

# “Lost in Translation”: Helping Students Create Meaning in the Content Areas

**S**uccessful communication in all four language modes—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—is essential for producing effective learning environments. Every teacher, regardless of grade level or content area, must daily endeavor to apply this fundamental truth in both theoretical and practical ways. Teachers know what happens when students, for any number of reasons, experience difficulty in efficiently navigating the various required “communication tasks,” especially when those tasks involve reading assignments that are part of the curriculum. Every teacher has encountered the intense and often overwhelming frustration that results from a breakdown between the student reader and the written text.

In every discipline, a student’s capacity to succeed academically depends in large part upon his or her ability to navigate various types of textual material. To do so, he or she must master the requisite skills. Depending on the course content, these skills may include the ability to make sense of graphs, charts, tables, and diagrams; identify a topic sentence in a paragraph; use a book’s table of contents and index, and scan a text for specific information. Academic texts often require the reader to decide which material is important, to discern fact from opinion, and to critically



evaluate content. The reader must be aware of the visual and context cues and be able to respond accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

While these skills may seem natural to teachers, they often present students, particularly those for whom reading is already a challenge, with significant barriers to comprehension. Therefore, teachers need basic strategies that allow them identify and respond to the difficulties that keep students from establishing a meaningful connection with reading. This has a broader

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meaning than “literacy,” per se, at least when that term is defined solely as a student’s ability to read.

Beyond acquiring basic reading skills, students need to *understand* what they read, transitioning from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman explore this concept in their book *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher’s Guide to Content-Area Reading*.<sup>2</sup> These authors, who are also professional educators, strongly believe that reading on any

subject needs to both reflect and inform students’ daily experiences in the world around them. Among other things, they suggest that successful content-area reading incorporate the following concepts:

- Students use the textbook as a basic source, but also venture beyond it.
- Rather than relying upon a single authority, students consult a variety of sources and voices on a topic.
- Students sample a wide variety of

genres including textbooks and other reference works, newspapers, magazines, Websites, and popular trade books.

- Reading selections have a range of lengths, from short newspaper and magazine articles to whole books.
- Many of the readings take an interdisciplinary approach, using the tools of multiple disciplines, combining science, statistics, history, biography, and more.

To ensure that all students use the best techniques, teachers must under-

## Figure 1 K-W-L Chart

Score: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Chapter: \_\_\_\_\_

### Think Sheet

This is what I know

This is what I would like to learn

This is what I learned

stand how successful readers connect with text. Proficient readers internalize reading strategies and use them consistently in order to achieve comprehension, while struggling readers either lack these intrinsic strategies, or apply them only to texts with which they feel comfortable.<sup>3</sup>

To assist students, content-area instructors can divide reading assignments into three major comprehension stages: **Before Reading**, **During Reading**, and **After Reading**. By providing students with a range of tasks at each stage of the reading process, teachers can greatly increase students' probability of comprehending the assignments.

### **Before Reading**

Daniels and Zemelman<sup>4</sup> see this stage as the most crucial. The teacher prepares the student to read by setting the agenda, stimulating students' questions, beliefs, and predictions about issues they will encounter in the reading, and making connections with students' prior knowledge. For example, using a pre-reading tool known as *K-W-L*<sup>5</sup> allows students to document what they already *know*, what they *want* to know, and finally what they *learned* through study, class discussion, and experimentation (see Figure 1 on page 52).

*Anticipation Guides* can also serve as an effective pre-reading tool. These guides include a few short questions or statements about the assigned reading, using a yes/no or agree/disagree format. Anticipation guides encourage students to use their pre-existing ideas about the topic as a springboard into the actual assignment. Students in a science class, for example, might examine what they believe about theories of evolution. History students might make predictions about the roles of the U.S. and England in the events leading to the War of 1812, while students in a basic accounting class might examine their notions about what constitutes "good" credit, or maintain a set budget prior to actually having to do so.

It is useful to have students revisit their initial answers after an assignment has been completed so they can

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compare their "before" and "after" responses. Students in my American Classics class have performed this exercise with *The Scarlet Letter*<sup>6</sup> in order to explore their attitudes about the nature of forgiveness, grace, and the role of the individual versus that of the community. While there will always be students whose answers remain virtually unchanged, it's interesting to observe those who, after reading a text, find their experiences, perceptions, and worldviews enlarged (see Figure 2 on page 54).

### **During Reading**

Once teachers have piqued students' interest about the possibilities inherent in the assigned reading, they must find ways keep them involved. One of the easiest methods of doing this is a well-constructed *Study Guide*. While study guides are often considered "busywork," they can, in fact, offer students a wealth of information and clues about what is important in the text. A well-written study guide gives students a model of intelligent inquiry, points them toward relevant, timely information, and serves as an excellent review for quizzes and tests. Creating good study guides requires some time and careful thought, but they will more than "pay for themselves" because of the number of times they can be reused.

One way to ensure the effectiveness of a study guide is to include a variety

of questions covering a range of inquiry levels. Good study guides require students to make careful, critical assessments and to draw conclusions and defend them. Study guides can also serve as a springboard to classroom discussion.

Daniels and Zemelman<sup>7</sup> suggest that students create *Double Entry Journals* during reading as an alternative to traditional note taking. Using this strategy, students record notes about their reading in two vertical columns on a sheet of paper. On one side, they summarize important textual information; on the other side, they jot down their thoughts, reactions, and questions about the things they have read. Double entry journals offer a valuable tool for teaching students how to identify key concepts in their reading. Another benefit is the immediacy of student response. Because students can refer back to their journal if they forget a key question or concept, this greatly enhances retention.

### **After Reading—Not Just the Test!**

Regardless of the subject, teachers need to make reading tasks as manageable and relevant as possible. To do so, they can encourage students to integrate and reflect on newly acquired information, rather than simply testing them on it and moving on to the next topic.

Allowing students to share what they've discovered in the process of reading is one of the best ways to solidify that knowledge. It's important for students to recognize that the end of a unit or chapter doesn't signal the "end of learning" on that issue. By assigning students to compose a "wish list" of what they'd like to learn about a topic or issue and then encouraging them to follow up, teachers provide with a model for lifelong curiosity and lifelong learning.

Creating a sense of community is also extremely important: The more students hear their teacher talk about the concepts they are required to master, the more relevant this information becomes to them. Since each discipline has a shared "vocabulary," it's impor-

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tant to introduce students to this language early on and encourage them to use it as part of a shared dialogue. This is crucial if teachers want their students to view themselves as members of the larger learning community.

## Conclusion

While the ideas discussed in this article only scratch the surface of content-area reading strategies, they do suggest the range of possibilities that are available to teachers as they assist

students with reading tasks. By guiding students through the reading process, teachers ensure that they connect with the text, and set the foundation for lifetime learning. ✍



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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "Content Area Reading;" accessed April 25, 2005, at <http://www.handheldeducation.com/readingscene/abc/contentareas.html>.
2. Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman, *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher's Guide to Content-Area Reading* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2004). The authors offer a wealth of content-area strategies, complete with visual models, as well as an insightful rationale on the subject of content-area reading.
3. "Reading in the Content Areas: Strategies for Success;" accessed November 16, 2005, at <http://www.glencoe.com/sec/teachingtoday/educationupclose.phtml/12>.
4. Daniels and Zemelman, pp. 100, 101.
5. Examples of K-W-Ls are available in most content-area texts. Thanks to Alvin Glassford, religion instructor at Andrews Academy in Berrien Springs, Michigan, for sharing his version of this strategy.
6. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972).
7. Daniels and Zemelman, pp. 118, 119.

## Figure 2 Anticipation Guide

### *The Scarlet Letter* Pre-Reading Questions (American Classics I)

Carefully read each of the statements below, and tell whether you agree (**A**) or disagree (**D**). There is no "right" or "wrong" answer, per se, as long as you consider the questions carefully and answer honestly. However, you must **agree with the entire statement as it stands** in order to write an "A" next to it. If you disagree with any portion of the statement, you must mark "D" indicating that you **disagree with the entire statement**. However, make a note of those statements with which you struggled due to "shades of gray."

1. \_\_\_\_ "Not judging someone" means agreeing with or approving of everything the person does.
2. \_\_\_\_ It is OK to forgive someone for something, but you shouldn't let the person forget that he or she messed up.
3. \_\_\_\_ When you do something wrong, it is important to feel guilty.
4. \_\_\_\_ It is OK to forgive someone for something as long as the person is visibly hard on himself or herself about it.
5. \_\_\_\_ Some mistakes simply cannot and should not be forgiven.
6. \_\_\_\_ Once rules or laws are established, they should never be deviated from; to do so weakens the law.
7. \_\_\_\_ It is ultimately most important to forgive yourself for a mistake, whether or not you obtain forgiveness from others.
8. \_\_\_\_ You should still feel guilty a long time after you make a mistake; this is the only clear proof that you're sorry for what you've done.
9. \_\_\_\_ Nothing good can ever really come from the wrong we do.
10. \_\_\_\_ Feelings of guilt are what keep people from making the same mistake over again.
11. \_\_\_\_ To forgive a mistake is to excuse it.
12. \_\_\_\_ It is possible to disagree with someone's views or behavior without passing judgment on him or her.
13. \_\_\_\_ Most people need someone else to help them see how weak they are; they'd never figure it out on their own.
14. \_\_\_\_ Guilt is an essentially positive thing.
15. \_\_\_\_ The needs of the group must ultimately take precedence over the rights of the individuals who comprise that group.
16. \_\_\_\_ Regardless of the restitution we may try to make for any mistake, we can never fully make up for the wrong we have done.