# EXPLORING TEXTS
## THE ROLE OF DISCUSSION AND WRITING IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF LITERATURE

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CHAPTER EIGHT

**Preparing Students for Enriched Reading**
Creating a Scaffold for Literary Understanding

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From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that - a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them. There was a wisteria vine blooming for the second time that summer on a wooden trellis before one window, into which sparrows came now and then in random gusts, making a dry vivid dusty sound before going away: and opposite Quentin, Miss Coldfield in the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or nothusband none knew, sitting so bolt upright in the straight hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles, clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children's feet, and talking in that grim haggard amazed voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound and the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear, as though by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust.

With these two sentences William Faulkner opens *Absalom, Absalom!,* easily one of the most challenging, perplexing and brilliant contributions to American letters. Perhaps you experienced some anxiety in reading this passage. Perhaps you stumbled over the stacks of adjectives, became lost in the tangles of modifiers, found yourself in a straightjacket of syntax, or were paralyzed by the arcane language. Perhaps you found the character so bewildering that, while the images enabled you to envision her, you found her as impenetrable as Faulkner's prose.

If you've had any of these disconcerting responses, then you're like most of us: *Absalom, Absalom!* is a notoriously difficult read, proceeding from this barely fathomable beginning and spiraling into uncharted realms of complexity. I've read the novel several times and feel that I've barely begun to grasp its full meaning. If you found the opening paragraph labyrinthine, you've got a lot of company.

You've also shared the same feeling that a lot of your students have when reading challenging literature. Often our own maturity, fluency and familiarity with the texts we assign cause us to forget how stupefying it is for many students to read quality literature. Yet their difficulty in taking simple content quizzes, their reliance on Cliffs Notes and their struggles in class discussions should tell us that their interactions with literature are often fraught with a sense of confusion and forbidding, much like our own when we read texts that challenge us.

If we have ever experienced frustration in understanding any kind of text, from Faulkner to appliance manuals, then we can empathize with our students in their attempts to comprehend literature. Reading is one area in which what you don't know most certainly *will* hurt you. If your vocabulary is short on words such as "indomitable" and "recapitulation," then Faulkner won't make much sense to you. If you can't follow sentence structure then Faulkner will leave you hopelessly befuddled. If you are unaware of the significance of wearing black in our society, then Rosa Coldfield's attire will not imply to you the grimness of her existence. If you do not know that a cold field will remain barren, or that Faulkner at times uses names (such as Flem and Mink Snopes) to suggest the nature of his characters, then the plight of the opening paragraph's central character will not be fully clear to you.

In the business world you've got to have money to make money. In the literary world you've got to have knowledge to gain knowledge. An important job for teachers, then, is to help provide an appropriate context of useful knowledge to prepare students for their reading. We can already hear E.D. Hirsch shouting in our ear: "Cultural knowledge is what students should know! Cultural literacy is the key!" Undoubtedly, factual knowledge - in some cases particular to a culture - affects comprehension. Without knowledge of the Old Testament, for instance, we cannot fully understand Faulkner; consider, for instance, the title *Absalom, Absalom!* Researchers, however, have identified many other kinds of knowledge that go into successful reading. At the heart of theories related to prior knowledge and reading is the idea that we benefit from having a *cognitive map* to facilitate comprehension; that is, some sort of framework that helps the reader anticipate the meaning of the text (Beck, Omanson & McKeown, 1982). Psychologists have found such girding to be of utmost importance in comprehending new information, even more critical than additional time studying the material itself (Bransford & Johnson, 1971).

Our cognitive maps come in the form of knowledge. Sometimes it is a simple factual base: In order to understand the manual that accompanies our new computer we have to have prior knowledge of the monitor, the keyboard, and so on; neophytes often become frustrated when the language, concepts and components become increasingly obscure. At other times our knowledge comes in the form of textual structure: When reading an appliance manual we know what to expect because we have read many other similar manuals that more or less follow the same organization. This knowledge of the structure of the text is known as *schematic knowledge* and is helpful in understanding new, similarly structured texts that we come across.

Several researchers (i.e., Clark, 1990; Hillocks, 1986) have argued that the knowledge we use in understanding new information comes in four general areas: both declarative and procedural knowledge related

to content, and declarative and procedural knowledge related to form. I will use this organization to present ways in which teachers can design instruction that helps provide students with procedures for establishing an appropriate knowledge framework for interpreting literature.

I have divided the remainder of this chapter into two sections. In the first section I discuss content knowledge and how it affects comprehension and then provide several kinds of classroom activities that teachers can design to help students consider appropriate content knowledge prior to reading so that their experience will be richer. In the second section I will discuss knowledge of literary *form* and how it affects comprehension, and again provide examples of classroom activities that teachers can use to facilitate student understanding.

The theory that motivates the instructional approach I'm taking is more psychological than literary, although the approach is compatible with much literary theory. In general I'm suggesting that students need a prior framework for understanding the texts they read. That framework may come in many quite different ways and often in many ways at the same time. One important prior framework is the knowledge of a "story script" that we have developed through our personal experiences. For instance, in my own experiences I may have felt a great emptiness, a feeling of loss so profound that my world was cracking and crumbling around me. I might use my understanding of the pattern of my experience - my story script, or my schematic knowledge - to relate personally to Rosa Coldfield and understand her story better. Or I may use my understanding of the Old Testament to interpret the title *Absalom, Absalom!* to anticipate that the story will serve as an allegory for a son's failed rebellion against his father and then use my knowledge of Civil War history to interpret the story as representing the South's failed rebellion against the North. Or I may use my knowledge of Faulkner's reliance on a spiral narrative form - that is, his method of retelling the same story over and over from different perspectives, each time adding new information to deepen our understanding of the action - to help my interpretation of the novel. The list could go on and on, and I would probably use all of these interpretive frameworks together to arrive at a coherent understanding of the novel as a whole.

The activities I'll describe are predicated on the idea that students often have appropriate knowledge (although probably not as sophisticated as that needed to read *Absalom, Absalom!)* prior to reading that could inform and enrich their reading, but that they do not spontaneously draw on it; and that an important part of a teacher's role is to design classroom activities that enable students to tap their prior knowledge for greater understanding. This cognitive theory may overlap with other theories for understanding literature: It is compatible with Hirsch's theory of the importance of cultural knowledge, with Rosenblatt's theory on the importance of personal knowledge, and so on, although it is incompatible with the idea that any of these theories by itself is sufficient.

I will elaborate this argument throughout the following sections. For now let us proceed to the importance of content knowledge and how teachers can help students to use it to inform their reading.

## CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

Declarative knowledge related to content refers to the facts a person knows. Hirsch (1987) and Ravitch and Finn (1987) have argued that students lack this knowledge base, thus accounting for any number of educational and societal failings. Proponents of "basic" education believe that factual knowledge is the cornerstone of education without which no further learning is possible. Their reform agenda calls for a heavy emphasis on factual knowledge that they claim is absent in our schools, the evidence being students' inability to recite it on demand.

Yet other research belies the claim that our schools no longer teach the facts. Goodlad's (1984) extensive study of schools and schooling (Ravitch and Finn base their claim on test scores, rather than on observations of

actual classrooms) reveals an educational system that could well be the world of Gradgrind and McChoakumchild, as described here by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* in the chapter "Murdering the Innocents":

> "You are to be in all things regulated and governed," said the gentleman, "by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact.... You must see," said the gentleman, "for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste."

Goodlad's report is phrased in the terms of a modern scholar rather than in the literary style of Dickens, but what he found was roughly the same, although the classrooms he observed were more boring than harsh. The problem, it seems, is not that teachers do not teach facts; Goodlad's report indicates that the facts dominate our schools now as much as they ever have. The problem appears to be instead that students are not remembering the facts well. From our own experiences we know that we tend to remember information that we find interesting or useful, which suggests that the facts students are taught are either inherently meaningless - which is not very likely - or are taught in a way that does not stress how students can use them in important ways. Perkins and Salomon (1988) have suggested four reasons why students do not retain knowledge or apply it to new situations:

1. They don't learn it well initially.
2. They learn the knowledge well enough but do not learn when to use it.
3. The knowledge is presented as static and disembodied when students should learn it with a sense of discovery and imagination.
4. They have trouble transferring the knowledge from the situation in which they learn it to other contexts (including testing situations).

The first of these reasons is a problem that, depending on whom you talk to, is due to the student or the instruction. Often teachers blame students for not remembering material studied, asserting that they don't care, are unmotivated to study, are lazy, watch too much television, are diverted by other interests, and so on. Undoubtedly these factors can contribute to a lack of retention of school-related knowledge, but teachers can help students remember what they study in school. Studying material in a meaningful context, for instance, helps students to regard knowledge as a tool that they may use subsequently in similarly structured tasks (The Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990). We might contrast this with the memorization of disembodied facts, such as the items on E.D. Hirsch's list. Among the items on his list, for instance, are Puritan, witch-hunt, Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Senator Joe McCarthy and McCarthyism (but not, interestingly enough, Arthur Miller or *The Crucible*). The imaginative teacher sees immediately the potential for combining these thematically-related concepts into a unit of instruction that enables students to learn important cultural knowledge in the context of potentially meaningful activities such as reflecting on personal ethics, reinterpreting incidents of mass hysteria and ostracism that they have witnessed, and finding modern analogies to the situation.

Hirsch, on the other hand, argues that knowledge needed for effective communication is "vague and superficial" and based on "an initial stereotype" (P. 16); studying the facts he has assembled would "ensure that [our children share] a minimal core of background information," the knowledge of which we could assess with general knowledge tests "for diagnosing areas of a student's knowledge and ignorance" (p. 141). The consensus

from psychological research, however, tells us that memorization of discrete facts is a poor way to retain information, with 50 percent of memorized information forgotten within one year and 80 percent forgotten with two (Tyler, 1949, P. 39). Hirsch is probably on track when arguing that cultural knowledge is important in understanding and communicating within one's own culture. His shallow notion of knowledge, however, seems more compatible with the ineffective approaches to schooling that he purports to be reforming than with effective teaching and learning as described by psychology researchers.

The other three reasons for the poor transfer of knowledge identified by Perkins and Salomon address the problem of "inert" or "passive" knowledge; that is, knowledge people have learned but fail to draw on in solving new problems (Whitehead, 1929). A person might, for instance, learn how to settle disputes at work but not use those strategies for settling disputes at home. Thoughtful instruction can help students connect their inert knowledge to school subjects and thus use their prior understandings to create a context for comprehending new material. Unfortunately, schools tend to present information as facts instead of as tools.

My intent with the activities that follow is to illustrate ways that teachers can help students transfer appropriate, previously learned content knowledge to their English classes in order to improve literary understanding. The general instructional approach emanates from a view of literary understanding developed by George Hillocks, Jr. and extended by his students: Curry (1987), Gevinson, Hillocks, Littell, Rehage and Smith (1984), Johannessen (1990), Johannessen, Kahn and Walter (1984), Kahn, Walter and Johannessen (1984a, 1984b), Kern (1983), Smagorinsky (1989, 1990, 1991), Smagorinsky and Gevinson (1989), and Smagorinsky, McCann and Kern (1987).

The thrust of the activities issues from an assumption about the purposes of literature study at the secondary level, an assumption at odds with the premises behind much secondary schooling. One educational tradition assumes that literary study and literary scholarship are one and the same; that the movement toward "relevance" (finding personal connection between the reader and the text) is frivolous and takes students away from a higher understanding of literature. My assumption in suggesting these activities is that high school students have different purposes in their reading than college students do. High school students are not being initiated into a discipline and in most cases are not engaging in scholarship; in other words, they are not mini-professors or mini-graduate students but are kids who have an opportunity to read for pleasure and understanding and yet who have often found their school-assigned reading to be of little interest or value to them. The activities are designed to help them draw on their prior knowledge -often from personal experiences that are embedded in their cultures - to enable them to see connections between their own lives and those of literary characters. Once this empathic bond takes place students are more likely to engage the text and find their reading worthwhile and educational.

To help students connect appropriate prior content knowledge to literary issues, I will suggest five kinds of activities: opinionnaire/survey, scenarios/case study, simulation/role playing, personal experience writing, and writing about related problems. In order to promote the connection of prior knowledge to literature, I would suggest explicit attention to the connection between the ideas discussed during the engagement in these activities and the problems that come up in subsequently studied literature. I would also recommend the persistent and systematic use of activities to introduce literature in order "to saturate the context of education with attention to transfer" (Perkins & Salomon, p. 29). If the classroom is organized to encourage students to connect their own prior knowledge to school problems and to use school problems as tools to help them solve personal problems, then students will be more likely to find their education to be personally worthwhile and engaging. They will thus be more likely to retain the knowledge that is integral in their lessons.

The activities follow the general principles of instructional "scaffolding," an instructional approach that provides students with strong initial support and gradually turns the responsibility for learning over to them. Applebee and Langer (1983) describe the essential features of the method:

> Teachers approaching instruction from this perspective must (a) determine the difficulties that a new task is likely to pose for particular students, (b) select strategies that can be used to overcome the specific difficulties anticipated, and (c) structure the activity as a whole to make those strategies explicit (through questioning and modeling) at appropriate places in the task sequence. (p. 169)

Introductory activities can provide initial scaffolding that supports students' efforts to establish a prereading framework that helps them anticipate problems in comprehending literature.

## INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES TO SUMMON APPROPRIATE CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

### Opinionnaire/Survey

An opinionnaire or survey is a set of controversial statements designed to solicit students' opinions about issues that are central to the consideration of a literary concept. A teacher needs to understand two important factors prior to designing an effective opinionnaire or survey: the concepts in the literature, and the concerns and experiences of the students. The activity helps to create a bridge between the two to help students anticipate the problems in the literature.

Let's say, for instance, that students are going to read a series of short stories in which characters must battle hostile forces in order to survive, such as Jack London's "To Build a Fire," Daphne du Maurier's "The Birds," Steven Vincent Benet's "By the Waters of Babylon," Barbara Kimenye's "The Winner," J. Nutuko Nzioki's "Not Meant for Young Ears," and a longer work such as Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* or Willa Cather's *0 Pioneers!*. Teachers designing opinionnaires or surveys should:

1. *Understand the concepts in the literature* in order to determine the issues that students would profit from considering prior to reading.
2. *Enter the world of the students* to discover the level at which students will connect with these issues.
3. *Develop controversial statements* that will spark a lively discussion related to the problems in the literature.

Here is an opinionnaire designed to get students talking about problems that will come up in reading literature about survival:

*Each of the following statements expresses an opinion. At the end of each statement, put an "A" if you agree or a "D" if you disagree.*

1. If robbers break into your house while you're at home, the best thing to do is to let them take what they want and hope that they don't hurt you.
2. Might makes right.
3. Only the strongest survive. There's no place for weaklings in this world.
4. Anyone from anywhere in my town can go anywhere else in town and feel perfectly safe, welcome and unthreatened.
5. If you're outnumbered, it's OK to fight dirty.
6. 1 agree with Teddy Roosevelt, who said, "Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far."
7. Nature is a force of good in the world; only people are capable of doing wrong.
8. War doesn't prove who's right, it only proves who's left.
9. When two countries go to war, it's usually for a good reason.
10. I admire people who put themselves in dangerous situations and then work themselves out of them.

Students should respond to the opinionnaire individually and then compare and discuss their answers. The teacher's role should be to moderate the discussion rather than to express a personal opinion.

The design of a survey is much the same as the design of an opinionnaire, the difference being that instead of giving their own opinions students interview ten people or so from outside the class and record their opinions. The responses then serve as the basis for an all-class discussion.

**Scenarios/Case Studies**

Scenarios and case studies describe problematic examples of people who find themselves in thorny situations that parallel the circumstances of the literary characters. Scenarios tend to be briefer and intended for small group discussion followed by a whole class comparison of the small group decisions; case studies tend to be more detailed and complex and used for more extensive study, such as when small groups lead the whole class in an analysis of a single case. The basic structure and design process of the two is similar, however. The teacher should:

1. *Identify problematic aspects of the literature* that could form the basis for a series of scenarios or cases (five is a good number).
2. *Enter the world of the students* to represent the problems in terms they can understand.
3. *Develop scenarios or cases* that depict the problem in students' terms.

The following set of scenarios could prepare students for a reading of literature concerned with conflicts with authority figures, such as "The Golden Calf" from Exodus, James Baldwin's "The Man Child," Bordon Deal's "Anteaus," Mary Lavin's "The Story of the Widow's Son," Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Paddy Chayevsky's "The Mother."

*Each of the following scenarios involves an individual coming in conflict with an authority figure. In a small group of four students, read each one carefully. Then, as a group, rank the characters according to how much you admire them, putting #1 by the scenario in which you admire the character's behavior the most, #2 by the scenario in which you admire the character the second most, and so on. You must rank all five of the scenarios, no ties.*

1 . Justin Time was on his high school football team. He didn't start but was a reserve linebacker who often played when the team went into special defenses. After a tough loss, the coach mistakenly thought he heard Justin laugh at something as the team was walking back to the locker room. Enraged that a player was not taking defeat seriously enough, the coach ordered Justin to crawl across the parking lot on his elbows in front of the whole team and a few hundred spectators, yelling at him at the top of his lungs the entire time. Justin thought that a good team player always does what the coach says so although he initially denied that he had been the one who'd laughed, he ended up following his coach's orders without arguing.
2. Sybil Rights was a bright young woman, although her grades didn't always reflect it because she didn't always do what her teachers wanted her to do. One time her history teacher gave the class an assignment in which they were to outline the entire chapter from the textbook that dealt with the American government's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. Although every other student in the class did the assignment, Sybil refused, saying that it was just "busy work" and that she would not do assignments that she thought were a waste of her time. She decided that she could spend her time better by actually learning something about this incident, so she wrote

an essay on the morality of the bombing that she intended to enter in the school's annual essay competition. She ended up getting a zero on the assignment, which lowered her grade for the marking period from a B to a C.
3. Mo Skeeto was a young American soldier stationed in France in World War Il. His troop was one of many battling the enemy in a hilly region of Europe. They had the enemy outnumbered, but the enemy was well positioned at the top of a hill and the Americans couldn't seem to gain any ground in spite of their superior numbers.
Finally, an order came down from the commanding officer that Mo's troop should charge the hill. It occurred to him that his troop was being sacrificed to create a diversion so that other troops could rush up and make a sneak attack from behind while the enemy was fighting his troop off. Mo thought that this was a stupid plan that was doomed to failure and that his life was going to be sacrificed needlessly. Yet, he followed his orders, charged the hill, and like everyone else in his troop, was killed. Sure enough, the master plan failed. After Mo's troop was wiped out, the sneak attack from behind was successfully rebuffed and the enemy still held the hill.
4. Robin DeBanks had a job working at the local hardware store after school. Usually, she did whatever was necessary, such as unpack boxes, work the cash register, or put price tags on merchandise. She almost always had something to keep her busy.
One day, however, a heavy rainfall kept business down. At one point there were no customers in the store and she had taken care of all the little jobs, so she was standing around doing nothing. Her boss hated to pay her for nothing and so told her to scrub the linoleum floor of the store with an abrasive cleaner, a job that Robin reckoned hadn't been done in years. She thought that this task was utterly ridiculous and a waste of her time, but she didn't want to risk losing her job, so she got a bucket, a brush, and some cleanser and went to work.
5. Frazier Nerves stayed out too late with his girl friend one night, and his parents reacted by grounding him, confining him to his room every night for a month. He thought that this was excessively harsh but knew that arguing would only make matters worse. Still, he had a great desire to see his girl friend; not only was he madly in love with her, but he also knew of other boys who found her attractive and he thought that if they were not to date for a month he might lose her to someone else. Desperate to maintain his relationship with her but fearful of parental repercussions, he started sneaking out through his window every night after his parents had gone to bed for a late evening rendezvous with his girlfriend. He made it through the month without getting caught and with his relationship still intact.

Students rank the characters in small groups and then compare their responses in an all-class discussion. The scenarios should be problematic enough that students do not reach an easy consensus. The discussions, then, should force students to examine closely their attitudes toward authority figures and consider carefully the kinds of dilemmas the literary characters will face.

**Simulation/Role Playing**

Most classes include a few students who are theatrical, or at least hams. These students can engage in simulations of circumstances that parallel those of the literary characters. For instance, students reading about cultural conflicts (i.e., Chinua Achebe's "A Man of the People," Pearl Buck's "The Frill," Abiosch Nicol's "The Devil at Yolahun Bridge," Nadine Gordimer's *Livingstone's Companions*, and George Orwell's *Burmese Days*) could role play situations in which characters from different cultures come in contact with each other (being careful not to stereotype or demean the characters they play).
A teacher would need to:

1. *Identify important literary issues* that students will need to confront to understand the material.

2. *Enter the world of the students* to create circumstances into which they can easily project themselves.
3. *Develop circumstances and roles* for students to play.

Possible simulations for literature concerning cultural conflicts would be a teenager from Wyoming moving to New York City, a multiethnic student council planning the prom, a foreign exchange teacher on the first day in an American classroom, a student transferring from an all-girls Catholic school to a multiethnic public school, and so on. Followup discussions could focus on the dynamics of cross-cultural interactions, how majorities can impose their values on minorities, how newcomers must acclimate themselves to new expectations, how right behavior in one culture is regarded as wrong in another, and which factors enable one culture to prevail over another.

**Writing about Personal Experiences**

Students can write informally - perhaps in journals or reading logs about experiences that are similar to those of the characters they will study. The act of writing can promote reflection about important experiences that will help students relate to the problems confronted by the characters. In having students produce appropriate personal experience writing, a teacher might:

1. *Understand the problems in the literature*. Often the literature centers on a theme, such as friendship (as found in John Galworthy's "The Apple Tree," Somerset Maugham's "The Letter," Miguel de Cervante's Don Quixote, Herman Hesse's Narcissus and Goldmund, and Joyce Carol Oates' Solstice). The range of problems displayed in the literature, however, may be quite broad. The teacher then needs to identify the kinds of problems that students will need to consider in understanding different aspects of the general theme.
2. *Enter the world of the students* to determine which of these issues they will be most likely to grasp and reflect upon fruitfully.
3. *Develop a range of suggestions* for topics for students to write on.

Students preparing to read literature concerning friendship might be given a choice of the following prompts:

1. Describe an experience you've had in which someone you thought was your friend turned out not to be.
2. Describe an experience you've had in which a strong friendship almost fell apart but survived
3. Describe an experience you've had that illustrates why your best friend is your best friend, and describe a second experience concerning someone who seemed to be a friend but turned out not to be. How are they different?

One option with personal experience writing is to have students interview a significant person in their lives, perhaps a parent, and then prepare a narrative of that other person's experience. When students interview their parents about literary topics it brings the parents in closer contact with what their children are doing in school and helps create some intimacy between parents and children due to the sharing of their personal lives. As a follow-up activity to either the personal experience narrative or the interview narrative, students can get in groups, select one narrative, and dramatize it for the class. Students thus see a variety of examples of possible behavior to prepare them for the problems experienced by the literary characters.

**Writing about Related Problems**

Tom McCann (Smagorinsky et al., 1987, p. 18, 43) has developed a procedure for creating a problematic situation parallel to that in a work of literature and having students write an argument in favor of a solution to the problem. For instance, in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, two related situations occur: A man has a strong attachment to an old dog whose geriatric miseries and unspeakable stench become so intolerable that other characters suggest he put it to death; and George must decide whether or not to kill Lennie. McCann developed an advice column format to introduce these problems, presenting a letter from a young boy who has an old dog that has grown decrepit and pathetic. The boy's family is pressuring him to put the dog to sleep, a horrible decision since the dog is the boy's oldest and dearest companion. The students' task is to play the role of advice columnist and write an argument in favor of a solution to the problem. In doing so, they must express an understanding of the complexities of the dilemma and look at the problem from several perspectives. Teachers who wish to design such an activity should:

1. *Identify the problems in the literature* that are important for students to recognize and contemplate.
2. *Enter the world of the students* to create a set of circumstances within their radius.
3. *Design a problem and format*, perhaps using McCann's advice column medium as a means of eliciting a response.

The following is a possible way to introduce *The Scarlet Letter* to students:

*Pretend that you are a famous newspaper columnist who gives advice to people who write letters to you. Often their problems concern crucial moments in their love life that they need advice about. Mat kind of advice would you give to the following person? Make sure that when you write your responses that you are supportive of the person ~ problems and give a thoughtful answer. Make sure too that whatever your advice is, you give several reasons why the person should follow it.*

Dear Answerline,

I am a teenage girl who lives in a small town out in the middle of nowhere. It's the kind of town where everybody knows everyone else and everybody sort of minds everybody else's business whenever they can. It's also the kind of town where everybody is pretty much the same: We all come from the same kinds of backgrounds, we all go to the same church - you know, that sort of thing. People in my town don't care much for strangers or people who are different.

Well here's my problem. It's a very big problem, one I can't figure out by myself. I'm not even sure how to explain it, because you see I've gotten myself in a bit of trouble, and as a result I've got a very big problem, the kind of problem that might cause me to go on a vacation out of town for about nine months or so, if you get what I mean. Except I can't even do that since all of my relatives live right here in town. I mean, people in my town just don't do that sort of thing. And now I've got this very big problem that I don't know what to do about it. Because if my problem ever came right out in the open, if you get my drift, no one would ever talk to me. I'd be a real outcast, my parents would disown me, the school board would probably kick me out of school, all of my friends would turn their backs on me, I'd be all alone in the world (well except for this one little companion, if you follow me). So this is a very bad situation.

But that's not my only problem. As you can imagine I had some help getting into this situation, and my helper is a very well respected person in town from a very well respected family (both of his parents are

deacons in the church, and he himself wants to go into the ministry) and he says that he'll help me all he can when all is said and done but that if word ever got out about his, uh, involvement in my situation then he would be so ashamed that he and his whole family would have to leave town for good and that he'd suffer in torment for all eternity for disgracing the church and ruining his family including all of his ancestors and descendants (including one that you might say I have a particular interest in). I respect him and I love him so I don't want to drag him into this; at least not publicly, but I really need to do something because my problem isn't getting any smaller, if you get what I mean. Please don't suggest any extremely drastic situations, by the way - you know, the kind that would involve doctors and would make me feel sad and horrible and regretful for the test of my life. So tell me, what should I do?

Desperately,

Bulbous in Butterfield

Students can discuss possible solutions in small groups and then either produce a group composition or disband and write their solutions individually.

**KNOWLEDGE OF FORM**

Often knowledge of the form of a literary work can help a reader comprehend the work's meaning. Gevinson et al. (1984), Smagorinsky and Gevinson (1989) and Smith and Hillocks (1988) have identified two general types of literature for which form-related knowledge can inform understanding: works sharing particular characteristics of *rhetoric* or *style* and works sharing format *generic* properties. Frequently instruction based on form-related knowledge is not beneficial for students for two reasons: (1) it focuses on *declarative* rather than *procedural* knowledge, and (2) it is based on a misguided sense of genre.

Form-related instruction, like content-related instruction, is ineffective when it concentrates on the skills of labeling and recall rather than stressing the importance of how to use the knowledge. When instruction in form focuses solely on labeling the parts of a work, all it teaches students to do is to label parts; it does not provide procedures for making meaning of the work based on an understanding of the formal elements. An example of this is the study of a genre such as the sonnet: Students are instructed in the conventions of the form such as the rhyme scheme and then tested on their ability to label the parts they have been taught. Such instruction does not give students procedures for using generic knowledge to interpret the poem's meaning.

Many secondary curricula are also built around an ill-considered notion of genre. Following the organizations of literature offered by anthologies, these curricula group works according to categories such as short story, novel, nonfiction prose, poetry, and drama. The assumption behind this organization is that reading one poem will help students understand the next; that the works of Ogden Nash and Ezra Pound share important properties because they are both written in verse; or that "an understanding of plot and character in Thurber's short story 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' enables a reader to understand ... the problems in Hemingway's 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber... (Smagorinsky and Gevinson, p. 29). The plot of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" does not follow the conventional linear form but jumps about considerably. Studying the plot of this story, therefore, is not helpful in reading and understanding stories that have a spiral narrative form, that begin in medias res, that jump back and forth in time, and so on.

I subscribe more to Aristotle's notion of genre - works such as satire, tragedy, epic and so on that share formal properties - that provides instead a means of organization that enables readers to make inferences about meaning due to the implications of shared elements. Students reading a series of Westerns, for instance, can

develop a cognitive map based on- certain formal properties: white settlers attempting to tame the West, often by means of agriculture or ranching, and overcoming obstacles such as natural elements, desperadoes, wild animals, and Native Americans, often relying on particular characteristics to overcome them. Variations on these elements often concern the morality of Western expansion and the settlers' attitudes toward the obstacles they face: In some Westerns the Native Americans are depicted as savages; in others, as noble victims. An awareness of the story structure helps students anticipate and adjust to variations in the form.

Following are ways in which to introduce students to formal elements and help them learn procedures for interpreting literature based on formal knowledge.

## INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES FOR KNOWLEDGE OF LITERARY FORM

### Rhetoric/Style

An understanding of rhetorical techniques and particular styles can help students make inferences about a literary work's meaning. Typically, however, literature anthologies treat rhetorical and stylistic issues superficially, by providing students with definitions and illustrations of such complex devices as irony and symbolism and then expecting students to interpret literature that uses them; or by treating point of view as a matter of identifying a perspective such as first person omniscient narration and then expecting students to understand a narrator's reliability.

Students require procedural knowledge for such sophisticated feats of literary understanding. Smith has identified a meticulous series of procedures for comprehension of works involving irony (1989) and narrator reliability (1991) following from a task analysis of the problems involved in understanding literature requiring such knowledge. The design process of the task analysis and design of activities includes the following considerations:

1. *Identifying the knowledge required to understand the literature*. In the case of irony, this means recognizing such clues as a conflict of facts within the work, as in Shelley's "Ozymandias" when the king declares himself "king of kings," yet his statue lies in a "colossal wreck." Smith, basing his work on a theory originally forwarded by Wayne Booth (1975), identified a total of five clues that students could use to identify a potentially ironic situation in literature: a straightforward warning in the author's own voice, an obvious error in the text, a conflict of facts within the work, a conflict between the author's style and the narrator's, and a conflict between the author's beliefs and the narrator's.
2. *Developing procedures for understanding literature*. Smith identified three steps that students could use to detect and interpret ironic literature: (1) use a recognition clue to detect possible irony, (2) reject the surface meaning of the poem, and (3) reconstruct the real meaning.
3. *Designing activities to teach students these procedures*. Students need practice in using the procedures on material that is accessible to them. In introducing students to the procedure for recognizing a conflict of facts within a work, a teacher could use a humorous cartoon such as those by Gary Larson in "The Far Side." One, for instance, depicts a brutal torturer whose victim is stretched out on a rack in order to extract information from him, with the caption reading, "Still won't talk, huh? ... Okay, no more Mr. Nice Guy." Students can see the conflict easily in a user-friendly medium, one that they enjoy a great deal. In introducing a sophisticated concept teachers can often find material that students latch on to quickly and then gradually move them through more sophisticated examples. The Bloom County (now Outland) and Mr. Boffo comic strips provide good introductory material for teaching irony, enabling students to move to more complex - yet still accessible and

entertaining - material such as columns by Dave Barry and Art Buchwald, and finally into literature, often using poetic popular songs as a bridge between ironic entertainment and literature.

The comprehension of ironic literature, then, is not well facilitated by an issuance of the definition of a term and an example but requires the thoughtful and careful planning of instruction in both declarative and procedural knowledge. Teachers planning instruction in rhetorical or stylistic techniques such as connotation, imagery, metaphor, symbolism, propaganda, parody, and author characteristics need to understand the nature of the comprehension problems presented to students and to plan instruction that teaches them *how* to go about their reading, using simple, accessible materials as introductions.

**Genre**

Knowledge of generic elements can help students prepare for reading literature of similar structure. Once again, however, students need more than just labeling skills; they need to know how the elements contribute to meaning. Teachers can use a general approach to designing instruction that parallels that outlined for planning lessons for rhetorical/stylistic knowledge:

1 . Identify the knowledge required to understand the literature. A teacher can do this either through consulting reference works or making decisions based on personal observation. Let's take a genre such as *satire*, which students are often familiar with though even they lack formal knowledge. Satiric literature aspires to ridicule and expose the follies and vices of humanity, using such techniques as exaggeration, understatement, diatribe, and irony. Students need to be able to identify the target of the satire, understand the author's motives in ridiculing the target, broaden the satire beyond the scope of the particular work under study, and identify the satirical techniques used by the author (Hillocks, McCabe & McCampbell, 1971, p. 259).
2. *Develop procedures for understanding literature*. Often when studying a genre students already have some scriptal knowledge based on previous experience with the genre. In sophisticated genres such as satire a teacher might need to point out to students satires they have read or seen and extract the elements from their knowledge of the material. Most students, for instance, have seen satirical television shows such as "Saturday Night Live," read satirical comics such as "Doonesbury," and seen satirical films such as "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." Teachers can draw on students' prior knowledge of the genre to teach procedures for recognizing and interpreting satire through these accessible materials.
3. *Design activities to teach students these procedures*. Familiar materials can provide a good introduction to an understanding of satiric techniques. Most students have seen teen-oriented films that satirize the adult world, from *Ferris Buehler's Day Off* to *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (any volume will do). Students can get in small groups to discuss the depiction of adults in movies of this kind, considering how the adults are characterized, how the filmmaker makes these characteristics seem foolish, and what the effect of the satire is. Through this accessible medium, students can practice the procedures they will need to use in interpreting more complex and unfamiliar works of literature.

The introductory activities discussed here are effective in two important ways. Cognitively, they provide a prereading framework for understanding literature. They also make students and their knowledge important sources of knowledge. As Nystrand (1991) has argued,

> Why should authentic discourse promote depth of understanding? First, the character and tone of classroom discourse set important expectations for learning. When teachers ask genuine questions about what students are thinking (and not just to see if they have done their homework), they promote

fundamental expectations for learning by treating students seriously as thinkers - that is, by indicating that what students think is interesting and indeed worth examining. In effect, they treat each student as a primary source of information, thereby giving them all an opportunity to deal with things in their own frames of reference. Authentic questions prominently underscore the character of instruction where students are "major players" in the forum of the classroom, where communication is not a one-way affair, and consequently where the terms of reciprocity between teachers and their students are upheld not merely in procedures but in substance as well.

The research of Goodlad tells us that students tend to be spectators (and bored spectators at that) rather than major players. The instructional activities outlined here can help bring them into the game and make the outcome dependent on their contributions.

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