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Learning to Use Reciprocal Teaching: One Teacher's Journey

BY ANN HAGER

For as many years as I have been teaching I have been aware that certain students struggle with learning and have difficulty deriving meaning from text. Looking for solutions to this on-going problem has been challenging indeed. To find methods that will engage students is often a long process fraught with many trial and error experiences. What helps one student is not necessarily what would help another.

I teach a Program Learning/Reading class at Bishop Foley Catholic High School in Southeastern Michigan. Students are placed in this class because they score 2 years below grade level on the High School Placement Test. The class is designed to provide individualized instruction in the areas of reading comprehension, vocabulary, thinking skills, and study skills. The class is small enough that individual needs can be met.

Last spring, six students were in the class. In conversation with them, I discovered that they were all experiencing difficulty comprehending their biology text. They could read the words accurately, but had difficulty constructing meaning. I had recently learned of reciprocal teaching, a technique designed for such students, and decided to try it. The purpose of this article is to share with fellow teachers my professional journey with this new technique. I will briefly describe the technique, highlight students' pre- and post-reciprocal teaching perspectives on themselves and their reading, share my daily journal entries, and offer conclusions. My hope is that others will be motivated to try this technique as it holds much promise for helping struggling readers.

Reciprocal Teaching: What Is It?

Reciprocal teaching (Palincsar and Brown, 1984, 1986) is an instructional procedure designed to help students comprehend text. It takes the form of an instructional dialogue between teacher and students, with each in turn taking the role of dialogue leader. The dialogue is structured around the four strategies of questioning, summarizing, clarifying and predicting: Questioning helps students to focus on the main ideas; summarizing helps students to determine what is important from what is unimportant; clarifying requires students to identify and clear up any confusion; predicting requires students to consider what will follow in text in relation to their prior knowledge and to previous information in text. As students develop facility with the strategies, the teacher gradually releases responsibility for controlling strategy implementation and the reciprocal teaching dialogue to them.

The Journey Begins

To build students' awareness of themselves as readers and motivation to learn new strategies, I asked them to respond to two questions in writing: *What kind of a*

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reader do you perceive yourself to be? and Is reading informational text, namely your biology textbook, difficult for you? Not surprisingly, students' responses were quite varied. I describe these using pseudonyms. Jim thought he was "a good reader," and did "better at reading when he took the time to understand it." Mitch, Molly, and Julie identified themselves as average readers. Mitch shared that he reads too fast and does not comprehend what he is reading, while Molly noted that when she reads she "may not understand the story or paragraph completely through because [her] mind [is] somewhere else." Similarly, Julie commented that her "mind tends to drift when [she] is reading." Sam perceived himself to be a "slow reader" who is "slow of comprehension" and "get[s] off track because his "mind wanders." Raymond considered himself a "pretty good reader" who "enjoy[s] reading books."

Students' assessments of their ability to read informational text were briefer. Raymond shared that the biology text was difficult for him because he didn't know how to stay focused. Mitch, Molly, and Sam all stated that the vocabulary was hard to understand and hindered their comprehension. Julie and Jim commented that biology was not interesting to them, and therefore they had difficulty focusing. After reading students' responses, it seemed clear to me that, for the most part, they perceived themselves to struggle with the process of reading, no matter how they viewed themselves as readers.

Reciprocal Teaching: Day by Day

I kept an instructional journal so that I might reflect on the spirit and mood of the classroom and on our progress as we worked together to learn and apply the strategies. The text we used was the dreaded biology book. I share these entries as windows into our experience.

May 7, 2002

I introduced the reciprocal teaching technique and gave students an overview of each of the constituent strategies that we would be learning. We started with the questioning strategy. To model the strategy, I asked questions about the title of Chapter 34: Digestion and Excretion and the first paragraph on nutrition. As we proceeded to read, I formulated questions, particularly about unfamiliar vocabulary words. Students answered them and asked questions of their own.

We had a good beginning to our experience with reciprocal teaching. I was pleased with students' attention and interest. They seemed motivated and

engaged. Some told me that they were excited at the prospect of being able to understand their biology text—one word, one thought, one paragraph at a time. I saw excitement in students' eyes. My enthusiasm is running high.

May 9, 2002

I continued to model the questioning strategy. My goal was to have students think more deeply. To do this I had the students respond to the following items in writing.

- One question I had about what I read was ...
- What question(s) can I ask about what I read?
- What was I thinking about as I was reading?

I was amazed at their questions and responses. They were able to link their thoughts and textual information to previous experiences and prior knowledge. Following writing, students shared their questions and we answered as many of them as time allowed. Students commented that they really had to think to both formulate and answer the questions. Success! During the last ten minutes of class, I introduced and modeled the summarization strategy using the two paragraphs on which we had worked.

May 10, 2002

The lesson began today by my reviewing the question and summarization strategies. I continued to model the summarization strategy, because I felt more practice was needed. I read the next paragraph aloud to the class and asked students to individually write two questions (not of the yes/no variety) and a summary statement in response. I gave them the strategy springboard sheet to use for a guide (see Figure 1 on page 27). When they were finished, we divided into two groups of three students and chose a leader for each group. Each group then answered the questions that each member had generated and discussed the summary statements. This method seemed to work well. It required everyone to think for him- or herself prior to engaging in group work. Further, students' written responses scaffolded their memory for text. I noted that students had generated a few one-word answer questions, although I had prompted them to think more substantively, and that there was too much detail in the summary statements. I would have to revisit these things.

May 13, 2002

Today (Monday) began with a review of reciprocal teaching: the strategies and why they are important. I modeled the questioning and summarization strategies

again, with more emphasis on summarization. Then, I introduced the clarifying strategy and modeled it using the next two paragraphs of the biology chapter. We clarified new vocabulary and unfamiliar concepts. Following, I divided students into groups, and appointed teacher/leaders. Groups then wrote two questions, a summary statement, and clarified information from two paragraphs.

I noted that some students thought that they had completed the task by just asking the questions, so I reminded all that the purpose of the strategy was to comprehend. The strategy was to make them think, to

provide support. I then prompted students to answer the questions. One group had some difficulty summarizing the two paragraphs. Again, they included too much detail. We reworked the summary together.

Thoughts at the half

In our first five days, we have accomplished much. Students have been taught and can apply the first three the first three strategies (i.e., questioning, clarifying, summarizing) with my assistance and the support of the strategy springboard sheet. Students' individual written responses enabled them to effectively participate in the small group dialogue. In the next five lessons, I need

Figure 1: Strategy Springboard Sheet

<p>Predicting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think ... • I bet ... • I wonder ... • I predict ... 	<p>Predicting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let's look at the title and all the visual clues on the page. What do you think we will be reading about? • Think about what we have read and discussed. What do you think might happen next?
<p>Questioning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm curious about ... • I wonder • Who? • What? • When? • Why? 	<p>Questioning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One question I had about what I read was ... • What question(s) can you ask about what you read? • What were you thinking about as you were reading?
<p>Clarifying</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is confusing me. I need to... (reread, slow down, try to figure out this word, etc.) • What I'm thinking is ____, but that doesn't make sense. I need to ____. 	<p>Clarifying</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the words I wasn't sure about was ... • What other words do we know that we can use in place of ...? • What words or ideas need clarifying for you?
<p>Summarizing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In my own words, this is about ... • The main point was ... • The author wanted me to remember ... 	<p>Summarizing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the author want us to remember or learn from this passage? • What is the most important information in this passage? • What kind of "teacher" question can you ask about the main idea?

to teach the prediction strategy, continue to encourage students to think more deeply about the questions they pose, make sure that they understand that they must answer as well as pose questions, and further support their summarization efforts.

May 14, 2002

Today, I began by clarifying two points: (1) Strategies are a learning tool to help understand the meaning of text, and (2) Students must discuss and write answers to the questions they generate. I then introduced and modeled the prediction strategy. We talked about the "initial prediction," to establish a purpose for reading, and the "final prediction" that comes at the end of the reading and precedes and focuses on the upcoming section of text. All seemed to understand. I asked students to individually write down one "initial prediction," two good questions, information to clarify, a summary statement, and a "final prediction." I worked with both groups, continuing to scaffold students' use of the strategies as needed. The summarization strategy remained the most challenging.

May 16, 2002

Again we reviewed the individual strategies. I assigned new paragraphs in the biology text, immediately placed students in groups, and designated a teacher/leader in each group. Julie's group elected to individually work on the strategies before beginning the dialogue. During the dialogue, Julie, the teacher/leader, elicited responses from each person. The group's exchange was intense and spirited. Raymond's group, on the other hand, did not prepare the strategies beforehand. Rather, they initiated the dialogue. Raymond kept everyone engaged. I moved between groups prompting students to think more deeply about their questions.

May 17, 2002

Students were excited to meet in their groups today. An upcoming biology test (next Thursday) was the motivating factor. Each teacher/leader immediately engaged his or her group in dialogue, using the next five paragraphs of the biology text. Students continued to apply thoughtful effort toward generating substantive questions. I visited each group, modeling and scaffolding the summarization strategy. Students seemed to use the strategies more naturally today. This bodes well for their integration into students' independent study routines.

May 20, 2002

We began again with group work with the teacher/leaders facilitating dialogue. While observing and

scaffolding each group, I noticed a genuine interest and desire to learn biology. In conversation with students, I learned that they were encouraged by their progress and that they valued their experiences as teacher/leader. Things seem to be coming together.

May 21, 2002

Another review of the strategies. We worked on the next three pages of text. It's slow going, but the point is to become competent with the strategies as well as to learn content for the upcoming biology test. The students were excited about their prospects on the test, given their use of the reciprocal teaching strategies. They predict that they will remember more information for this test than for previous tests. Group dialogue continued with the teacher/leaders facilitating. Students made sure to summarize today's text and used the strategy springboard sheet. I modeled (thinking aloud) in each group as needed. It was evident that students have made progress. The goal for strategy use is to have it become a natural process – something they do automatically.

May 23, 2002

Students read the four remaining pages of the biology chapter in groups with the teacher/leaders facilitating. They used the springboard sheets as needed. The challenge today was to summarize both the current sections and previous sections read. They experienced some difficulty in summarizing the previous material. With my support (thinking aloud), we co-constructed a chapter summary.

At the end of class, the students voluntarily shared the results of the biology test. Four of the students scored higher on their test. They attributed this increase to their use of the reciprocal teaching strategies and were quite pleased with their accomplishments.

Student Responses:

Post-reciprocal Teaching

After spending 10 lessons on reciprocal teaching, I was eager to have students evaluate their experience. With this in mind, I asked the following question of them: Has your understanding and your comprehension of the biology text improved since you have been using the prediction, questioning, clarification and summarization strategies? Please explain your conclusion.

All of the students felt that they made improvements in reading comprehension. Molly responded that the summarization strategy provided her with "a bigger look" at the information. Raymond and Mitch high-

lighted reciprocal teaching's effect on their recall of facts. They were able to remember more because the technique helped them bring meaning to the text. Mitch particularly thought that he benefited from the clarifying strategy. Sam identified reciprocal teaching as a useful study routine. Jim shared that "... this method makes me use my brain more," and stated that when he used the questioning strategy to review, his test scores improved.

Julie seems to have benefited the most from reciprocal teaching. She stated:

"My understanding and comprehension of the biology text has improved since I learned the four strategies. I think it has improved because I learned how to clarify the words I didn't know. I think that was why I didn't do well on the test because I didn't understand most of the words. With the questioning strategy, I think that got me to listen and think about what I was reading. The predicting and summarizing helped me out a lot too. I had to grasp everything I read and put into a couple of sentences which also made me think about what I was reading."

Conclusions

When I began this curriculum project, I was excited by the potential of reciprocal teaching to enable my students to construct more meaning from their biology textbook and to develop strategies that would help them to read independently across the curriculum. Although our experience with reciprocal teaching was brief, it seemed evident that the students benefited from the technique. Each student focused, unknowingly, on the constituent reciprocal teaching strategy in which they were the weakest. Some students found that a deeper level of questioning greatly improved their understanding of the text. Others used the clarification strategy to identify and build understanding of difficult or unfamiliar vocabulary. All of the students used the prediction strategy to jumpstart and activate prior knowledge. Most students used the summarization strategy to determine the central focus of the particular chunk of text on which they were working.

A particularly powerful result of reciprocal teaching was the psychological effect that it had on students. Their interest and motivation piqued, they derived personal satisfaction from their successful efforts in

constructing meaning. For the first time, they viewed themselves as successful at an academic endeavor.

Although I was pleased with our experience, there are three things that I would do differently in the future. First, I would allocate considerably more time to explicitly teaching each strategy (i.e., questioning, predicting, summarizing, clarifying) before introducing the reciprocal teaching cycle. Second, I would make sure to include the extensive guided practice that is so necessary for my struggling students. Finally, I would lengthen the time for the reciprocal teaching experience. I introduced reciprocal teaching in May of the school year. Clearly, there was not enough time before the close of school for the students to become proficient users of the technique. In the future, I will begin teaching reciprocal teaching in the fall of the year and continue through spring. In conclusion, I am encouraged and pleased that I have found a technique that struggling students can use to achieve independent learning. I am looking forward to the new school year!

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