

DEEPER

Reading

Comprehending Challenging Texts, 4–12

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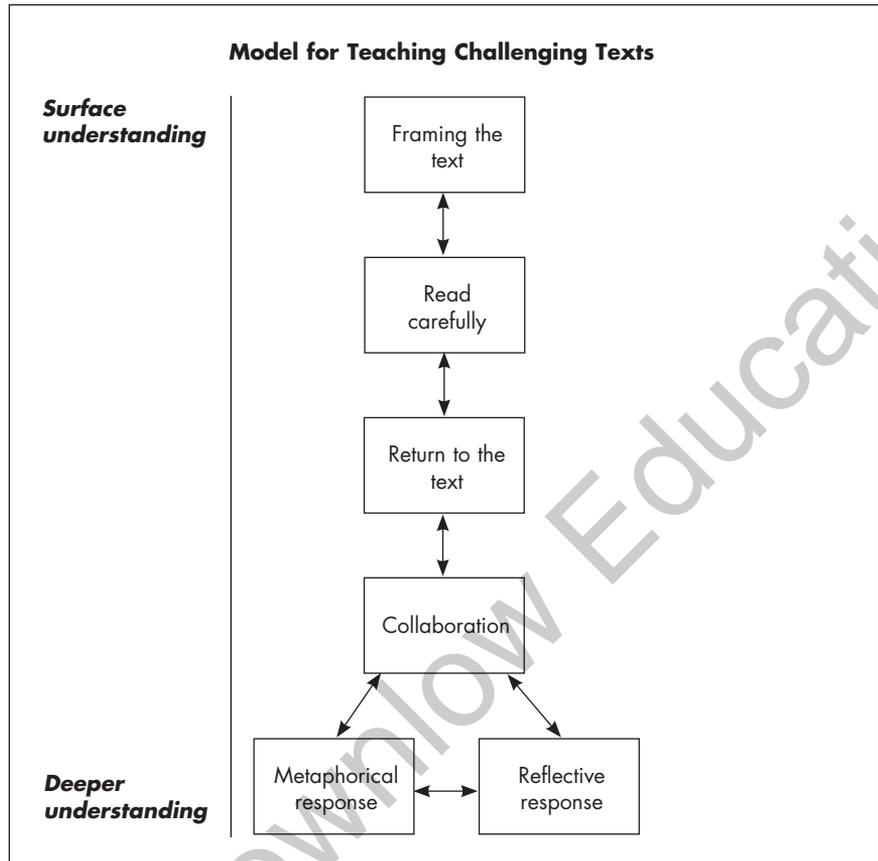
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Teaching Challenging Text

I call it the “Sunday Afternoon Shadow” – that feeling that slowly emerges in the back of my brain every Sunday afternoon around two o’clock. It begins with a vague awareness that the weekend is winding down and that within hours I’ll once again be standing in front of my classes. Even after nineteen years in the classroom the Sunday Afternoon Shadow brings a hint of apprehension, particularly on the eve of any Monday when my students are to begin reading a difficult book. Thinking about how to approach the teaching of any new book raises some familiar questions: How do I plan to teach this unit? How and where can I, their teacher, intervene to help my students tackle this challenging work? What can I do to help them achieve deeper comprehension? Where do I begin on Monday morning? And where do I go from there?

To assist me in the planning process, I refer to a model I developed with a colleague, John Powers. This model, which is depicted in Figure 2.1, helps me to decide what I can do to support my students’ reading of any challenging text, fiction or nonfiction. Having this model in front of me reminds me to consider the following as I plan the unit:

Figure 2.1



- What support do my students need before they begin reading the book?
- What support do my students need before reading each chapter?
- What strategies will assist them to read the text with purpose and clarity?
- How can I encourage a second-draft reading to facilitate deeper meaning?
- Which collaborative activities will help deepen their understanding?
- How can encouraging students to think metaphorically deepen their comprehension?
- How can I help students see the relevance this book plays in their world?

That is a lot to consider before teaching a book. To help clarify how the model depicted in Figure 2.1 helps me answer many of these questions, let's play with a piece of text and examine each of the stages of the model in greater detail.

Focusing the Reader

A teacher was hired to teach Year 1 at an impoverished inner-city school in the United States. She decided she would begin the year with a unit on bears. The students would read about bears, write about bears, paint bears – in short, study all things bear. To help her decide where to start and what direction the unit should take, she thought it would be a good idea to poll the students to find out what they already knew about bears.

When she asked her students what they knew about bears, she was stunned by their lack of knowledge. Their responses revealed they knew very little about bears. They said things like: “Bears are big.” “Bears live in the forest.” “Bears are hungry.” A majority of the students had never seen a real bear. The teacher decided she would have to begin the unit at the ground floor. After completing this introductory exercise, she knew that she would have to do quite a bit of background teaching on bears and that she might not be able to get as deep into the unit as she had originally envisioned.

Three years later this teacher took a new job across town. Her new school was literally and figuratively on the other side of the tracks. Located in an affluent neighbourhood, it was quite a contrast from her first school. She decided to start the year again with the bear unit. When

she polled her students prior to the unit to gauge what they knew about bears, the responses she received were markedly different from those of her students from the previous school. It was immediately apparent that her new students knew quite a bit more about bears. They said things like: “There are many kinds of bears – polar bears, black bears, grizzly bears.” “Bears hibernate in the winter.” “In Australia, they have koala bears, but I don’t think they are really bears.” All but one had seen live bears, most at the zoo, some in the local mountains. Two had travelled to Alaska, one to Australia (the student who mentioned koalas).

Because her new students possessed much more background knowledge about bears than her class in the other school, the teacher was pleased that her students “hit the unit running”. She did not have to spend as much time on scaffolding to prepare students for the reading. As a result, she was able to take the students deeper into the unit. She realised that some of the reading materials she had used with the students at her first school (where few students could read) were too easy for the students at her second school (many of whom could already read). Because her students came to the unit possessing some prior knowledge about bears, the students were better prepared to read more, to comprehend more and to learn more.

Why Cold Reading Is Often a Bad Idea

Students in secondary schools may know about bears, but often lack the necessary prior knowledge to read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *The Great Gatsby*. A student who knows a lot about the Holocaust will be able to read and comprehend Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl* at a much deeper level than someone who comes to the text cold. My point is that reading comprehension is tied closely to what the reader brings to the page – to what the reader knows *before* reading.

In the mid-1970s, J. D. Bransford and N. S. McCarrell wrote a passage to demonstrate the importance of prior knowledge when one reads unfamiliar text. Read the following passage once only, then look away from the page and pretend to explain to someone else what you have just read and what it means.

The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups. Of course one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to the lack of facilities, that is the next step; otherwise you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo things. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In the short run this may not seem important but

Instead, I have found it useful to invest a couple of minutes to refocus my students before they resume reading. Here are some strategies to help students refocus on a daily basis while they are midstream in a literary work.

Daily Focus Questions

When students walk into my class they find a daily focus question on the board. The purpose of this question is to get students' heads back to where they were when we left off the day before. While I take roll, they respond to the focus question. There are two types of focus questions:

1. *Text-dependent questions* may ask students to revisit yesterday's (or last night's) reading. I call these "text dependent" questions because they require the students to have read the text before they can answer the question; in other words, their ability to answer is dependent on their reading and comprehending the text. Here are some examples of text-dependent questions I might use during the reading of *Hamlet*:

- What aspects of Scene 1 establish that something is wrong (rotten) in Denmark?
- What does Hamlet's first soliloquy tell us about him?
- Explain the significance of the following passage: "The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

Students who have not read the text or participated in class will be unable to answer these questions. Many of these questions are culled from the previous day's reading; often they have been discussed thoroughly in class. My goal is not to catch students in a mistake, but rather to have them spend a moment answering a question that will bring them back to where we left off the day before. These questions can also serve as reading checks if the reading was assigned for homework.

2. *Text-independent questions* may ask students to consider a big idea that will help them "set the table" for what will be found in the reading they'll do in class that day. These questions are not specifically from the previous day's reading; instead, they serve to prepare students for some of the big ideas and themes they are soon to encounter. While reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, students might be asked some of the following questions before key chapters:

- Where is God during wartime?

Once students are in the correct frame of mind to read, there are things we can do to help them make sense of difficult text. Before I ask students to read challenging or unfamiliar material, I ask myself: Have I adequately framed the text to help shore up my students' lack of prior knowledge and experience (as discussed in Chapter 3)? In short, are they ready to go?

First-Draft Reading

When students read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* for the first time, it is unrealistic to expect them to "get it" immediately. The novel is simply too complex for them to grasp on an initial reading. Before starting a novel of this complexity, I try to lower students' anxiety by telling them that the initial reading is a "first-draft" reading. I share with them an Anne Lamott passage from *Bird by Bird*, where she discusses the trouble professional writers have in writing first drafts:

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something – anything – down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft – you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft – you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed or even, God help us, healthy." (p. 25)

What Lamott writes about the difficulties of the early stages of writing applies equally to the early stages of reading. When my students read a difficult work for the first time, this is the "down" reading draft. My hope is that they get the basics down – familiarising themselves with the characters, recognising significant plot points, getting used to the language and structure of the novel. Once students have achieved a basic understanding of the text, they are ready to undertake a second, deeper reading – the "up" draft. In a way, it's like getting used to the cool water in a swimming pool before beginning a rigorous workout. Before the real swimming begins, students first need to become acclimated to the water.

Assuming I have done an adequate job framing the text and assuming my students have prepared themselves to read by tuning their minds to the correct "reading" channel, what can I do to help make their first-draft reading as meaningful as possible? As my students embark on any new literary work, I consider four key questions:

The Importance of Collaboration

Someone once said there is not a single book on Earth that is completely understood by any one person. Every one of us comes to the printed page with different prior knowledge and experiences, with different viewpoints and biases, with different insight and blind spots. Though we can “comprehend” text the first time we read it, deeper comprehension is more likely to occur when we discuss our reading with others. I have learned this lesson ninety-one times in the past ten years. Allow me to explain.

Ten years ago I started a faculty book club at the secondary school where I teach and today we have thirty-three members who read a book a month. The books we have read and discussed have encompassed a wide range of subject matter, from the dangers inherent in climbing Mount Everest (Jon Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air*) to the dangers inherent in attending an inner-city Los Angeles secondary school (Miles Corwin’s *And Still We Rise*). We have examined life from a biologist’s point of view (Lewis Thomas’s *Lives of a Cell*) and death through the eyes of an oncologist (Jerome Groopman’s *The Measure of Our Days*). We have read books where God seemed absent (Helena Maria Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*) and where God was ever present (Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies*). It has been a varied and interesting ten years of reading.