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High school and college writing instructors who value teaching reading and writing in tandem often wrestle with accommodating those writers who do not read well enough to grasp essential concepts (referred to here as "basic readers"). In particular, instructors who draw upon the literary critical theories of structuralism or post-structuralism in their teaching are challenged by underachieving readers, as these theories presuppose an appreciable foundation in reading and active engagement in constructing/creating meaning during reading. How can writing instructors who advocate the union of reading and writing face the stark reality of basic readers who land on their doorsteps having scant resources upon which to draw for meaning making, perhaps having never even read a book? Frustration may abound in the absence of deliberate instructional strategies that model for students how to "connect" effectively with texts so that a sense of ownership is fostered.

In the writing classroom, I integrate certain dynamic, yet readily adoptable, reading strategies that engender meaningful "connections" through involvement in ideas, emotions, and structures. To this end, I guide my students on strengthening background schemata (concepts, frames, or prototypes stored as prior knowledge); using specific pre-reading techniques as a bridge into text; and taking hold and actively identifying during reading. I concur with Robert Tierney and Margie Leys that connecting students with readings through deliberate strategies promotes richer conceptualization and improved language awareness and, hence, more rewarding student writing experiences. I have witnessed the benefits. In this forum, I offer useful alternatives for facilitating background schemata development, pre-reading "bridges," and active identification with text, drawing from the work of certain scholars in Composition Studies (Augustine and Winterowd; Flower et al.; Bartholomae and Petrosky; Berthoff; Goleman; Salvatori; Sternglass; and Tierney and Leys) who have documented the value of uniting reading and writing. I target those strategies that I have found to be most useful and offer practical suggestions. Ultimately, though, I do not employ any one method or model to engage students in my classroom; rather, I mix and match.

Strengthening the Foundation

Due to a host of mitigating factors, classically under-prepared student writers, "basic writers," populate basic writing course sections in colleges and universities throughout the country. Mina Shaughnessy describes basic writers in *Errors and Expectations* as, "those who had been left so far behind the others in their formal education that they appeared to have little chance of catching up . . ." (2). Obviously, she was not referring merely to students' literacy levels in the limited sense of reading and writing proficiency. Making the matter even more complex for under-prepared students, scholars who have focused on the associations between college student reader/writers' cognitive development and background knowledge resources (e.g. August; Bizzell; Daiute; Flower; Flower and Hayes; Foertsch; Kellogg; Lunsford; Shaw; and Sternglass) have concluded that under-prepared college students and, indeed, even better prepared college students must ultimately be challenged beyond the boundaries of familiar, established ideas and terminology to grow as readers, writers, and thinkers. Basic writers, therefore, are faced with the seemingly impossible task of "stretching" based on what they do not know. How, then, can basic writing instructors reconcile their under-prepared students' varied backgrounds with the thwarting demands of academic prose? More particularly, how can writing instructors enlighten basic readers on the historic, cultural, and political "voices" at work in outside

texts so they can partake more fully in the "conversations?" The answer is writing instructors must manage the background/schema issue consciously, knowledgeably, and efficiently.

How? To start, Robert Tierney and P. David Pearson make a sensible, fundamental recommendation applicable to any level, although intended for elementary reading teachers: Prior to a reading assignment, teachers should devote time to developing both background knowledge (6) and a "model of meaning for a text" (9), establishing a context for understanding. To that end, for example, teachers should not only question their students as to what they know (a usual practice), but should also help them *predict* what is to come in the reading, drawing upon the strength of the group's collective knowledge. (When appropriate, of course, the teacher should augment the depth of the pool of information prior to the predictions.) Tierney and Pearson's recommendation is useful across levels as it connects students with text prior to a full reading and rejects the notion of a freestanding text. It privileges the schema theory notion of an "active," idiosyncratically constructed text on the part of the reader, one requiring a basis of related pre-existent knowledge.

For college students in particular, though, I have found it essential to be particularly mindful of the complex nature of background knowledge when planning instructional strategies. E. D. Hirsch offers valuable insight on the complexity involved in background knowledge in his work, *Cultural Literacy*. (Acknowledged is the objection of many researchers and practitioners in Composition Studies to the narrowed parameters of cultural literacy referenced therein.) He notes that we store knowledge in schematic background networks or in a "unified system of background relationships," not consciously present to us due to the constraints of short-term memory; hence, "visible parts stand for the rest of the schema" (54). The deeper and broader the networks, Hirsch purports, the stronger the ability to evoke substantive understandings (54). To be an effective reader, according to Hirsch, one must possess relevant background knowledge that is both

adequately extensive and organized for ready retrieval (56-57)—a reasonable claim. He includes community college student readers in his discussion on this issue (54), and noted researchers in Composition Studies (Augustine and Winterowd; Bartholomae and Petrosky; Brandt; Bruffee; Flower et al.; Goleman; Lunsford; Salvatori; and Sternglass) refer to college-level readers in their work on topical background knowledge integration. These latter researchers maintain, however, that (student) readers who have learned how to read actively—to consistently dialogue with text and construct meaning during reading—automatically integrate their background knowledge on the topic, no matter how rudimentary. Of course, the more rudimentary the background knowledge and the more lean the exposure to technique, the greater the challenge. With immediacy, therefore, basic writing instructors should focus basic readers/writers on network building and integration of background knowledge through "active" reading, with emphasis on making connections with text.

The good news here, offering cause for hope, is that basic writing instructors can make quite a difference in these respects—unobtrusively and fruitfully. For example, one effective instructional method of strengthening historical and cultural foundations prior to a reading/writing assignment is to visually depict the historical backdrop or key concepts in the pending reading, via a slide show, photos, or film. Related poetry, artifacts, and music serve to deepen the students' appreciation and understanding. A detailed model of an instructional unit I use in my classroom illustrates the power of connection inherent in this approach:

For a reading and writing assignment on the short story, "Fear," by Peter Mahoney, set in Viet Nam during the War, students first examine a bracelet worn in remembrance of a prisoner of war and copies of letters of communication written between key political leaders. Then they view a slide show of actual war scenes, accompanied by background music and a brief reading of related poetry. They view the slides twice, initially with the music tailored to focus on the patriotic dimension of

the War, via Barry Sadler's anthem, "The Green Berets," and then with the music focused on the catastrophic dimension of the War, via a solemn, classical heart-rending sonata. Students respond informally in writing after each slide presentation, having vicariously experienced some of the War's aspects. Then they study a fact sheet on the War. The facts combined with the imagery evoked by the poetry and the images on the slides often serve to enlighten students on the incongruities of the War. They are positioned to better connect in significant, insightful ways during the full reading of the story. To capture their in-process reflections during the full reading (which is done aloud so that basic readers experience proficient prose aurally and visually), students jot down in the margins notes or insights gleaned and underline words that "grab" them. They share their reflections aloud informally. Then, during the writing process, they are encouraged to integrate their perceptions and insights. (I, for example, circulate and make suggestions to students while they are writing.) Ultimately, then, writing a structured piece in response to "Fear" becomes a more rewarding experience for students because they have connected with the text. This multi-media based approach is very useful for building background schemata and fostering active reading, but other methods focused on establishing contextual understanding and connections are also worth investigating.

Judith Goleman, for example, illustrates an effective process that promotes both the growth of background knowledge and insight and active involvement with text. She engaged her freshman writers in studying the introspective records of a 1940-50's country doctor in John Berger and Jean Mohnr's *A Fortunate Man, the Story of a Country Doctor*. The doctor recounts his daily activities, providing ingenuous commentary as he interprets one personal incident in light of those preceding. (Of particular interest, the doctor refers to himself in the third person, creating an air of objectivity.) As her students came to see how the doctor knew what he knew, Goleman urged them to explore how they knew what they know—to "compose" their own

lives in their own introspective notebooks, looping between the doctor's experiences and reflections and their own. Consequently, they were steeped in stimulating metacognitive activity, having been provided a model upon which to advance their own interpretations. If this activity had succeeded merely to enlighten Goleman's students on the common condition of man across space and time, thereby expanding their worldview, it would have been worthwhile. However, Goleman seems to suggest that students discovered the value of learning to intimately connect with a person of a different time and station in life as a basis for learning how to reflect and deliberate in writing about their own lives. Had Goleman restricted her students to keeping a usual style journal of daily reflections, she would have offered them a considerably limited opportunity for growth and development as readers and writers.

Approaches, such as these, provide basic readers with the tools for developing thought networks and for grasping the very essence of ideas. Students develop their background knowledge and become connected with text beyond what would have otherwise been likely. Better writing cannot be guaranteed, of course. But I have found that students who derive enriched understandings and insights from active reading techniques often arrive at more critical, stimulating points of view and provide better-grounded discussions.

The Power of Pre-Reading

Common sense dictates that perusing a substantive text before a full reading of that text can be advantageous for most readers—including basic readers. Of all the pre-reading strategies available, the specific "previewing" technique is fundamental to strengthening involvement with and comprehension of complex materials. It is an effective connector, easily orchestrated, and widely endorsed by study skills specialists who promote use of the Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review (SQ3R) study technique, wherein previewing activity is referred to as the "survey" (Robinson). I use previewing or surveying with basic readers/writers,

but purposely enhance it to stimulate higher-order thinking skills and rhetorical reading, encompassing claim, purpose, audience, tone, and critical stance. Students are better able to handle more challenging texts, such as narratives set outside their realm of experience or professional essays containing unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary/terminology. The steps are as follows:

The instructor and students begin by constructing a general framework for understanding the text, reading the title and the author's notes (if provided) and speculating on the content (as was similarly suggested by Tierney and Pearson). A reader reads the first paragraph, the first sentence of each body paragraph, and the last paragraph. (Reading aloud, as mentioned previously, is a means for basic readers/writers to experience proficient prose aurally and visually.) If important, unfamiliar words, likely to stump despite contextual clues, are involved at any point in the process, the instructor may simply wish to provide explanation. Lastly, a reader reads the discussion questions accompanying the lesson. The questions often reveal the skeletal progression of the text and can be superimposed as a "map" during active reading of the entire text. To avoid unnecessary confusion, the instructor may wish to limit the number of questions for critical overlay to two or three, rewriting them if they are ill constructed. Well-constructed questions span the various levels of comprehension, such as literal, inferential, analytical, and applicative (the latter in relation to demonstration of knowledge through application). They involve students in various ways of "seeing," such as comparing and contrasting, discerning cause and effect, and synthesizing for wholeness. They may challenge students to assume a critical stance. For example, relating to Shirley Chisholm's, "I'd Rather Be Black Than Female," a clearly structured essay, students can read to compare both elements of Chisholm's argument in order to answer the question, "Does Chisholm grant adequate time and provide adequate evidence to convincingly develop each part of her claim?" Usually basic writers dare not question the authority of an author and require permission to assume an

assertive stance—in this case, to study the discussion closely enough to analyze the evidence allotted each claim and make a judgment call. But Dorothy Augustine and W. Ross Winterowd claim that this level of textual involvement yields fresh insights and expands the reader's "experiential inventory" (135), allowing a student to partake in teasing "the concept of rhetoric from the universe of discourse" (140). In this case, certainly, some basic writers ultimately *will* present convincing evidence that Chisholm proves or fails to prove her claim through using this method. In fact, some of my students have already done so. Basic writers, therefore, can be nudged out of their nests toward independence and away from inflated or otherwise inappropriate criticism by instructors who encourage employment of reasonable, yet provocative, critical frameworks during reading.

Of course, students can also "pre-connect" by focusing directly on an instructor provided writing prompt converted into a pre-reading question. (The prompt should also meet the same stringent criteria designated for questions.) In this way, they can begin to negotiate the content of their emerging essays while they read. For instance, a student can read Malcolm X's account of educating himself in prison in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* from the perspective of the writing prompt, "If Malcolm X made a speech today, what important issues would he stress?" During reading, the student can note phrases/sentences that seem to indicate what Malcolm X valued and then work with two-to-three writing partners to organize the ideas into groups or patterns, consulting with the instructor as needed. Based on their findings, then, the students can begin to make calculated projections in writing, having focused on the particular issue of concern.

The intrinsic value of focusing readers for their writing tasks has perhaps best been described by Linda Flower and her colleagues in *Reading-to-Write*. Although their project involved acclimating college level readers (as opposed to basic readers) to various task-representations for their papers, beyond the scope of this application, the significance of focusing readers on the writing task in acknowledgment that reading can shape that task is

not level specific. Clearly, writers that read with the writing task in mind are more connected and, therefore, better prepared for writing purposes. Relating to basic readers/writers, those writing instructors, for example, who make a practice of directing their students to "Read such-and-such over the weekend so that you can write in response to it on Monday" could better serve students by deliberately focusing them on the writing task instead, thereby providing informed guidance. Those instructors who argue for the sanctity of popping the writing prompts on students at the point of execution could always provide reading prompts that best prepare students for the in-class writing prompts. In either case, students would be preparing for their written assignments.

"Ties That Bind" Through Active Reading

Another strategy for connecting student readers/writers with a challenging text is that which I term "identification." Identification is a method grounded in reader-response theory, wherein the reader, embedded in individual, contextual interpretive codes, constructs meaning while "dialoguing" with challenging text. The instructor immerses students into readings on specified topics, but only after having provided them the opportunity to establish working terminology and conceptual frameworks for the topic areas. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky conceived of the basic strategy when their freshman writers seemed "powerless . . . when asked to do something with what they read" (22). In a course Bartholomae and Petrosky designed, they directed their students to do some preliminary writing on the topics of change and identity, drawing from their own experiences, and to construct working terminology in groups in preparation for interpreting outside readings. Using their unique interpretive frameworks, the students became actively engaged in negotiating the outside readings, selecting "significances"—points of interest with which they somehow identified—and interpreting them in light of the agreed-upon terminology. Even when students were initially unable to comprehend the global picture of a text or

to intuit its multiple "conversations," they were frequently able to initially identify with several specifics and to ultimately make connections. This model augments the students' referential resources and allows initial access to those students lacking confidence who ordinarily would choose to remain uninvolved. Although Bartholomae and Petrosky regard their basic reading and writing course as an effective entity unto itself, dependent on required specifications and methodology employed in particular contexts, and although they have developed a following of professionals who employ the methodology and/or debate the merits annually at professional conferences, even the most casually observing instructor can appreciate the value of grounding students through this type of technique.

Actually, in actively checking significances according to individual associations, basic writers are involved in a form of internal rumination and sorting, akin to, but not as sophisticated as, the act of ongoing internal elaboration referenced by Flower and her colleagues in the *Reading-to-Write* project (involving more advanced college-level readers/ writers). For project members, ongoing internal elaboration meant the act of bringing what one knows to a text during reading/writing and using it to sustain an underlying, active conversation. More particularly, Victoria Stein, a member of the project team, referred to it as creating "meaning-enhancing additions"—the principle means by which students bring what they already know into the reading and writing processes (122) and by which students can discover connections between ideas in the text and their own (123-24). The critically important element in both cases, however, is that students begin with the familiar to make significant connections with the unfamiliar.

I use a productive model of the familiar-to-unfamiliar elaboration process with my basic writers when they are assigned William Buckley's short essay, "Up from Misery." Buckley spins a gut-level tale of a commonplace, miserable alcoholic, connecting almost any reader by way of a web of intrigue. However, due to his sophisticated language and style and despite my explanation of how to "talk

back" during reading, usually my students, like most basic writers (earlier noted), do not grant themselves license to engage in internal dialogue during reading. They do not "give a 'voice' to an otherwise 'mute' text," in Mariolina Salvatori's terms (137). To foster more student involvement in active reading, therefore, as we read aloud, I ask the students first to check off significances, points of personal connection, and then, during their own closer reading, to write very specific personal notes to or about the primary character, the alcoholic, in the margins. Because many persons have had at least some experience with a substance abuse addict and understand, at least in part, the chaotic repercussions associated with addiction, I ask the students to express themselves freely, while protecting anonymity as they wish, and I begin by providing an example of my own musings. Consequently, in informal, sometimes emotive prose, the students partake.

Next I ask them to free write on one or more of their notes and to use what they have learned to arrive at a deeper understanding of a key issue in the text. I recall, for example, when one female student, rather than reviling Buckley's alcoholic, felt heartfelt pity for him and, notwithstanding Buckley's brusque, starchy style, voiced deep regret bordering on sentimentalism in her free elaboration. In the first draft of her writing, however, with my guidance, she began to reflect more broadly on the suffering experienced by alcoholics, employing a more reserved, philosophical tone. Of course, specifics were notably absent at the preliminary stage, but her emotive connection had provided the basis for production of engaging prose. In fact, she eventually set up a case, addressing the opposition in an argumentative format. Whereas usually a student writer's personal, emotive identification in isolation results in an overly informal tone and/or inappropriate stance, I have found with a teacher's guidance, it can be a powerful preliminary step in developing mature realizations.

Besides identifying with text through elaboration, basic readers also can actively connect by concentrating on one representative object in a text, probing it for meaning—"not problem-solving but problem-posing," as Ann Berthoff suggests (125), and then relating the meaning to the whole text for a richer understanding. In Berthoff's view, even if students concentrate on objects such as designer jeans and digital clocks, which are customary to them, they are provided viable departure points for poignant writing. She notes, "Objects in their (students') field of vision become, slowly, emblems of their lives" (126). Berthoff patterns her approach on Paulo Friere's political model of "reading the world" from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which natural experiences, those resulting from observation of natural forms and designs, are regarded as the best models for learning in the quest to empower the politically oppressed. She refers to Friere's example of how a bowl of dirty water or a squalid kitchen, both of which are associated with "the poor," become, through observation and contemplation, universal emblems of squalor and injustice not to be tolerated (Berthoff 125). Berthoff's orientation, apart from the raw specifications of a heavy political agenda, focuses students on the intrinsic value in discovering significant meaning in forms or shapes natural to them, for use in the interpretation of a text's complexities (127).

In a similar non-political regard, I have involved even the most basic readers and writers in my classroom in probing for meaning through objects presented in their readings. A specific example clarifies the technique: Most of my basic writers struggle with unfamiliar references (schemata issues) and advanced vocabulary while reading Maya Angelou's "Graduation" (a section in a chapter from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*). Usually they understand the basic story of Maya's eighth grade graduation, but cannot appreciate the nuances. Accordingly, to get them started, I suggest they concentrate on the flowers in Maya's backyard garden or on the cool dirt of the backyard garden sifting between her toes on the morning of her graduation. Or I ask them to consider the exquisite yellow dress her mother had hand sewn for the ceremony.

I encourage them to delve for the deep, rich messages found in those seeming insignificances. If they focus on Maya's graduation dress, for example, even though they may be unfamiliar with "shirring," they can connect with Maya's mother's love demonstrated through her intricate hand sewing on the handmade dress. They can connect with Maya's pride upon wearing it. They can look into their own lives for symbols of love and pride, perhaps in terms of homemade or handmade items, and then come away with a deeper understanding of Maya, her mother, the dress, the importance of graduation day to parents and the communities during that time, or even of the mother-daughter relationship. In a real sense, this metaphorical teaching deeply connects students and enables them to have something interesting and worthwhile to say in their writing, even though initially they may have sworn they had nothing. Additionally, this active connection serves to spark insight into various complexities of the whole text. Through this process, therefore, students realize a type of empowerment.

Conclusion

"Connected" teaching/learning in the basic writing classroom enriches the experience for both instructors and students. Instructors usually find themselves more deeply engaged in the interpretive and the aesthetic than they had been—both during preparation of materials and during in-class teaching sessions involving fresh methodologies. Concomitantly, students who connect with and invest in texts, using their bolstered background schemata, pre-reading techniques, and individual associations, begin to "perceive" both in terms of what they know and in terms of know how. Although "connection" does not automatically effect fluent, sophisticated diction and phrase manipulation or well-developed text, it often does serve as a basis for marked improvement. Of course, by now it is probably obvious that "connective" techniques are valuable for all levels of readers in our classrooms, not just unprepared basic readers.

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