

Do I Really Have to Teach *Reading?*

Content Comprehension Years 7–12

Oris Tavani



Contents

1	Introduction: “I’m the Stupid Lady ...”	1
2	The “So What?” of Reading Comprehension	11
3	Parallel Experiences: Tapping the Mother Lode	23
4	Real Rigour: Connecting Students with Accessible Text	37
5	“Why Am I Reading This?”	51
6	Holding Thinking to Remember and Reuse	65
7	Group Work That Grows Understanding	87
8	“What Do I Do with All These Sticky Notes?” Assessment That Drives Instruction	99
9	“Did I Miss Anything? Did I Miss Everything?” Last Thoughts	115
	<i>Appendix</i>	121
	Double-Entry Diary	
	Comprehension Constructor with Connections Guide	
	“The Three Bears” Translation	
	Sample Text Set Guide Sheet	
	Instructional Purpose	
	My Answer Comprehension Constructor	
	Template for Reading Response Logs	
	Silent Reading Response Sheet	
	Weekly Calendar	
	Double-Strategy, Double-Entry Diary	
	Highlight and Revisit	
	Group Observation Form	
	<i>Bibliography</i>	135

1

Introduction: “I’m the Stupid Lady ...”

The science textbook is hard for me to read. It has a lot of information with diagrams and pictures. All of these things are helpful to people who know the subject, but to me it is very confusing.

Evan, student

It’s a rainy Monday morning. I am sitting by an open window in a high school science classroom, far away from my own students. I watch as students file in and fill the seats. I overhear a conversation between two girls:

“What are we doing today?”

“Remember? The stupid lady is coming to teach us about reading.”

I realise they are talking about me, and the butterflies in my stomach flap a bit faster. I’ve been hired for the day to work at an alternative high school. My morning will consist of doing demonstration lessons in content-area classrooms, with the afternoon spent debriefing the lessons and sharing comprehension instruction with the teachers who are observing.

The stakes are high, with much expected of me. Teachers have been provided with substitutes so that they can come and watch the demonstrations. The principal’s hope is that the teachers will learn how to help students be better readers of their content.

My first demonstration lesson is in this science classroom. The biology course is a requirement, and the students taking the class are struggling readers who will most likely not be going on to tertiary study. Much to my displeasure, I am to use the textbook chapter on viruses. I received the chapter earlier in the week, but had trouble getting through it. It is long, boring and difficult to read.

It is challenging for me to plan these types of lessons, but I always request the actual textbook or reading materials in advance so that I can see the work from both the teachers’ and the students’ perspectives. I don’t know the students, and I’m not an expert in the content. In this case, my ability to read the virus chapter closely resembles that of the students.

Sometimes not knowing the content well benefits me. My job is not to teach the content – that’s the classroom teacher’s job. My job is twofold. First, I am supposed to model a strategy that will help students become better readers of science. Second, I am supposed to model for the teachers a strategy that works not only with a specific chapter, but with all kinds of reading.

As I prepared for the lesson the week before my trip, I kept saying to myself, “Who cares? How does this stupid chapter on viruses affect my life?” I worried that if I couldn’t get excited about it, how would I engage students I had never met? I needed to come up with a plan.

The plan didn’t hit me until I was on the plane heading for my destination. I sat down next to a man who was invading my seat area. He was big and sweaty, and I didn’t want to sit next to him. But because the plane was full, I was stuck. We weren’t in the air even fifteen minutes when the guy started sniffing and sneezing. As luck would have it, he let out a sneeze that sprayed all over me.

The sun from the window hit the mist of spit, and I could almost see the germs as they landed on me. Quickly, I covered my mouth and nose. I edged to the far side of my seat as questions began to flood my mind: Were this guy’s germs going to recirculate throughout the plane? Did he have a cold, or was it allergies? Was a cold a virus? Could a virus be cured with antibiotics, or is that a bacterial infection? Is a virus alive? Is AIDS a virus? Do viruses mutate? Is that why we can’t find a cure for AIDS and the common cold?

I pulled the “boring” textbook chapter on viruses out of my carry-on luggage. I started to read to find answers to my questions. Based on my own reading and thinking I began to formulate a plan for my demonstration lesson in the classroom.

Now I stand by the windows, ready to begin as soon as the students are settled into their seats. A kid asks me, “Are you the fill-in teacher?”

“No,” I say. “I’m the stupid lady you mentioned.” The student looks at me and sniggers. I head to the front of the room and begin adjusting the overhead projector. I introduce myself to the class and to the twenty teachers observing at the back of the room. Thanks to a science colleague in my high school I approached earlier that week, I am armed with some colour transparencies of viruses she uses with her students. They were interesting to me, and I hoped they would generate some curiosity in these students. I begin showing them as a warm-up for the actual lesson.

More students straggle in as I run through the colour overheads. One girl comes in and sits directly in front of me. She plops down, trying very hard to distract me, waving her arms and turning to chat with a student behind her. I keep moving through the transparencies. Most of the class seems interested.

After three or four minutes pass, this girl looks up, throws her arms in the air and lets out a loud, exaggerated sigh. She drops her head to the desk and covers her face in her arms. I stop. Out of embarrassment, remembering the twenty

teachers in the back who are wondering what I'll do next, I chuckle. She looks up. I stop and say, "So you're bored with viruses, too?"

"Yeah, who cares about stupid viruses? It's not like I'll ever need to know this stuff."

"I know what you mean. When your teacher sent me this chapter and told me I was supposed to teach a lesson on it, I did the same thing as you. I threw up my arms and let out a sigh. I didn't really care about it either. As a matter of fact, I didn't even want to read the chapter, but I had to, because I was going to be in front of a lot of people and I didn't want to look stupid. Because the chapter was hard and boring for me, I had to figure out a way to get through it."

The girl rolls her eyes, and I can see that she has something to say. I pause, and she jumps in. "There is no purpose in this science stuff. It's not like I'm going to be a scientist or anything."

"You've got a point. Maybe you're not going to be a scientist. But maybe there is another reason why you need to read this chapter and remember some of the information. Let me ask you a few questions. Do you need this class to get through this year?"

"Yeah."

"Will your teacher give you a test on this chapter when you're finished studying it?"

"Yeah."

"Do you need to pass the chapter test to pass the class?"

"Yeah."

"Well, maybe what I'm about to show you will help you get through this boring text that you don't really care about in a way that will help you pass the test. That might help you pass the class so you can graduate."

By this time I have her attention. I begin telling the story of the man on the plane and how I always seem to sit by people who are sick and who sneeze on me. I share my questions and begin writing them on the board. I then show the class how my questions propel me through the chapter on viruses. I explain that asking questions is a strategy that I use to help me read uninteresting material.

I emphasise that the questions have to be questions that I really care about. I can't ask any old question – it has to be one that I truly am curious about. As my colleagues Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (2000) note in their book *Strategies That Work*, "A reader with no questions might just as well abandon the book" (p. 82).

We continue with the reading, and students begin to generate their own questions. At different points, we discuss how various types of information are conveyed through text, graphics or figures – and how many of our questions are being addressed in the textbook. Before I know it, the bell rings.

The kids file out of the classroom, and a science teacher approaches me. She thanks me for the lesson and says, "Before you leave, I have a bone to pick with you. How can you say that viruses are boring?"

I smile and say, “Well, to a science teacher they might not be boring, but to an English teacher like me, viruses are definitely boring.”

The science teacher replies, “You obviously haven’t read all the fascinating articles about viruses. Do you know that some scientists think that viruses might hold the key to finding a cure for cancer?”

“No, I haven’t read those articles. I had no idea that viruses could be so intriguing.”

“Oh, yes, there are all kinds of great informational texts out there that are just fascinating to read.”

I pause. Thinking that I have nothing to lose, I ask, “Then why aren’t you using those articles with your students?”

My Roots of Learning About Comprehension

Fifteen years ago I began the quest to figure out how to help students think when they read. What was missing for those kids who could decode text but not comprehend it?

I was sure that comprehension could be taught, but I didn’t know how. I was fortunate to become involved with a nonprofit staff development group called the Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC), a group of talented teachers who specialise in literacy staff development. When I became part of the group, it was led by Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmermann, co-authors of *Mosaic of Thought* (1997).

My colleagues from the PEBC, Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, have helped teachers implement strategy instruction through their book *Strategies That Work* (2000). Debbie Miller’s *Reading with Meaning* (2002) has helped many primary teachers further refine their strategy instruction. Chryse Hutchins and Susan Zimmerman recently translated many strategies for use by parents in *Seven Keys to Comprehension* (2003). My own book, *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It* (2000), is part of a growing number of texts on strategy instruction written for teachers of adolescents.

I remember the day Ellin introduced a body of research to the training team that we eventually called the proficient reader research. This research named certain strategies used by proficient readers of all ages. Ellin reasoned that if good readers used these strategies, perhaps we needed to be teaching them to struggling readers.

Since I first learned about the proficient reader research, my work has involved helping students and teachers learn how to become more aware of their thinking processes. I realise that if I want readers to reuse and remember the information they read, I have to help them know how to mark text. Highlighters, sticky notes, and different forms such as double-entry diaries and inner-voice sheets, are tools that help students hold their thinking so that when

Like it or not, textbooks are here to stay. Even as technology changes the nature of nonfiction reading into a multisensory, multitext experience, the textbook – that single, hardbound, seemingly complete container of a year’s worth of content – remains a constant. . . . Even if we choose to reject textbooks completely – cast them aside as biased, poorly written or demotivating – it turns out that we would be doing our students a disservice in preparing them for [tertiary study], where the first-year student is asked to read, on average, eighty pages per class per week, with most of the load coming from textbooks. (p. 2)

In my head I calculated what year it would be when we could order new history textbooks. The department chairman’s concerns were valid. I had to come up with an alternative that would support teachers and give kids something interesting and readable, keeping in mind two real concerns of all content teachers: too much content and not enough accessible text.

The curriculum in history classes increases by 365 days every year. I realise that purists don’t consider something history until it is at least twenty-five to thirty years old. However, the commonsense side of me says that any good history teacher works hard to connect current events of the day with historical events to help students make sense of the past.

The only way history teachers can cover course content that begins with pre-history and progresses to the modern day is if they lecture and feed the information to the students. There is no time to allow students to read unless the reading is done at home. We all know how successful that is, especially for struggling readers.

Teachers end up lecturing so they can deliver the maximum amount of content. The problem with this is that the teachers end up doing most of the work. Students aren’t getting an opportunity to construct meaning. They might remember the information for a multiple-choice test, but then they usually forget it. Teachers are frustrated because students don’t remember information from previous chapters, so they constantly feel as though they have to back up and reteach material.

Some students are seeing textbooks for the first time when they enter year nine. When students have to read their textbooks, they usually aren’t very good at it, because they haven’t had much practice with these difficult texts. Richard Allington (2002b) addresses the problem of harder books in the following passage:

Unfortunately, the idea of harder textbooks has captured the attention of educators and policymakers interested in raising academic achievement. But harder books won’t foster the growth of content learning. Think about your own attempts to acquire new content knowledge. Imagine you want to learn about building a website. Do you reject the books you might use because they are too easy? Do you