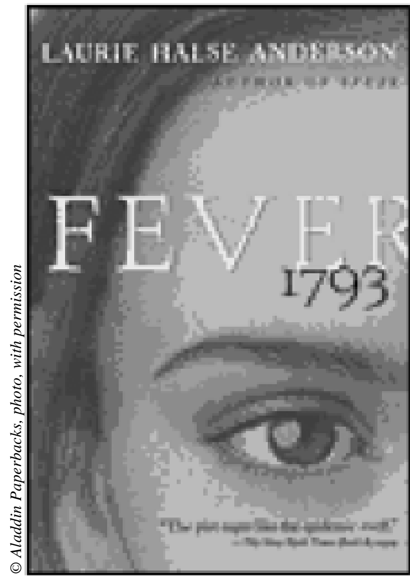
***Principle 1: Metacognitive vocabulary instruction helps students make connections.*** Learning theory research over the past fifty years has helped educators understand how children learn. Piaget (1969) and Vygotsky (1978) helped us understand schema theory and the zone of proximal development where learning takes place. Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, and Goetz (1977) applied schema theory to reading. Our brains categorize and organize information according to a system (schemata) that constitutes our existing learning. New information that does not make any

**Table 1 Metacognitive Thinking Boxes**
Sample entries from a student about the book *Pictures of Hollis Woods*, by Patricia Giff, 2002

| Vocabulary Word | Thinking About Text Connections | Thinking About Personal Connections | Thinking About World Connections |
|---|---|---|---|
| dollop (p. 1) | The peanut butter was on the picture. I think it was bigger than a smear. It seems like a lot to be on her picture. | I have heard people say they wanted a dollop of whip cream on their pumpkin pie. It is pretty big. | I think dollop always has to do with food, but I am not sure. |
| kale (p. 8) | It is a vegetable. It helps us remember Josie's last name. | I have never tasted kale. Our teacher says it is like spinnach. | Where do they grow kale? Who eats kale? I wonder what it looks and tastes like. |
| skittered (p. 16) | She was in a hurry. She had to use the restroom. | I think it is like trying to run in the halls at school but making it look like you're not running. | Do adults skitter? Or is it just something children do? Are you always in a hurry when you skitter? |
| whittling (p. 18) | You cut into wood with a knife to make things like carvings. Josie did this in the story. | My friend's grandpa cut some animals out of wood. They were pretty cool. | There is a picture in our social studies book of a wooden deer. It looked very old. |



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connections with existing information is highly unlikely to be retained. Culture can influence a learner's ability to build schema. Students from cultural or economic backgrounds that differ markedly from the mainstream may have different first-hand experiences, so it may be more difficult for them to form information connections with school-related topics (Heath, 1983; Nilsen & Nilsen, 2002). Instructional strategies such as modeling the use of connecting words (e.g., *such as*, *like*, and *kind of like ____and ____put together*) are required to help students initiate these vocabulary-building thought processes.

***Activity:***
*Metacognition Thinking Boxes,* as shown in Table 1, can help increase vocabulary acquisition during reading. Metacognition Thinking Boxes can be completed by individuals or small groups, or can be used as a basis for rich discussions. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) summarized metacognitive teaching strategies as relating information to self, text, and world ideas. The Thinking Boxes provide a framework for students to relate vocabulary words to texts they have read (Thinking about Reading Connections), to what is important in their life (Thinking About Personal Connections), and to things related to the world (Thinking About World Connections).

***Principle 2: Metacognitive vocabulary instruction helps students gain full word knowledge.***
There are four degrees of word knowledge: unknown words, initial recognition, partial word knowledge, and full word knowledge (Dale & O'Rouke, 1986). Students ultimately need to learn vocabulary words well enough to have a thorough understanding of the concept of each word and a working knowledge of the syntactical forms of the word, i.e., full word knowledge. Blachowicz and Lee (1991) describe the acquisition of vocabulary as a continuous process along these four degrees. Students can use metacognitive strategies to consider what they already know and what they need to learn about a new word. The learner can ask simple metacognitive questions about personal thought processes to think more deeply about a word and its meaning. For example, metacognitive questions can help students explore a variety of syntactical forms of a new word. Teachers can help children think about and ask themselves the following metacognitive questions about parts of speech: Does this verb have a noun form? Does this noun have a verb form? Does it have an adjective form? Does it have an adverb form? This process helps students increase understanding and gain full word knowledge.

***Activity:***
*Whole–Part–Whole* is a three-step activity that helps students develop full word knowledge and learn vocabulary words well.

1. Whole: Key vocabulary words are pulled from the text.
2. Part: These words are dissected and metacognitive questions are used to unlock full word knowledge and learn syntactical forms.
3. Whole: The text is revisited to help students understand word meanings as they apply in context.

For example, students reading the book *Fever, 1793* came across some similar words that were confusing them: *yellow fever, miasma, plague,* and *pestilence.* They pulled the words out of the story to do a more in-depth analysis of the word meanings and distinctions among them. They examined the words by asking metacognitive questions about word meanings and the syntactical forms of the words. Then they went back to the text to see if the shades of meaning and word distinctions made sense in the context.

***Principle 3: Metacognitive vocabulary instruction models the use of new words through class discussions.***
Discussing vocabulary words during and after reading enables students to use the new words in oral and written responses (Brett, Rothlein & Hurley, 1996; Dole, Sloan & Trathen, 1995; Harmon, 2002; Hennings, 2000). Preteaching vocabulary has shown to be less effective (Pearson & Gallagher, 1984; Pikulski, 1989; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Effective teachers can model think-aloud strategies to show students how to use new words in their oral and written language. An example of a think-aloud might be: "What word have we read today that might work in this sentence? 'Even though she is at the top of the class in math, she is still.. (e.g., *humble*)'" During class discussions the teacher demonstrates how to use new words to elaborate on thoughts and ideas, to help students gain a working oral and written knowledge of new words (LaFlamme, 1994; Weir, 1991). These think-aloud and modeling processes give students strategies to increase their own use of new words in response journals and other written work (Dixon-Krauss, 2002).

Students also learn vocabulary through listening to passages in read-alouds (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2001; Stahl, Richek, & Vandevier, 1991), through shared reading experiences (Senechal & Cornell, 1993), and through independent reading (Ruddell & Shearer, 2002). Each of these provides effective teachable moments for informal vocabulary lessons. Teachers and students can develop think-aloud procedures that can be used to clarify word meanings during a read-aloud, shared reading, or silent reading period. As students perform think-alouds, they can self-assess their need for additional clarification and signal the teacher to inform her of their need (see Block & Mangieri, 2004, for types of signals). The teacher then stops to provide needed definitions.

***Activity:***
*Listen Up!* In this activity the class decides each day on a vocabulary word to focus on, for example *humble*, and everyone (teacher and students) makes an effort to use the word as many times as possible during the course of ordinary events that day. Examples: "He was humble when he won the race at recess" (correct usage). "She was humble when she proudly called out the winning answer" (incorrect usage). The whole class tracks how many times the word is used—correctly and incorrectly—throughout the day. Think-alouds can be performed to help clarify meaning when a word is used incorrectly. In the example above, the teacher might ask the student to think about the meanings of *humble* and *proud* to determine whether they make sense as combined in the sentence.

***Principle 4: Metacognitive vocabulary instruction allows students to self-select vocabulary words.***
Students learn more vocabulary words when they have a voice in the selection process. Ruddell and Shearer (2002) found that with self-selected vocabulary words, students learned a greater number of words, devoted more learning effort, and retained more words for a longer time. As students read, they can identify words that are unclear. Then they can ask themselves if a particular word is critical to constructing the meaning of the passage. If so, they can decide to add the word to their self-selected list of vocabulary words.

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***Activity:***
*Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (VSS)* enables ownership through personal selection in vocabulary learning. For example, the teacher may assign five words to learn, and ask each student to select five additional words that he or she would like to learn. This strategy motivates students to learn more new vocabulary terms because they have been given a choice (Ruddell & Shearer, 2002). This self-selection process allows students to choose vocabulary words that are personally meaningful, and then they can relate the words they have chosen to their prior knowledge and cultural experiences through metacognitive processing.

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***Principle 5: Metacognitive vocabulary instruction provides students with an opportunity to learn with peers.***
Socio-linguistic learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) is based on the principle that thoughts and language are related, and learning takes place through social interaction with adults or more capable peers. Through oral language, students are able to learn from peers. Based on this knowledge, we should create small group and peer-learning environments to enhance vocabulary acquisition (Allington. & Johnston, 2002). Two effective paired group strategies are *reciprocal peer tutoring* (Malone & McLaughlin, 1997), and *teacher-facilitated peer dialogues* (Harmon, 2002). One advantage in peer learning contexts is that students are less likely to feel threatened (Almasi, 1996). Students share their thinking processes as they discover new words. One student's knowledge and experience can scaffold another student's understanding, leading to deeper comprehension of a text.

***Activity:***
*Literature Circles* in which one student is assigned the role of *Word Wizard* are an excellent tool for collaborative learning. The Word Wizard researches the meanings and even the etymologies of potential vocabulary words before the literature circle meets. Collaborative discussions, and sharing of metacognitive thoughts and think-alouds, help students apply the meaning to the context, thus developing full word knowledge (Dale & O'Rouke, 1986). An example of this type of discussion is seen in the Whole–Part–Whole activity for Principle 2. Some examples of metacognitive discussion prompts can be found in Table 2.

| **Table 2** | **Metacognitive Discussion Prompts** * |
|---|---|
| **Purpose of responses during discussions** | **Prompts to help students increase metacognition during classroom discussions** |
| To increase meaning construction of information being discussed | Before I started reading/thinking about ______ information,<br>I remember what I learned about __<br>While we were reading/thinking about _______ information,<br>I discovered why/how this information influenced_______<br>We can use this information when we study ___ or learn about ___ |
| To help monitor understanding of information being discussed | I was confused about ______<br>When I was unable to determine the meaning of a word, I related this word to. |
| To help evaluate information being discussed | This information is important in our discussion about ____ because ____<br>This makes me feel _____<br>This information is important because ______<br>What I liked about _________ |

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**Vocabulary assessment**

Metacognitive vocabulary instruction matches assessment with instructional goals. The National Reading Panel (2000) suggests that there is no single best method for assessing vocabulary, and each assessment method analyzed in their report produced different results. They concluded that standardized tests may be most appropriately used as a global measure to provide a baseline of vocabulary knowledge. Teacher-created tests are probably best used as measures to assess whether students are meeting instructional goals and gaining full word knowledge. Individual vocabulary assessment can be conducted using Reflective Metacognitive Interviews (RMI). The teacher can "see inside the mind of a student" by asking questions that require the student to share understanding of a passage. Teacher questions can help the student clarify his/her thinking about difficult vocabulary words (Israel, Bauserman, & Block, 2005). For example, after reading the opening line, "I'll swing by my ankles, she'll cling to your knees as you hang by your nose from a high-up trapeze" from the poem "Acrobats" in *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (Silverstein, 1974), a second grade girl reported: "I don't know what a trapeze is. This poem is about acrobats, and I think that it's like people who do somersaults and cartwheels." She read the rest of the poem: "But just one thing, please, as we float through the breeze—Don't sneeze." She added: "At the beginning of the poem, I didn't know what a trapeze is…. The very end of the poem, I didn't get what they said about the sneeze…. I had to read the last part a few times, and I still didn't get it." During the RMI interview, the teacher asked some metacognitive questions to help the student understand the poem: What were you thinking when you read trapeze? Have you been to a circus? What did you see there? What is a trapeze? What connection can you make between a nose and sneezing? If you are hanging by your nose, what will happen when you sneeze?



Additional metacognitive assessment ideas can be found in Israel, Bauserman, and Block (2005).

**Summary and conclusions**

Effective teachers remember that the purpose of vocabulary instruction is to help students use new, rich words automatically and independently, in their in reading, writing, and oral language. Vocabulary lessons should increase students' abilities to comprehend all genres of writing. Metacognitive vocabulary instruction goes beyond looking up the word in the dictionary, writing its definition, and using it in a sentence. It helps students make connections and build understanding as they read and learn.

Metacognitive vocabulary instruction helps students make metacognitive and personal connections while demonstrating a variety of strategies for learning vocabulary. It motivates students to learn new words and helps students learn those new words well. Through think-alouds, teachers model the use of unknown words in class discussions. Students are allowed to self-select vocabulary words and are provided with an opportunity to learn with peers. Finally, authentic assessments help teachers meet vocabulary instructional goals. Effective teachers can help students develop independent metacognitive strategies that become lifelong tools for unlocking word meaning.

In 1925, Whipple wrote, "Growth in reading power means, therefore, continuous enriching and enlarging of the reading vocabulary and increasing clarity of discrimination in appreciation of word values." More than seventy-five years later, this claim remains unchallenged (National Reading Panel, 2000). We must no longer exclude metacognitive learning theory from our teaching of vocabulary skills. When teachers interweave all five of these student-centered principles of metacognitive vocabulary instruction, elementary and middle school students can reap the benefits. When students have access to a tapestry of new, rich word meanings, gains in comprehension can't be far behind.

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# Staying Connected with the Heart of Education: Science for Pre-service Elementary Teachers

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"Remember to always stay connected with kids and schools," my principal told me when I took a leave from teaching and enrolled in full-time graduate studies. Dave was a warm-hearted person who generously shared his time and his smiles with children before, during, and after school. I have never forgotten his words of wisdom, and indeed his advice has shaped my career as an educator.

When I started graduate school I had every intention of returning to teaching. However, I did not know then that the next time I stood before a class to teach, it would be at the university, and my students would be future teachers. For the next six years I taught future elementary teachers in a one-year teacher education program. In this paper I share four examples of collaboration with educators that helped me stay connected with kids and schools and provided opportunities for my students (future teachers) to learn about the importance of working and learning together as educators. It is my hope that these examples will provide some practical ideas for teachers and for teacher educators. Moreover, I hope to illustrate that simply aiming to collaborate with other educators often creates rich educational opportunities. I believe it is our intentions as educators that really matter, and keeping children at the heart of our intentions.

## Collaboration I: Lever-operated puppets

When I taught children at school I attempted to make learning exciting by creating a learning environment that encouraged their active participation. Similarly, as a novice teacher educator I set out to make university learning meaningful and motivating. After deciding to introduce my pre-service teachers to the physics of levers and motion by having them make lever-operated puppets, I contacted a local teacher to ask if she might use some lever-operated puppets for her school play. I remember her positive response—her immediate question was "how many puppets could we make?" At that point I had no definite idea about how to make this work, but I knew it would be authentic if it happened. Authentic learning is characterized by linking what is taught to an application of this learning. It is even better if the task has a real purpose. If I expected pre-service teachers to assign their future students authentic tasks, then I too must provide authentic assignments in the teacher education program.

After my conversation with the teacher I was excited and nervous at the same time. Did I actually say *life-size* puppets to the teacher? How would I do this? Since the puppets would be made of

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cardboard, I would need enough huge pieces of cardboard for 80 pre-service teachers. There was only one solution. My students would think me crazy, but I decided to send an e-mail over the December holidays requesting that they attempt to bring a bicycle box or freezer box or any other large cardboard box for the first class in January. I then began making calls to local bike shops and furniture stores to see what I could collect. I had started down a path, and although I did not know where it would lead me, I knew it was an authentic one.

What else did I need to prepare? How would I set this up? The school play was to be about the African Savannah, so we would need resources with accurate drawings of African animals. I decided to teach my students how to make a mini lever-operated puppet in one 90-minute class, and in the next class they would create the life-size puppet. The mini-puppets went very well. The storage of huge sheets of cardboard, and where to keep the life-size puppets, was not yet part of my plan. The future teachers paired up to create 20 life-size puppets in each class. They made giraffes, meerkats, elephants, lions, oryxes, rhinoceroses, zebras, cheetahs, and more. Future teachers spread out down university hallways, working on the floor just like kids often do at school. Most importantly, they worked extremely hard to finish the puppets and to make them as life-like as possible, knowing that children would be operating them in a school play.

There was nowhere to store these beautiful cardboard puppets, so we had to deliver them to the school immediately. We were on the third floor, and many of them would not fit in the elevator. I still remember carefully walking with a giraffe down two sets of stairs. Luckily one of my teaching assistants suggested that we use her car, which had a hatchback, and we soon began loading the cardboard animals. I called the school to make sure we could get in and leave the puppets for the teacher. I think we made four or five trips, being as careful as possible with our savannah puppets. When the teacher arrived at school the next day she was ecstatic. Of course she could not store 36 life-size puppets in her room, so she distributed the puppets to various classrooms in the school. A high school art student worked with the children to paint the puppets as realistically as possible. Wow, this was more than I had envisioned—the next time I saw the puppets they had stripes and spots and lots of color.

When I went to the school for a dress rehearsal and saw my students' puppets, they looked spectacular. A few of the puppets had adaptations to the lever so that children with special needs could operate them. Overall, 36 lever-operated puppets enabled 36 more children to be in the school play. Some of the levers needed reinforcement with duct tape or extra locking pins, so I made a point of checking them all and bringing supplies for the evening performances. I repaired a few levers in between performances, and learned how to make them stronger for multiple usages.

The teacher invited all of my students to attend one of the three performances of the school play (*Circle of Life*), and provided free tickets. Ultimately, we all thought it was incredible to see the puppets in the play—they really were dramatic. The



pre-service teachers attending the play were amazed at how the puppets they had made added a new dimension to the performance.

This collaborative experience encouraged me to dare to teach in new ways again and again, and to think about how to connect with schools and teachers whenever possible. The pre-service teachers were extremely proud of the work they had done, and their learning went beyond understanding the science of levers and motion. I too was very proud of my students' work, and the effort to set up such a learning environment had benefits all around. Additionally, I saw benefits in seeking to integrate the teaching of elementary science with other curriculum areas whenever possible. As a classroom teacher this was something I had done regularly, and it was only now that I recognized how to apply this learning in teacher education.

### Collaboration II: Exploring science and music

On another occasion I collaborated with a teacher to explore a learning opportunity integrating the curriculum areas of science and music. We were both involved in elementary education (she in a K-8 school and I in university teacher education) and we believed not only that we could learn from each other, but also that our students could benefit from our collaboration. The teacher was a music specialist keen to learn more about science, and I was keen to learn more about music. What followed was a team effort to create an integrated unit for Grade 8 students. Across the unit students participated in the following ways: exploring sound using various materials; listening to various genres of music; creating sound research posters; designing and making instruments from junk materials; presenting their learning in various formats, including a musical drama piece; and writing reflections on their learning at regular intervals. In order to foster our professional growth, I met with the teacher at the end of each collaborative teaching day, and we discussed the day's work and our collective learning. As educators we both felt that these daily post-teaching reflections provided an unusual opportunity for professional learning, as ideas, thoughts, and feelings were articulated, discussed, and confirmed.

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Subsequently, I felt it was important to find a way to share this incredible teaching and learning experience with my future teachers. Not only had I collaborated with another teacher to teach an integrated unit to Grade 8 students, but also we had found a way to share our professional knowledge by reflecting together on our teaching experience. The importance of professionals engaging in reflective practice is recognized by numerous researchers (Ball, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Loughran & Russell, 1997; Schön, 1983). Moreover, current standards of practice (British Columbia College of Teachers, 2004; Ontario College of Teachers, 2006) expect all teachers to be reflective practitioners. But what does it mean to be a reflective practitioner? What does it mean to reflect? Instead of telling future teachers what they might do, I could show them a real example. Again the idea of sharing authentic learning remained a central goal. It would be impossible to teach this entire integrated science and music unit to future teachers, but perhaps experiencing part of it would be informative.

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remember the distinctive sounds made by some one-of-a-kind instruments.

The collaborative session began by partnering every Grade 8 student with one or two future teachers. Partners had the opportunity to share how they had designed and made their instruments, what problems they had encountered, and the range of sounds their instruments made. The Grade 8 teacher taught a mini session on guided music listening, and Grade 8 students helped their future-teacher partners understand this exercise. We used two classroom spaces to divide up the large group (70 students), and created the opportunity for some junk band playing and question time. The future teachers asked students if they had enjoyed the unit, what they had learned about science, what they had learned about music, and more. Because I had two sections of future teachers, the Grade 8 students had two opportunities to share their learning. It was an exceptional experience for future teachers learning to teach science, and the Grade 8 students showed a notable degree of responsibility and pride in sharing their work. Written reflections on this learning experience revealed that the future teachers evaluated "the actual experience with real kids" as unforgettable.

At this point in my career I was just beginning to develop strategies for regular reflections on teaching and learning, as I realized how important reflection could be. In this particular collaboration, we had required Grade 8 students to reflect on their learning in writing at the end of each day. The teacher guided students' reflection by pointing out that the use of descriptive words helped her better understand their experiences. For example, "I learned a lot today" would be less informative than "I learned that the pitch changes when you add more water to the jar." I applied this learning when I began to guide future teachers' reflections on their learning in university classes. Additionally, I began to keep personal reflective notes on my teaching at the end of each class. Ultimately, the Grade 8

When I asked the Grade 8 teacher if she thought her students could come to the university and teach university students some of the ways they had explored science and music in class, she was more than delighted. In order to provide some common ground, I gave the future teachers a homework assignment to design and make instruments from junk materials, noting that they would share this experience with Grade 8 students. Moreover, we spent one class session engaging in explorations of sounds at various sound centers. Grade 8 students had explored these same sound centers as part of their integrated science/music unit (i.e., tapping, plucking, shaking, and blowing, using various objects made of different materials).

The idea that Grade 8 students would share their learning with future teachers in a university class was intriguing for the pre-service teachers and motivating for the Grade 8 students. Although I planned the sessions with the teacher beforehand, we were both prepared to be flexible on the actual day. Would this actually work? Could university students and middle school students learn together in this setting? When the day came, the future teachers brought some very interesting "junk" instruments, and I was pleased they had made such efforts to create them. I remember one student who made a mini piano out of a shoebox, kitchen mugs, popsicle sticks, and dominos. I also



teacher and I shared our professional learning at two educational conferences, the International Conference on Teacher Research (ICTR) and the American Educational Research Conference (AERA).

**Collaboration III: Hands-on science**

This collaboration began when I designed an authentic task that required pre-service teachers to make a toy that could be used to teach a child something about science. Naturally it made sense to take these toys to the local school, across the street from the university, to explore children's responses. The Grade 6 teacher I collaborated with asked me to return the following year with my students, and possibly work with additional classes. With approximately 360 elementary pre-service teachers at the Faculty of Education every year, and approximately 350 children at this local school, potential teaching and learning opportunities were immense. The seeds of collaboration had been planted, and I intended to keep them watered.

The following year I sought to design an assignment that would require pre-service teachers to work with children at the local school. In the first week of the teacher education program I asked the pre-service teachers to plan something that would "wow" children about science. Specifically, the task was to prepare a 10-minute hands-on science activity, and to repeat the same activity six times with a different group of children for each session. In addition, I insisted that the pre-service teachers engage children in science with simple, inexpensive materials they could carry to the school in a backpack. Many of the pre-service teachers reacted with panic. "How can I make science exciting?" "What materials should I use?" At the same time, they became excited about this opportunity to try out their ideas for science teaching activities with real kids.

The Science Wow event took place during the school day. Every class in grades K–6 (14 classes in total) engaged in hands-on science activities for one hour. Six pre-service teachers were assigned to each class, and the classroom teachers organized their students into six small groups in advance. The classroom teacher was responsible for keeping track of time and signaling a group rotation every 10 minutes. Pre-service teachers repeated their activity six times, and the children rotated to experience every activity station. This arrangement provided the added opportunity for the pre-service teachers to refine their instructions as each new group attempted the activity. At the same time, the classroom teachers had the opportunity to observe their children engaging in science, and this too was informative. Some examples of the hands-on science activities planned by the pre-service teachers include: classifying rocks, making a prism, changing pitch, exploring air pressure, generating electricity with lemons, making a paper helicopter, bending light, solid or liquid, inside my body, and how sound travels. Science Wow was so successful that I returned to the same school year after year. One year I brought 160 pre-service teachers to the school and we provided hands-on science activities three days in a row, for an hour each day, for the entire school. It was an incredible sight to behold.

My classroom teacher colleague points out that over the past five years the Science Wow program has provided teachers at his school with regular injections of fresh, dynamic ways to implement the curriculum. He is convinced that teachers need the enthusiasm provided by teams of future teachers as they perform and collaborate with students and staff. Teachers are reminded that science is important, fun, active and non-threatening. The kids see it.

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The teachers see it. In addition, the teachers now recognize that the Faculty of Education serves as a local "think tank," where not only are current pedagogical issues being considered and evaluated, but future educational thrusts are also being anticipated, researched by faculty and graduate students, and tried out in the field.

Undoubtedly, the Science Wow collaboration was an amazing adventure for all participants. Future teachers felt more confident and keen to teach science after this experience. Classroom teachers felt inspired to teach science, and some teachers asked for future assistance in beginning a regular science program in their classroom. The children enjoyed the science activities immensely, asking, "When is Science Wow coming back?" Finally, the opportunity for me to observe my students teaching science, and observe children participating in science activities, was highly motivating and informative. This setting provided an opportunity for me to interact informally with teachers and to learn more about their classroom realities. As a teacher educator I felt this form of collaboration was at the heart of teacher education. It was real. It was helpful to the local school and it provided actual experience for future teachers. We had formed an educational partnership intended to help all participants learn together.

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**Collaboration IV: Team teaching**

As a young assistant professor in the Faculty of Education, I was expected to design educational research projects and to publish manuscripts about my research. I was not required to connect with schools or teachers to do my research. However, since I sought to make the academic work I did useful or practical for educators, it was important that I live in the real world of schools. The time and effort required to obtain permission from the university and school district ethics offices when conducting research in schools discouraged this form of practical research. Nevertheless, I was convinced that nothing was more vital than collaborating with educators at schools to better understand how to improve education for children. Additionally, it was already part of my regular practice (as shown in the three previous examples), though I had yet to enter a school with the main intention of conducting research. I set out to create a learning experience that would provide authentic learning for everyone and would also enable me to collect some data and write about the experience.

I collaborated with two Grade 4/5 teachers and one teacher vice-principal in teaching a six-week unit that addressed specific science and music standards from the current curriculum. We met at the school several times before teaching the unit, in order to develop an approach that would work for all of us. It was important to me that the teachers engage in team teaching and that all participants feel at ease about making changes along the way. I took the lead when new science concepts were taught, and the vice-principal took the lead when new music concepts were taught. Since we had students working in small groups throughout the unit, all four educators were involved in supporting and organizing group work.

I remember beginning the unit with 58 children who had their string-wrapped fingers in their ears in order to hear the sound waves traveling from an attached coathanger. It was a magical learning moment. For the following six weeks, I worked with three committed educators to teach these children, and it remains one of the most meaningful experiences in my career as a teacher educator. It was a time when I felt that my work actually mattered. I could see and hear the direct benefits. Most importantly, by teaching children in an actual school setting I confronted many of the educational issues I only talked about in theory in my university classes. Nothing can compare with actual experience, and I know that I improved as a teacher educator because of this collaboration. I am ever grateful for the invitation to work with educators at this school, and for their generosity in sharing their teaching responsibilities.

In the middle of the unit, I invited my class of pre-service teachers to come to the school to experience this learning environment. The pre-service teachers experienced firsthand how four educators were collaborating to teach two classes, and they also participated in some of the activities with the children. Interestingly, one of the future teachers asked a question that remains with me to this day. The question was something like, "How do you know how to teach like this?" It was very difficult to provide a specific answer. So much of the teaching was in the experience, and I could only point to the importance of creating a motivating learning environment that required active participation from the learners.

One afternoon we invited a high school music teacher to bring six high school music students with their instruments to work with the Grade 4/5 children. Previously the children had explored sounds made by various materials, conducted sound experiments, designed and made instruments from junk materials, and practiced guided music listening techniques. Now they would have the opportunity to learn about sound from practicing musicians, and ask specific questions about their respective instruments. The high school students worked in small groups with elementary students, engaging them in conversation. They also led a mural composition activity and played their instruments together with elementary students, who played their handmade instruments. Imagine the sound of 58 Grade 4/5 students, six high school students and five educators all playing instruments together!

**Our intention as educators**

These four collaborative teaching and learning experiences have helped me become a better teacher educator. I am thankful for the teachers, children, and future teachers who have helped me along

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this learning path. Moreover, I am hopeful that the future teachers I had the privilege to teach are now creating active authentic learning environments and inviting children to reflect on their learning in their current classrooms. Every day teachers around the world have the opportunity to teach children and to collaborate with one another in this important endeavour. If educators seek out collaborative opportunities, perhaps we can all stay connected with the heart of education.

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*Marie Ernestová*

# Promoting Reading and Writing in Linguistically and Ethnically Diverse Communities in the Czech Republic

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**Migrants and minorities– some comparisons**

Under communist rule, the borders of the Czech Republic(CR) were strictly controlled and generally closed to migrants. For a long time, the only minorities of any significant size were groups that had lived there for a long time. These groups fell into two categories:

- National minorities (mainly Slovaks, Germans, Poles, and Hungarians), which had not actually migrated to the CR, but found themselves living there as a consequence of historical developments, such as changing borderlines; and
- Roma, who actually had been present for a long time, but were not always officially recognized as a national minority before the communist government collapsed in 1989.

Immigration was a relatively minor issue until the end of the 1980s, when the country opened its borders. Since that time, increasing numbers of migrants have found their way to the Czech Republic: asylum seekers, refugees, transit migrants, and temporary workers—as well as ethnic Czechs moving back to their home country.

In Western Europe, *migration* and *minorities* are largely regarded as synonymous concepts, because the vast majority of national minorities are recent foreign immigrants (i.e. past 50 years) and their descendants. The importance of this distinction should not be underestimated. Much of the confusion in immigration debates between Western and Central/Eastern European countries is likely caused by this disparity in how ethnic groups are classified (Broekhof et al., 2003).

Central European countries have usually tended to focus their policies on national minority groups (e.g. Bulgarian, Polish, Hungarian, German, Roma, etc). The Roma, being the largest Czech minority (estimated population 300,000, per UNHCR 2000) and also the most vulnerable and least-integrated group, are priority-targeted for many support measures. These include protection of their rights and culture, social integration programs and, perhaps most importantly, preschool education programs.

In contrast, new immigrants, such as those from Afghanistan, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran, and the "new" Eastern Europe, have so far received comparatively little systematic attention in the national policies of Central Europe. There are several reasons for this:

- The EU has explicitly asked the Central European countries to give greater priority to the protection of their borders.
- The countries themselves tend to view the recent immigrants as temporary residents, on whom integration efforts would be wasted.
- In general, new immigrants do not enjoy the same degree of legal protection as national and Roma minorities.
- Immigration from outside Europe is a recent phenomenon in Central Europe, and as a result the new immigrant populations are still relatively small in comparison with national and Roma minorities.

However, the enlargement of the EU may well lead to growing numbers of new immigrant groups, placing increasing demands on the host societies.

In Central European countries today, the main categories of immigrants are likely to be illegal migrants, asylum seekers, and highly skilled workers. Moreover, in the wake of their accession to Europe, Central European countries are increasingly attractive destinations for migrants due to their economic growth and social and political stability. It is also to be expected that demographic trends will increase immigration.



It is interesting, therefore, to consider whether policies developed for national minorities and Roma are also suitable for the new immigrants, or whether new policies need to be devised that are suitable for all groups. Education policy is a case in point. Failure in education is only partly related to ethnic background; the main contributing factors are language problems and the education level of the parents. It has been clearly demonstrated that these two causal links hold true for all of the immigrant groups investigated to date, and indeed also for indigenous Czechs. Thus immigrants are not necessarily more likely to fail in education—nor do all indigenous pupils succeed—so it seems sensible to devise policies that target all disadvantaged pupils simultaneously (including indigenous pupils), rather than to develop a separate policy for each ethnic group.

So what can be learned from our experience to date with regard to integrating minorities and immigrants?

**Using the mother tongue as a bridge between two cultures**

Language is both an expression of culture and an instrument of communication. A common language for communication is indispensable both for individuals and for the society in which they live. Language is thus a precondition for effective participation in society. On the other hand, the mother tongue is a core component of a person's cultural identity. So the big questions are: *What provision should be made for supporting minority languages?* and, *What are reasonable demands to impose for learning the language of the host country?*

Minority groups themselves need to have a major say in provisions for teaching their own languages. The more difficult question is how to integrate immigrant populations into the societies in which they have settled, and this issue is currently prominent in political debate in the majority of European countries. Questions of integration must address both children and adults in the minority populations.

In Czech schools, at the *preschool level*, the key education issue is managing the transition from home to school, taking into account family background and culture, childrearing practices, and the different home language. At the *primary and secondary levels*, teaching the language of the host country is the key issue, but it has to be closely linked with development of the child's home language, as well as with his or her broader social and cultural development. In *tertiary and adult education*, the priorities are teaching the language of the host country and informing immigrants about the laws and customs of the host society, including, in the case of parents, home–school relations.

Like most European countries, the Czech Republic is keen to ensure that immigrant children benefit from their basic right to education, including both school services and financial support disbursed by the education authorities. There must, of course, be a reciprocal relationship between the educational system and the immigrants using the system: In order to be effective, teaching methods and curricula need to be adapted to meet immigrants' needs; and immigrants, for their part, need to adapt to the education system provided for them in order to benefit from it. Consequently, changes to the major goals of education may need to be considered.

**The language of instruction in the host education system**

Unquestionably, proficiency in the language of instruction of the host country is crucial for successful integration into the school system. Linguistic support measures are widespread in European countries. Sometimes they immediately mainstream immigrants (the total immersion technique), but sometimes immigrant students are initially isolated in a transitional educational program to prepare them for integration into their host country's system.

Table 1 gives some general examples of strategies aimed at helping immigrant children to integrate into host education systems. It also illustrates that the different types of remedial and support measures are not all always accorded equal priority. Those measures listed in italics are at present implemented in only a few countries.

In order to speed up the integration of immigrant children, measures to assist them have been introduced. Two main support

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| Table 1 | Linguistic Support Measures* | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Host country language of instruction** | **Mother tongue of immigrant pupils** |
| Guidance and parental involvement | *Provision for teaching the parents of immigrant pupils the language of instruction* | Published information on the education system provided in the languages of immigrant pupils<br>Interpreters provided for immigrant parents and children |
| Assessing the appropriate level of education services | Initial assessment of immigrant pupils' competence in the language of instruction | Initial assessment in the mother tongue of the previous educational attainment of immigrant pupils |
| Ongoing educational support | Intensive teaching of the language of instruction<br>Programs at the preschool level to promote the language of instruction<br>*Initial and/or in-service teacher training in how to teach the language of instruction as a second language* | Formal teaching of the mother tongue of immigrant pupils, either outside the normal school timetable or as an optional subject in the curriculum.<br>Bilingual teaching provided, i.e., teaching partly in the language of instruction and partly in the mother tongue of immigrant pupils |

* Linguistic support measures for immigrant children in pre-primary and full-time compulsory education, 2003/4 (adapted from European Commission, 2004, p. 69)

models are currently used (European Commission, 2004, pp. 41-45):

- The ***integration (immersion) model*** mainstreams immigrant children into classes usually consisting of children of the same age group, where they follow the same curriculum as indigenous pupils. Sometimes pupils will drop back a grade if their performance is not up to their age-group standard. Sometimes, even the content and teaching methods of the mainstream classes may be modified: e.g., class sizes may be reduced (CR regulations limit the number of immigrant pupils per class), or the performance of immigrant pupils may be assessed in a different way. Remedial teaching is implemented as necessary during school hours, either for individual pupils or for groups.
- The ***isolation (bilingual) model*** establishes transitional arrangements that group immigrant children together for limited periods so that they can receive special attention geared to their needs, although they still attend many mainstream lessons. These classes, often called *reception* classes, do not usually last longer than a year, although there is provision for longer-term arrangements (e.g., streamed classes).

In the CR, these two models are often combined in one way or another.

**Other benefits enjoyed by immigrant children in the CR at present**

The Czech Republic seems to be the only country in Central Europe to have adopted specific legislation providing for education of the children of asylum seekers. In fact, the CR also permits school enrolment for the children of migrant workers and temporary residents.

Asylum seekers are accommodated in Residence Centers, and social workers and Center staff liaise with both schools and parents in the catchment area to help resolve all matters concerning the schools' relations with parents, to deal with issues concerning children's progress, and to provide advice on further education opportunities. If the local school is not within walking distance, either transport is provided free or the cost of transport is refunded. The Refugee Facilities Administration (a body established by the Home Office) provides asylum seekers' children of compulsory school age with the school supplies they need, if these are not already provided by the Ministry of Education. Schools also receive additional funding for teaching immigrant children, and can even request funding for after-school clubs to help them integrate fully into the social life of the school.



**Teacher responsibilities and performance monitoring**

In general, teachers responsible for working with immigrant pupils receive no special remuneration or other fringe benefits. However, in some schools teachers with full tenure may be paid more if they regularly teach classes containing children of recent immigrants.

As with most European education systems, the CR employs an intercultural approach in the curricula—an approach that encourages and enables schools to address and maintain the cultural diversity of the society. This perspective is an integral part of activities for all pupils, whether immigrants or native Czech speakers. CR schools are also monitored for their implementation of a directive of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports stating that education should impart a greater understanding of the differences between individuals, as well as respect for each person, minority, and culture.

**Practical experience teaching Czech to immigrant pupils**

Like most countries that offer support to non-native speakers, the CR begins by teaching the language of instruction, in this case Czech. There is a fairly well established methodology developed around the teaching of Czech as a second or "additional" language.

A team at the Department of Czech Studies in my university has recently completed research into the spoken and written language of immigrant pupils in a number of schools in the region (Alexová & Dvoøák, 2004). A standardized questionnaire was compiled covering issues such as the respondent's personality, family, interests, language skills, and perceptions of life in the Czech Republic. Speaking skills were analyzed through informal personal interviews with 26 pupils representing nine different immigrant groups.

As expected, the quality of the answers was strongly dependent on the duration of residency in the CR, and interviewees willing to expand on a topic produced syntactically loose structures characterized by statements with repeated stereotyped connectors. Most students had difficulties with intonation, with distinguishing between the long and short forms of Czech vowels, and with producing certain sequences of consonants.

However, there were also some intriguing insights: Immigrant children—like their Czech peers—use highly colloquial Czech

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with features typical of contemporary "youth-speak." This shows that, even with inadequate knowledge of the Czech language, children will quickly learn to communicate with their peers because the incentive to be accepted is so strong.

Written language skills were analyzed through standard dictation. Most mistakes were made in diacritical signs (which alter pronunciation), which implies that many schools do not adequately teach the phonetic aspect of the written language (a problem compounded by the non-standard youth-culture pronunciation and lexicon so quickly picked up from their schoolfellows).

The second most frequent problem in written texts was distorted word forms. Pupils often could not recognize word boundaries in normal speech so they wrote word endings and word combinations phonetically. This problem suggests that teachers should encourage students to focus on the actual words in a text, especially when reading. A language will never be learned properly unless there is understanding of the inflected forms of words and the word combinations—how they are constructed and how the parts are put together. The most frequent mistakes were in adjective endings, in the spelling of word roots after the so-called ambiguous consonants and also in subject–verb agreement. Immigrant pupils also struggle with *i/y* spelling (both letters have the same sound)—but so too do Czech children!

Even though the sample size in the above research study was relatively small, the results concur with the conclusions of similar research in other parts of the CR (Š ebesta, 2004). The research has at least shown that the use of Czech as a common language is particularly important where several ethnic groups are represented in the

same school. It has also clearly demonstrated that Czech is acquiring an important function in multicultural communication, and this development highlights the need for new goals for our educational system.

### Teaching and learning strategies that have proved successful

Many of the strategies discussed in CMES (2002) have been applied in Czech preschool classes for some time, because they produce good results in integrating children in multi-ethnic classes, and also in preparing those with a poor command of Czech—immigrant and indigenous alike—for school where Czech is the language of instruction.

### Visual support

If pupils new to Czech are to understand the language, they must be given as much contextual support as possible.

The teacher should regularly repeat new words, language structures, and functions, and should also regularly use visual aids to help students understand new tasks and topics. Some of the options for visual support include:

- facial expressions
- body language
- practical demonstrations
- pictures
- photos
- video
- posters
- objects
- diagrams
- maps
- labels
- tables
- semantic networks
- picture dictionaries
- illustrated encyclopedias

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### Cooperative learning

Tasks that require students to work cooperatively inevitably serve to integrate them as a group, involving them naturally in meaningful dialogue (presenting hypotheses, making suggestions, persuading, instructing, arguing, objecting, predicting, etc.).

Some suitable collaborative activities could be:

- games or jigsaw puzzles (all pupils play equal roles and therefore support each other)
- story telling (fairy tales are very useful because they involve a lot of repetition)
- brainstorming (pupils gather as many ideas as possible on a particular topic)
- prioritization (a group must agree on a particular order for things in a list)
- incomplete information (a task that can be fulfilled only if groups share information they have)
- matching tasks (e.g., matching a word with a picture, a statement with a picture, a word with a number, two parts of a statement)

### Reading

With young pupils it pays to start with a picture book; with older pupils it is important to choose books at an appropriate intellectual level. It is also good if the text contains repeated phrases or passages, because the repetition helps the child to develop Czech language patterns. Above all else, it is important that the book be of interest to the pupil, so that he or she will really want to read it—for the plot or content rather than merely as a reading exercise.

It is usually best if children read in pairs, or in small groups that include at least one good Czech speaker. Choral reading works well because children can see and hear the words at the same time and come to grasp the rhythm and cadence of the language. Reading should be planned as an activity for relaxation and entertainment, so that it is not seen as a chore or simply a school requirement. Experience from other countries (e.g.



**Table 2 Additional Activities Related to Text (after Davies & Green, 1984)**

| Reconstruction activities using modified text | Analysis activities using unaltered text |
|---|---|
| *Pupil tasks:* *completion-type activities with deleted or segmented text.* | *Pupil tasks:* *text marking, labeling or recording.* |
| **Text completion** Predict deleted words, sentences, or phrases from options given. | **Underlining** Search for specific target words or phrases that relate to a particular aspect of content (e.g. key words). |
| **Diagram completion** Predict deleted labels on diagrams, using the text and other diagrams as source materials. | **Labeling** Label segments of text that deal with different aspects of the discourse (e.g. marking a scientific account with labels such as *prediction, evidence, conclusion,* provided by the teacher). |
| **Table completion** Complete deleted parts of a table, using the text as a reference. | **Segmenting** Delimit paragraphs or segments of text into distinct information units and label them. |
| **Completion activities with disordered text** (a) Determine a logical order or sequence. (b) Classify segments according to categories provided by teacher. | **Diagrammatic representation** Construct diagrams from text (e.g. create flow charts, concept maps, mind maps, labeled models). |
| **Prediction** Predict the next part(s) of the text, using segments arranged in correct sequence. | **Tabular representation** Extract important information from the written text and present it in tabular form. |

CMES, 2002) suggests that parallel texts in the pupils´ mother tongue and in the new language, read simultaneously, lead to very good results, by enhancing understanding and encouraging discussion.

It is also good to involve the parents if possible—even though they may have limited competence in the Czech language. It is known that a child's cognitive abilities develop more quickly if the parents read with their child in their mother tongue and then talk about the text: the plot and the pictures, and the feelings and impressions aroused by the story. Having a structured discussion about the text (whether in the mother tongue or in Czech) makes the child an active, rather than a passive, reader. Czech teachers are advised to use so-called *Directed Activities Related to Text* (DARTs), because they provide a whole range of ways to encourage structured discussion. Pupils work either in pairs or in groups, on activities that require them to make decisions and examine meanings.

Davies and Green (1984) provide additional practical examples, which are summarized in Table 2.

### Writing

As a rule, immigrant children take longer to learn to write than they do to read, but when children join their Czech peers in preschool or in the first year of primary school, they start learning to read and write simultaneously and at more or less the same rate as Czech natives. However, when children enter Czech schools in a higher grade of primary or secondary school, the teacher must be prepared to guide them through the process of writing very carefully and systematically.

Using the recommended *supported* (or *cooperative*) methodology, the aim is to teach (particularly) immigrant children to write independently about a specific topic, but also, importantly, to develop an awareness of voice, of writing for the reader and giving the writing a particular style, purpose, or objective. There are a number of techniques teachers can use to facilitate this task, such as providing a sample text for paraphrasing, collating pupils' ideas on the blackboard, suggesting popular topics, accepting responses in the students' mother tongue, etc.

Younger pupils will benefit from "factographical" writing (using lists, diagrams, etc), which test comprehension, and from group projects (writing a story, newspaper, etc), which facilitate cooperative learning.

### Conclusions

Clearly the teaching of ethnically mixed classes, particularly those incorporating recent immigrants who are still learning the

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language of their new country, demands special teaching skills and new, or supplemental, linguistic techniques. In addition to the expected problems with grammar, syntax, and dictation, the performance of speakers of "foreign" languages in mixed classes is often greatly influenced by other relatively subtle factors—social interaction, self image, home environment, etc. The Czech Republic and other countries experiencing similar teaching challenges need to consider incorporating special modules into teacher training and in-service programs, so that teachers learn how to better manage these mixed classes, how to communicate more effectively with parents, how to cope with immigrant pupils of differing abilities, and how to apply recently developed methods of teaching the host country language as an additional language, while supporting continued use of the child's birth language.

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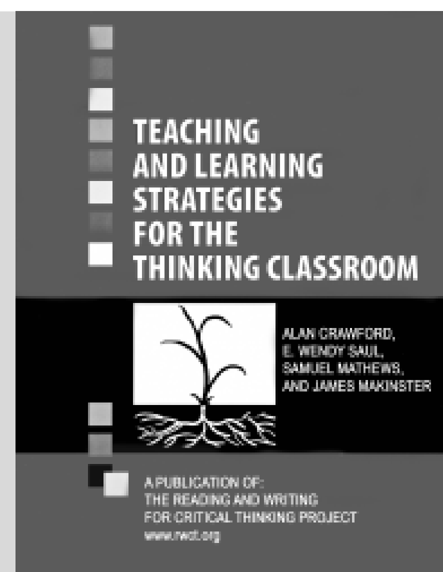





*Vida Zuljevic*

# "Just Pour your Feelings onto Paper!" Successful Strategies for Promoting Students' Love of Poetry and English Language Learning

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***Vida Zuljevic***
*is the Librarian at Robert Frost Elementary School in Pasco, WA, USA.*


Whether we call it creative writing or a literary genre, poetry has one meaning for me—a well of beautiful words, shallow enough for everybody to sip from and yet deep enough to dive into, taking pleasure that will leave a lasting, powerful impression on those who dare to explore.

In preparation for teaching writing to a Russian bilingual class of third, fourth, and fifth graders a few years ago, I remembered that my first experiences with the English language were nursery rhymes and traditional children's songs—my first encounter with poetry in English. I had learned these at the time I got my first job, at a preschool academy in Dallas, Texas, after moving to the US from my native Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war. My love for poetry, combined with a love for puppetry and music, were such powerful tools in my own language learning that I saw them as keys with which I would certainly "open the doors to my students' feelings, their imaginations, and their voices" (Heard, 1998, p.3). Poetry seems able to ease the first encounters with a second language. It alleviates a child's fears of not being able to read or write in that language. Its appearance on the page is friendly, and if the words rhyme, if they are funny, if there is music in these words, they stay with the child as friendly reminders of his or her first "I-can-read-in-English" experiences.

Poetry comes from within one's soul, from within one's very heart. "Just pour your feelings onto paper," I hear fifth grader Annabel encouraging her hesitant peer who is uncertain of his abilities to write a poem. Annabel already knows that feelings are a very important part of poetry. In Krashen's (1981) language acquisition theory, emotions—an affective factor—are recognized as one of the most important factors in acquiring language. Therefore, teachers need to provide a safe and motivating environment in which English language learners have no affective barriers to language learning. Incorporating poetry, using innovative and proven instructional strategies, has the potential to ease the process of acquiring the foreign language. When teachers read poetry and explore poets' writing styles, searching for beautiful words, identifying the figurative language used, and recognizing music and rhythm in each word, it is important for them to underline that the essence of poetry writing is the feelings the authors have about certain ideas, regardless of the poetic forms they use. Annabel apparently already knows that. Gennadiy, a fifth grader who attends the Russian bilingual program and receives special services support on a regular basis, writes, "Poetry is fun. its makes pepol happe." He is another student who obviously knows that poetry is very much related to our feelings. Gennadiy's

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sister Liza, a sixth grader this year, adds, "Poetry is fun and I relax when I write it. And I like it becous it's funy and make sence." And Felichiya, a fifth grader, expresses it very nicely in the form of a poem:

POETRY

by Felichiya Morar
(5th grade)

Poetry is a hobby
For everybody
It expresses your feelings
When you are lonely, happy, excited.
It tells what you like or you don't.
Or your poem could be a gift!
So you see,
everybody can take pleasure in it.

The following examples offer a few strategies and ideas for teachers who wish to start using poetry more often in their everyday teaching, approaching poetry with less fear and more enthusiasm. These are my experiences, and I believe they are worth sharing because through these strategies, I succeeded in motivating hundreds of students to listen as I read poetry aloud to them, and to read and write their own poetry. The result was a literacy-rich environment, one particularly needed by English-language learners, who are the majority population at my school. I knew that with my support and encouragement they would eventually acquire enough English to use the wonderful words that poetry introduced them to, and to express themselves in this literary genre as well.

**Reading, discussing, and performing poetry**

The first strategy I used with my Russian bilingual combined third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade writing class was reading, discussing, and performing poetry. I would begin our writing classes with ten minutes of reading aloud—a chapter or two from *Poetry Matters* (Fletcher, 2002), or a poem written by a well known children's author—just to have my students listen to the wonderful language used by masters of writing. At each session I reminded students that they should take one word, an image, or even a verse from the readings of the day, and write it in their notebooks, take it home, and share it with somebody.

After sharing a poem, we would discuss it, and a few students would describe their feelings and thoughts about it. This activity helped my English language learners open up, talk, and use the words they heard or read, all of which added up to a wonderful way of experiencing and learning the new language. Because I taught writing, I had to ensure that the majority of class time was spent accomplishing writing tasks, and we were constrained by the one-hour time slot. But we managed not to sacrifice our most pleasurable time—sharing about poetry and sharing the poetry itself.

A special treat for us all was our Friday class. It was entirely devoted to poetry reading and performance. I would provide plenty of poetry books (see Poetry Collections) so that every student could find a poem suitable for his or her level of English proficiency and understanding, which ensured that everybody could feel successful as a reader and performer. Students worked in groups to decide how to perform their poems. We had dramatizations, choral reading, puppets, poems in two voices, readers' theatre, etc. Then, students would say a little about the poems they had chosen, and provide at least two reasons for their choice of poem and method of performance. Not only did this activity motivate students to talk, but it also helped sharpen their thinking about the literary qualities of poetry, and helped enrich their vocabulary, performing skills, and social skills as well. In addition, it gave the students a tremendous amount of knowledge about poetry and the English language, and about how words can be used differently and yet powerfully. It also provided students with an opportunity to learn about the authors of those brilliant poems and encouraged them to write their own poetry. As I continued working with these students, they demonstrated impressive success and language improvement over time. Here is a poem written by a fifth-grade student (who entered my class as a third grader) who had been in the United States for three years at the time:



MUSIC

by Natalya Bondarenko
(5th grade)

Music is my best friend
because it is with me all the time.
When I close my eyes I imagine that
there is music in the house, in the car
Or in the class even in the cell-phone,
In the piano, and even in Yamaha.
When I close my eyes
I hear music and see people happy,
singing and dancing around.
Music is my best friend.

**Family Poetry Night**

Last year, a colleague and I organized a Family Poetry Night, inspired by the Favorite Poem project. I learned about this project at the 48th IRA convention from two university professors, Jerry J. Wellik and Francis E. Kazemek. The project was very well described in the July 2006 issue of *Thinking Classroom* (Kazemek, Wellik, & Barkley, 2006). We modified it a little with the purpose of increasing the involvement of our students' families. The students took home a few poetry books of their choice, and were given the task of reading some poems to their parents or grandparents (and, if necessary, translating them into their mother tongue). Then the student and family members together were to choose their favorite poem. When our Family Poetry Night was held, I asked one of my fourth-grade students if she would introduce our poetry project and say a few words about it. She did not have a script to read from, nor had we spoken about it earlier, and yet her confidence when speaking about poetry was remarkable. She talked about how much we love poetry and why, and about how Mrs. Zuljevic had introduced many wonderful poems and poets to the students. She added convincingly that they—the parents and grandparents in attendance—should read Fletcher's *Poetry Matters* (Fletcher, 2002) because "he explains everything you want to know about poetry." I was very proud of her confidence and of what she said. It showed me that all the work we had done during the months of studying and writing poetry really paid off for my students.

Instead of making triptychs, the activity in the original Favorite Poem project, the task at our Family Poetry Night was for each family to make a two-part poster, with the poem they had chosen on one side and a family photo on the other. They could also add some information about the author of the poem, their reasons for choosing it, and their

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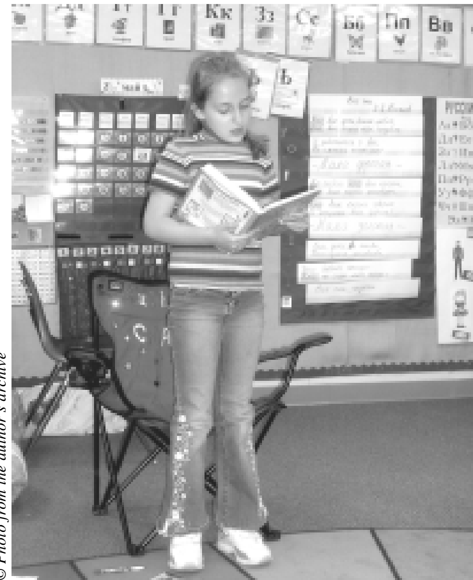
thoughts about it, or they could choose to write a family poem in acrostic form. At the end of the evening, the students presented the projects they had created with their families. It was a magnificent sharing time that all of us enjoyed immensely. Below is an example of an acrostic poem, written by the Jaramillo family and above is their photo at the Family Poetry Night:

Our family is great
Understanding
Reliable
Fond of each other
Always kind and artistic
Musical
Imaginative
Loving
Yeah! Our family is together.

The photos offered in this article illustrate well the atmosphere in the library that evening.

**Puppetry and poetry**

With a picture of this successful event in mind, I collaborated with the same colleague (a literacy coach at our school) to hold another poetry night, called Puppetry and Poetry Family Night. We wanted to engage more parents, and possibly spread the love of poetry and make our poets known to a wider circle of students and families. Our initial idea was to have our student participants read their own poetry using puppets, but we extended the format to include students using puppets to read their favorite poems from the books available at our library as well. Parents, siblings, and grandparents attended the performance. It was not only our students who performed, but also younger children who came to see the performance



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**PUPPY**

I am puppy, hear me bark:
Woof! Woof, woof, woof! Woof!
Woof, woof! Woof, woof!
Woof, woof, Woof, woof!
Woof, woof ? Woof, woof!
Woof! Woof!
Brrrrrrrrr! Be aware!
I chew on books, and do some mess.
I go on people's nerves, and get lot
of attention. And I am adorable,
can't you see?

*Felichiya Morar (4th grade), the author of the concrete poem "Puppy" is reading one of her poems*

of their siblings, and who wanted to share their "poetry" using puppets. A few of the youngsters took the puppets (Humpty Dumpty and Five Little Monkeys) and performed popular nursery rhymes. We did not need any other proof that these younger children understood what poetry is, nor did we have to wonder if they were going to like performing it.

The performances were an eye-opener for the parents too, because several of them said that they could not even have imagined that their child would want to perform poetry. And in conversations that we had with parents afterwards, they agreed that it would be a "door" through which reluctant readers could go on the path to becoming fluent readers, who equate poetry with success and a joyful experience.

**Technology and poetry**

My next strategy for using poetry incorporated technology. Fourth- and fifth-grade students researched different poetry forms in groups of five of six over a period of eight weeks. Their task was to become experts in the chosen form, to write a poem in this form, to contact a poet who wrote mainly in this form, and to develop a Power Point presentation to teach peers and family members about it.

In preparation for the project I taught mini lessons on each chosen poetic form; on figurative language; and on note-taking strategies, Internet-searching strategies, letter (e-mail) writing, and using Power Point to develop a presentation. I also provided plenty of poetry books (see Poetry Collections) that were representative of each form of poetry the students were working on. In addition, at the beginning of the school year, I read some award-winning novels in free verse so that I could refer to the craft of their authors as we went on. The atmosphere in class was very much like that of a busy workshop. Once the students started, they naturally blended as a group and acted as a coherent team who, at the end, were proud of work well done.

They were thrilled (and so was I) when answers from eminent poets came back their way. Janet Wong, Paul Janeczko, and Johnette Downing all took the time to answer my students' questions about free verse, concrete poetry, and haiku poetry forms, and some other questions about poetry writing as well. To the students, these responses added excitement and resulted in a greater willingness to improve their own poems and presentations.

I want to emphasize the point that all of the students were very enthusiastic about this project, willing to work, to revise their poems, to read a lot of poetry, and to find the most beautiful words for their images. Simply put, they strove to make their presentations the best ever. When they presented at the Power Point Poetry Family Night we organized at the end of the school year, it was obvious that they had achieved their best, as they displayed their enthusiasm, confidence, and pride for their families, friends, and teachers .

"It made me cry," said grandma Olga, seeing her grandson and granddaughter presenting their poems.

"We left our baby girl with the neighbors to come to see Melanie's presentation. It is wonderful," said Melanie's mom and dad. Melanie smiled proudly.

Below are a few poems presented that night.

**SCHOOL**

(acrostic poem)

by Shamara Northern (4th grade)

**S**ometimes it is too
**C**old and I want to stay
**H**ome, but I can't, mom says so,
**O**nly if I'm sick. I wish some times
**O**ur school was a giant
**L**imo!

**SPORTS**

(free verse)

by Tony Cortez (5th grade)

People playing sports
Screaming,
Crying, sweating,
Bleeding, and
Bruising up all the time

**BIRDS**

(haiku)

by Jonathan Talavera 5th grade

Birds, birds everywhere
On my left and on my right
Chirping in my heart.

**Poetry wall display**

In addition to all of these strategies for promoting poetry as a great way of learning the language and learning about the language, I began a poetry wall display in September 2005, when I started the year as the school librarian. After introducing the poetry wall to the students, I promised to display every poem that they wrote and illustrated. The display grew over the year and was a wonderful testimony to the growing popularity of poetry, and the growing courage the students gained as they worked on various poetry projects throughout the year.

I gathered several poems that were particularly well written and that demonstrated the skills the students had already internalized, and sent them to the local newspaper. These poems were published and were the pride of our student poets, their teachers, and their parents. Several teachers said they were impressed with the students' work and expressed doubt that they, the teachers, would be able to write as well as these students. Even if said jokingly, these remarks reminded me of Pablo Picasso's statement about becoming an artist of such fame: "It took me my whole life to learn to draw like a child." We could apply that to poetry: "It took me my whole life to learn to write a poem like a child."

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**Multilingual poetry**

Throughout the entire school year students were bringing in poems in Spanish and Russian, too. I did not turn them back. I asked a Spanish-speaking colleague if he could help the Spanish-speaking poets revise their poems, and he was glad to do it. After they worked with him, I would type up the poems and display them. The students were thrilled with this opportunity. I myself helped the students who wrote in Russian to revise their poems and I displayed those, too. I ordered a number of children's poetry books in Spanish and Russian for our library. As soon as these books were introduced to the students, the book stands and shelves where they were displayed stayed empty most of the time until the end of the school year. My thinking was clear: "If we encourage these children to read and write poetry in their mother tongues, they will love it in any given language later on. So, why not?"

Following are a few poems written in students' native tongues, Russian and Spanish:

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*The Morar family at the Family Poetry night*

**ОСЕНЬ (AUTUMN)**

by Darya G.
1st grade

Мне нравится осень.
Осенью есть красивые листья.
Можно собирать их.
Есть красные,
жёлтые и
коричневые.

**TU ERES**

by Irene Eusebio
3rd grade

Tu eres mas hermosa
Que un Kakapu verde
Mas dulce que
Un kilo de chocolate
Mas valiasa
Que una jolla gigante!

**PARA MARIA**

by Edgar Gomez
3rd grade

Querida mama te hü querido.
Decir que te quero mucho y te
Adoro por todo.
Lo que as hecho por mi y lo adoro
Por eso que una mama como tu
eres como.
La reyna de mi vida.

After successfully completing all these activities, and having so much fun, I am left with no doubt about young children's love for poetry and their willingness to read and write poetry. We teachers must recognize that poetry satisfies our students' literary tastes, and enriches their knowledge of the language they are learning, as well as of poetry as a literary genre. Most importantly, we must appreciate that poetry is a powerful tool for teaching other literacy skills, the first of which is an everlasting love for reading and writing.

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## Suggestions for further reading


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# Comprehending Nonfiction Texts: Four Dimensions and Strategies


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Comprehension is a complex process. It is developmental in that one's ability to understand text continues to increase throughout life (Brozo & Simpson, 2007). It is contextual in that meaning making is bounded by place, history, social interaction, and function (Gee, 2000). Furthermore, comprehension is, as Eileen Kintsch (2005) puts it, "no longer considered to be a single, monolithic process, but rather multiple processes that occur simultaneously at different levels" (pp. 62–63).

Theses various processes inherent in acts of comprehension can be framed around four critical, interrelated dimensions: cognitive, textual, personal, and social. Teachers mindful of the complexity of the meaning making process are better able to support their students' comprehension of text (Braunger, Donahue, Evans, & Galguera, 2005).

### Cognitive dimension

Comprehension as a cognitive process is concerned with the skills, strategies, and background knowledge of the reader. A valuable cognitive dimension strategy is the *process guide,* a set of instructions that "walks" students through the processes involved in reading a particular text, providing "expert" assistance and scaffolding as students adjust their reading approaches to the text. Teachers can provide a variety of suggestions in a process guide. Some of these suggestions might guide students in how to read their assignment (e.g., skim, slow down, notice the graph) and some might point out an important idea or relationship that students must understand, as in the example in Table 1.

**Table 1 An example of the *process guide* strategy**

1. Read the summary on page 40 BEFORE you begin to read. Why? The section's key ideas are highlighted for you.
2. Page 23, paragraphs 3–6: Pay special attention to this section. Make sure you identify three reasons for Turkey's entry into the war.
3. Page 25: Notice the three subtopics under the boldface heading titled "Involvement in World War II." These subtopics represent three reasons for the Axis powers' involvement. What are those three reasons?
4. Page 32: Study the graph. Be prepared to explain the processes represented in the graph. HINT: Read the graph from top to bottom.
5. Page 37: Skim the first three paragraphs. Then slow down and read very carefully about the major strategies of the Axis powers. Make sure you can explain these two strategies using your own words.

### Textual dimension

The textual dimension of comprehension requires us to consider how the structure and properties of the texts interact with and stimulate a reader's capacity for constructing and using meaning. One strategy that sensitizes students to the structures and organization of prose is *text mapping*. The steps are as follows:

1. Identify and photocopy pages from the class textbook that contain important organizational features, such as the table of contents page for the chapter to be studied; introductory pages of the chapter, including title, headings, and subheadings; pages with highlighted terms; pages with graphs and charts; glossary and index pages.
2. Organize the pages edge to edge and tape them together into a long scroll. Tape the scroll to the board.
3. Distribute markers to students. Explain to students how the process of mapping the scrolled text will help them see more explicitly its structure and organization. Explain further the importance of recognizing and using textual cues and formatting features to guide reading comprehension.
4. Draw students' attention to various cues and features on the scrolled pages and begin marking them. For instance, if there is hierarchical diagram that serves as a graphic organizer at the opening of the first chapter, draw a circle around it and write next to it *visual outline of the chapter.* Highlight the words *first, second*, and *third,* and talk about how authors signal the organization of their exposition with enumerative words. Next, using circles, arrows, diagrams, pictures, and other appropriate notations, go on to mark, highlight, circle, and make marginal notes for several other format and organizational features.
5. Keep the scroll on the board so more text features can be mapped as you study the chapter, and as a reminder to students of the important and useful structures of text.

### Personal dimension

Issues of engagement, identity, agency, and goals comprise the personal dimension of comprehension. Individual personal attitudes play a vital role in the reading, learning, and remembering process,

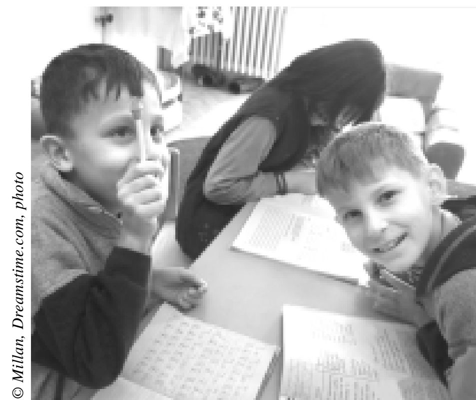


**Table 2 The *opinionnaire* strategy**

**Directions:** After each statement, write SA (strongly agree), A (agree), D (disagree), or SD (strongly disagree). Be prepared to explain your opinions.

1. Cloning humans should be done because it can be done.___________
2. Cloning humans is ethical even if used to produce spare parts.____________
3. Genetic engineers should find ways to use cloning to make humans resistant to diseases.____________________

**Table 3 What to model?**

**Questioning**

- Focuses students' attention on main ideas of text
- Students learn which questions provide access to information and which do not
- Encourages students to ask higher-order questions

**Summarizing**

- Increases students' comprehension through discussion
- Builds students' language through interaction

**Clarifying**

- Students monitor their own comprehension
- Students use conversations with peers to understand unfamiliar vocabulary and references to unknown events
- Students make connections to themselves, other texts, or the world

**Predicting**

- Activates background knowledge
- Students determine purpose for reading
- Students make educated guesses about the text
- Serves as a motivator to confirm or disconfirm predictions

as researchers have confirmed (Eagly, Chen, Chaiken, & Shaw-Barnes, 1999).

The *opinionnaire* strategy capitalizes on adolescents' propensity to form opinions by asking them to take a stand on declarative statements related to critical concepts and issues in the text (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2006). Opinionnaires also promote self-examination, value youth's points of view, and provide students with a forum for influencing others with their ideas. Opinionnaires are developed by generating statements about a topic that require students to take positions and defend them. The emphasis is on students' points of view and not the "correctness" of their opinions. Virtually every text topic can lend itself to opinion statements, even topics traditionally regarded as fact-based and objective, as in the science example in Table 2.

### Social dimension

The social dimension takes into account that making, extracting, and using meaning is a social process (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Kelly & Green, 1998). From this point of view, in classroom environments that encourage the co-construction of knowledge, each individual's comprehension is enriched by the input of others.

The *reciprocal teaching* strategy (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) is one in which the teacher and students take turns generating questions and summaries, and leading discussion about sections of a text. Initially, the teacher models questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting activities, while encouraging students to participate at whatever level they can manage. Gradually, students become more capable of contributing to such discussions and assume more responsibility for their own learning. The reciprocal teaching processes in Table 3 are modeled by the teacher and then elicited from students until independent reading and monitoring skills are learned (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2006).

Because comprehension is a multi-dimensional process, teachers should use a variety of strategies to develop students' comprehension abilities. To help students move toward a more sophisticated level of thinking about text, teachers can model processes of thinking, scaffold strategies for comprehension, explore the organization of texts, create opportunities for making personal connections to text, and engage youth in interactive experiences that require them to go beyond mere memorization. As teachers model and elicit comprehension processes, they challenge students to accept more and more responsibility for their own critical and elaborative thinking.

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