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RESEARCH

Understanding *Understanding*: Interdisciplinary Articulation for Instruction and Assessment

W. DOUGLAS BAKER AND ELISABETH DÄUMER

As teachers and researchers we strive to observe when and how students understand a concept, a process, or other selected disciplinary or subject matter knowledge. Yet, how we define *understand*, or the process of understanding, and how we operationalize and describe it in our daily practice, is often ambiguous. This raises a key question: how can we assess students' understanding when we are uncertain as to what we mean by understanding, or what *demonstrates understanding* looks like in action—particularly when students are in the “ugly” or awkward stages of developing or reflecting knowledge?

Defining key terms, or threshold concepts, becomes important for how we assess students and for how we distribute analysis or information about evaluations of students' learning (Estrem, 2015), and these concepts are sometimes linked to learning outcomes beyond our classrooms. Therefore, transparency of definitions and planned operationalization of them become critical. For example, what it means for secondary school students to understand a text—and how we prepare teacher candidates to guide others to understand texts and assess those understandings—are linked to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The word *understanding(s)* appears at least 100 times in the CCSS, yet the definition and suggested actions that lead to understanding(s) are obscured or only implied. In the past, this type of omission provided instructors flexibility in planning and initiating curricula and classroom practices that would guide students to learn local knowledge. However, the consequences of standardized testing of students' knowledge of the CCSS and our classroom assessment of students' understanding(s) urge us to closely examine key terms such as *understanding* in order to make transparent how they are defined, by and for whom, under what conditions, and for what purposes.

As colleagues with different disciplinary backgrounds and perspectives in the same university English department (Doug in English Education and Elisabeth in Literature), we

have explored interpretation of literary texts for our individual and collective purposes, and here we turn to understanding texts and implications for how we assess students. Since we both contribute to preparing secondary English teachers (teacher candidates must take two methods and seven literature courses at our institution), and since teachers typically teach how they were taught (Marshall & Smith, 1997), the way we initiate and develop classroom practices influences how a sizable number of secondary school students learn to interpret texts, and how they are assessed. Furthermore, in planning to team-teach a graduate course on interpreting and teaching literature, we quickly recognized the need to explore across disciplines the complexity of understanding, and we learned to view our disciplinary differences as resources (Baker & Däumer, 2015) and to value the distributed knowledge we brought to our conversations and this project.

Our goal for this article is to describe a process that led us to develop a working definition of understanding by adapting research methods from each of our fields. Yet, we conclude with a telling case (Mitchell, 1984) of when we as instructors misunderstood a student's public demonstration of his understanding of a text. Instead of describing a case when we accurately recognized a student's understanding, we elected to examine when we misunderstood because that experience led us to explore dilemmas of assessing students' understanding, particularly the lack of a transparent definition for understanding.

Although paradigmatic definitions exist for understanding (e.g., Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), how we operationalize the term, or what counts in our classes as understanding, is dependent on our perspective of the term and on how we demonstrate it through interactions with students. We wondered how a cross-disciplinary inquiry could lead us to develop a stance on understanding, one that we would be willing to describe, observe, and reflect on for purposes of enhancing instructional approaches and benefiting other teachers and our students.

Building an Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding

Although the fields of English Education and Literature are linked, they represent different disciplines, the former focuses on the preparation and support of English teachers and the latter on interpretation of literary texts. Through our discussions over the years, we have recognized that we cite different scholars in our research, we typically focus on different questions, and we engage in different methodological approaches toward discovering answers to our questions. (Of course, English educators who have focused on hermeneutics may view these fields as more aligned than has been our experience.)

As we prepared and began to team-teach a graduate course on literary interpretation and pedagogy we began to examine how we observed and assessed students' understanding of texts. Similar to the lack of definitions of understanding in the CCSS, we discovered that as teachers we often omit discrete definitions of the construct, or neglect to reveal to students what constitutes understanding in our classes; furthermore, we recognized that perspectives on understanding are not shared across disciplinary boundaries. These omissions and observations led us to talk across academic fields to define this central term and make visible for what purposes we do so.

The ambiguity of understanding is not a singular case. For example, the ubiquitous terms *context* and *literacy* lack shared definitions across disciplines—even within disciplines—yet how these are defined and operationalized determines what students have access to for learning and influence how policymakers and other stakeholders make decisions. In their examination of the term *context* across three prominent research journals, Rex, Green, and Dixon (1998) discovered a lack of common definitions or attempts to describe how the term was operationalized in research studies. Green and Dixon (2002) described a range of how context is operationalized or defined and concluded that the “differing views of context show that without an understanding of what each researcher means by context or what each group reading the research understands context to be, the influence or role of context in literacy will remain invisible” (p. 107). Similarly, Sylvia Scribner (1984) famously observed that how literacy is defined has implications for how it is viewed, by whom and for what purposes, and that the choice of metaphors used to define literacy (e.g., “literacy as power”) has implications and consequences for teachers and students.

The Need for Articulation Across Levels

The lack of transparent definitions of key terms (e.g., *understanding* in the CCSS) has consequences for instruction and the opportunities students have for learning. According to the College and Career Readiness Standards, students will be “expected to meet each year’s grade-specific standards, retain or further develop skills and understandings mastered in preceding grades, and work steadily toward meeting the more general expectations described by the CCR standards” (CCSS, p. 4). Public rhetoric demanding that students demonstrate “higher order” thinking skills, meet “challenging State academic and content standards,” and “develop skills and *understandings* [italics added] mastered in preceding grades” (CCSS, p. 4) appear inarguable. Who does not want students to be able to demonstrate these? (Similarly, who would argue to leave a child behind?) However, these expectations raise questions. For example, what are “higher order thinking skills,” or what constitutes “challenging academic and content standards”? What does it look or sound like when students master understandings? For example, what does it mean to understand a text and be able to demonstrate that understanding? These questions spawn a litany of others: According to whom? For whom? Under what conditions or contexts? For what purposes and for what desired outcomes?

On the surface, answers to these questions seem evident, as they were crafted to be. They are ostensibly designed so that K-12 schools will construct “rigorous” curriculum to lead students to “develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language” (p. 3). Although the CCSS “do not describe all that can or should be taught,” and “[a] great deal is left to the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers” (p. 6), what will count as the standards will be brought to bear on the students (and teachers) by the test chosen by the state, and by instructional practices in class over time. Of course, dilemmas emerge.

In preparation for pending tests, there have been few, if any, opportunities for teachers across grade levels and higher education to discuss what might constitute understanding, particularly as presumed by the CCSS. Therefore, educators must seek clarity about, for example, what it means to understand and what it means to demonstrate understanding, especially for purposes of designing curricula, preparing students for standardized assessments, arguing for what is best for students beyond these tests, and creating opportunities for articulation across disciplines and institutional boundaries.

If we accept that knowledge of key terms and how they are operationalized is situated within local contexts (e.g., Gee & Green, 1998; Street, 2005), how might we generate cross-disciplinary inquiry that could lead us to further develop a stance that we are willing to describe, defend, and explore with colleagues and students? How, for example, might professors of English education and professors of literature discuss and negotiate instructional approaches for how teachers (and teacher candidates) prepare students to interpret texts and demonstrate understandings of texts? What constitutes understanding and how do we make the definition(s) transparent?

A Methodological Approach to Answering the Questions

Well-reasoned definitions of understanding for education do, of course, exist. In their seminal text *Understanding by Design* (2005), Wiggins & McTighe provide an educational perspective of understanding through layers of definitions, particularly drawing on the work of John Dewey (1910/1933), Benjamin Bloom (1956), and Jerome Bruner (1960), and suggest approaches for designing curricula that guide students to “really understand what they are asked to learn” (p. 4). Most importantly for our purposes, they present a chapter on “understanding understanding” and argue that a clear definition of understanding will guide teachers to design more effective instruction for purposes of assessing students’ understanding. However, the complexity of the term, as evidenced by the multiple definitions they present, makes a definitive perspective of the term—and agreed upon practices that demonstrate it—layered and elusive. For example, Wiggins and McTighe state, “Understanding is multidimensional and complicated” (p. 84), and “understanding is about wise performance—transfer and use of big ideas—not mere recall” (p. 250). They describe six facets of understanding, or “manifestations of transfer ability” (p. 84), including explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge.

Their definitions of understanding also provide military and archeological metaphors that signal physical aspects of the construct. For example, they depict understanding(s) as a ‘target,’ something students “aim” for, and as an archeological process: “You have to ‘dig’ below the ‘surface’ (i.e., the ‘cover’) to ‘uncover’ unobvious ‘core’ insights. Understanding ‘takes time and practice.’ Understandings are ‘hard won,’ not immediate—maybe even overlooked or unseen by those

with lots of knowledge” (p. 46). Transfer of knowledge is integral to the key definition they offer:

To understand is to be able to wisely and effectively use—transfer—what we know, in context; to apply knowledge and skill effectively in realistic tasks and settings. To understand means that we show evidence of being able to transfer what we know. When we understand, we have a fluent and fluid grasp, not a rigid, formulaic grasp based only on recall and ‘plugging in.’ (p. 7)

However, implied in their notion of “transfer” is a connection with the autonomous model of literacy that Street (2005), among others, argues against. That is, literacy itself will autonomously, “irrespective of the social conditions and cultural interpretations,” lead to improved performances (p. 417). Furthermore, Wiggins and McTighe add a problematic component of “correctness”: “To understand is to have done it in the right way, often reflected in being able to explain why a particular skill, approach, or body of knowledge is or is not appropriate in a particular situation” (p. 39). From our perspective, what constitutes “the right way” is embedded in and dependent upon contextual factors (which they implicitly acknowledge), a perspective described by philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, as we discuss later.

However, Wiggins and McTighe also argue “that student misunderstanding is a far bigger problem than we may realize, and that assessment of understanding therefore requires evidence that cannot be gained from traditional fact-focusing testing alone” (p. 7). Although we certainly agree that testing alone cannot adequately assess students’ understandings, we view misunderstandings—including teachers’—as opportunities for exploration, which Wiggins and McTighe acknowledge: “. . . misunderstanding is incredibly valuable to teachers, not a mere mistake to be corrected” (p. 51). This position raises questions about misunderstanding and about teacher knowledge and expertise.

Implicit in Wiggins & McTighe’s discussion are assumptions about the expertise of teachers and their capacity to observe and assess students’ understandings toward meeting desired outcomes: teachers will be able to recognize when students are (mis)understanding. This assumption becomes problematic when observing classroom interactions and focusing on students’ (or teachers’) discursive actions (e.g., what happens when a teacher misunderstands a student during class discussion?). In other words, while Wiggins and McTighe supply layers of *a priori* perspectives of understanding, we recognized the need to build a local definition of

understanding that would guide us to observe and acknowledge when students or teachers (mis)understand within selected contexts, particularly within our team-taught course.

Constructing a Working Definition of Understanding(s)

As we turned toward our process of developing a shared definition, we began with a critical assumption: understandings are situated and constructed through discursive practices of a group (Gee & Green, 1998; Street, 2005; Bloome et al., 2005). In other words, understanding something is a process embedded within local contexts and the interactions of participants of a group over time; and, generated definitions inform how evidence for what counts to members of the group as understanding is recognized and acknowledged. Therefore, although definitions of understanding are available, we value the process of exploring and building a working definition, including analyzing understanding through an example classroom interaction.

We focused on understanding a text, and the four methods we used to shape a local, working definition of understanding grew from our (inter)disciplinary backgrounds. First, we briefly conducted a taxonomic analysis of how understanding is used in the CCSS by the writers of the document, and we offer representative examples. Next, as literary scholars often do, we consulted the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for etymological and denotative meanings of *understanding*. Since we focus on literary texts, we then turned to philosopher and literary theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer's perspective on understanding. Finally, we describe an example classroom interaction between a student and two teachers that demonstrates how understanding is (mis)understood through discursive action in a selected context (e.g., a classroom discussion). In a sense, the example becomes a cautionary tale of how instructors' misunderstanding of students' understanding demonstrates complexities of assessing understanding. But first, as an example, we turned to the CCSS to analyze how understanding is defined by writers of that document.

Using an Ethnographic Perspective to Examine CCSS's Use of Understanding

James Spradley (1980), a cultural anthropologist, described ways to develop a taxonomy of a selected construct or action in order to learn how a particular group views a concept, or action, etc., especially through

interactions among the community of people who engage in a particular phenomenon and display their understanding of it—in other words, observing what counts as a term or action to the group. We used this approach to uncover the apparent definition(s) of understanding(s) suggested by the writers of the CCSS. The key to this inquiry process is to step away from ethnocentrism (i.e., from our own assumptions and values that are based on our experiences) and observe from the group's perspective (Green, Skukauskaite & Baker, 2012)—in this case, the writers of the document. Sometimes, especially when researchers do not have a “cultural guide” to supply local information, they must begin with what they can observe and look for patterns or evidence that might support initial claims. Our analysis of the CCSS is not part of an ethnography, yet we adapt principles of ethnography to examine how understanding is used within particular contexts (i.e., by the writers, for schools and teachers, for purposes of assessing students and evaluating schools).

For example, through analysis of the CCSS for English Language Arts, we searched for the term *understanding(s)*, listed the sentences it appears in, and inferred criteria or definitions for the term's usage. (The process is similar to how the OED constructs an entry for a word—sentences with the selected word are collected and collated, and definitions are inferred based upon usage.) The CCSS document reflects particular values and cultural practices, so this approach makes sense when the

goal is to uncover assumptions of the documents or aspects of it. (The next step would be to interview the writers of the CCSS to corroborate the accuracy of our claims, although this step is beyond the scope and purpose of this article.)

Table 1 (see Appendix A) lists representative sentences that contain *understanding(s)* found in the opening pages of the CCSS for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Studies. In this table, *understandings* is a noun, which include the following qualities: understandings can be specified and required by multiple subject areas as prerequisites for college readiness; they are to be demonstrated, retained, and mastered; and they have a relationship to skills—evidenced by the sequential usage of the two terms. A dominant usage of understandings can be observed throughout the standards following the transitive verb *demonstrate*; therefore, to demonstrate understandings is to

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display knowledge that one possesses, not provide evidence for an action or process.

However, the document provides examples that suggest a process. For example, “Integrate information...to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue” (“Integration of Knowledge and Ideas,” Grade 6, p. 39). The definitive form, “to understand,” is used a few times and implies that *understand* is an action that requires diligent work, emerges over time, and that students must seek it (CCSS, p. 7). Yet, the multiple definitions of the root word, *understand*, and the variations of it in the CCSS reflect complexities of the term, particularly that it is used within different contexts and for different purposes: understanding is not simply understanding and that what counts as definitions of the term is constructed by the users of the document, or by the group engaged in enacting it. Therefore, we turned to the OED to seek clarity of the meaning.

Understanding in the Oxford English Dictionary

According to the OED, the verb *understand* means “to comprehend; to apprehend the meaning; to grasp; be thoroughly acquainted.” Of course, the key issue is what counts in a classroom or on a standardized test as comprehending, apprehending, grasping and becoming thoroughly acquainted? The etymology of *understand* includes “to step under” or “to take upon oneself, to venture, to presume.” Therefore, historically, to understand suggests presuming, taking risks and stepping under a stance of another. Moreover, since *understand* is a compound word, we perused the many definitions of *stand*, and the seventh entry of the OED suggests an interesting view of the word: aside from literal meanings (e.g., maintaining “an erect attitude on one’s feet”) and the figurative (e.g., “stand in another’s shoes”), *to stand* with an adverb can imply a “change of place, distance or the like,... [or] the notion of movement as a preliminary to the static position” (e.g., to stand aside, back, down,...off, out of, up).

With *under* as the adverb, *understand* suggests a position beneath a stance, or making assumptions about someone else’s stance (e.g., a writer’s, a speaker’s, etc.). Therefore, to understand suggests that a person observes a stance, a position, and seeks to comprehend or grasp it; to understand reflects a response to someone, an idea, an attitude, etc., and an effort to strive to match what a reader or listener comprehends with the writer’s or speaker’s presumed meanings. Therefore, *understand* can be viewed as a relational term or

activity. As a noun or gerund, *understanding* is a product of a process, and as a verb it is an ongoing process that leads to a product. This dual perspective fits well with literary interpretation. Therefore, we chose to explore a philosophical perspective on interpretation and understanding that might center us on how we approach the process of grasping or comprehending a text in order to demonstrate knowledge of it. For a primary example of such a perspective, we chose the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, an influential German philosopher of the twentieth century who explored understanding, particularly in terms of literary interpretation (Elisabeth’s area of expertise), and described understanding as an open-ended, continuous, linguistic and interpretive process.

Gadamer on Understanding

Gadamer (2006) argued an idea that for most English teachers seems unequivocal: readers bring to a text their experiences and subjectivities—their “fore-knowledge” or “fore-understandings,” and these contribute to the reader’s “horizon,” or what is possible for the reader to comprehend or grasp. For Gadamer, the “horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p. 735), and this horizon is defined, first of all, by a reader’s location—linguistically and historically (Gadamer’s interests), but also socially, institutionally, and experientially. According to Gadamer, the horizon we bring to understanding a text can be challenged, and through the reader’s encounter with the “otherness” of a text, including its challenge to “customary usage” of words (p. 722), understanding can be significantly broadened; yet it cannot be transcended. Given Gadamer’s insistence on the integral role of fore-meanings that we project as readers when trying to grasp a text, his simultaneously articulated goal of achieving “right interpretation” and a “right horizon,” and his concern with protecting a text “from misunderstanding from the start” (p. 723), it becomes evident how his thinking about understanding is pertinent for our inquiry, especially since students are often faced with demonstrating a “correct” understanding of an idea or text.

A “correct interpretation,” Gadamer writes, “must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought and direct its gaze ‘on the things themselves’” (p. 722). The only way to do so is to become aware of such habits of thoughts, so as to avoid “blindly” holding on to fore-meanings (p. 723), even when they are questioned or undermined by the text.

Distinguishing between “true prejudices, by which we understand,” and “false ones by which we misunderstand,” Gadamer describes the interpretive process as one in which readers become conscious of the prejudices governing their own understanding, so that the text, “as another’s meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own” (p. 733).

What further complicates, or layers, Gadamer’s notion of understanding a text is the concept of tradition: the critical, interpretive discourse that has developed around a text and in which over time the horizons of the text and that of successive readers fuse together (p. 737). In other words, a “correct” understanding of a text, particularly one from an earlier historical period, needs to take into account the interpretive tradition and acknowledge the existence of prior, and institutionally sanctioned, interpretive efforts. The concept of tradition is an indication of Gadamer’s conservatism, designed to constrain the proliferation of new interpretations. And yet, he is clear that such constraints are not based on notions of objectivity but on negotiated, institutionally sanctioned understandings.

Gadamer developed his theory of hermeneutics specifically for the understanding of texts removed by history—i.e., texts that readers seek to connect with across the gulf of centuries, historical periods, and altered language usages (including earlier forms of a language). This fact raises legitimate questions about the usefulness of his theory for our purposes of understanding what it means to understand literary texts studied in English language arts classrooms, particularly the multiple layers of understanding that occur through interactions among teacher and students. However, what makes Gadamer’s theory particularly apt is his insistence on understanding as a relational process, whose theoretical and ethical implications he illuminates through frequent interpersonal analogies. He explains his notion of “right understanding,” for instance, with reference to our everyday efforts at understanding the meaning of another: “All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or of the text. But this openness always includes our placing the other meaning in a relation with the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in a relation to it” (p. 723).

Despite his focus on the interpretation of temporally removed texts, then, Gadamer offers a nuanced model for the complexity of understanding as a relational process, requiring not only cognitive capacities—to grasp, to analyze, to speculate, to presume, to ask self-reflexive questions—but also emotional and social ones: to empathize with the meanings of another, to open oneself to strangeness and the

possibilities of misunderstanding that can only be productively engaged when readers allow their fore-meanings full play. Ultimately, “right understanding,” as Gadamer proposes, cannot be measured in terms of “content” alone but needs to be measured as well in terms of process of inquiry or interpretation. There is never simply one right understanding but an unfolding process of understandings guided by the principle of self-aware attentiveness to the text and the reader’s own process of grasping it.

So What?

Using the above three segments of our process (examining usage of understanding in the CCSS, consulting the OED, and exploring Gadamer’s perspective), we arrived at a local, working definition of understanding: *To understand requires making assumptions, offering preliminary, presumptive interpretations grounded in specific details from a text, and “taking a stand”—particularly in response to another’s or a text’s perspective or stance.* Contrasting one’s understanding of an idea, text, etc. with those of others within a community is a key part of the process of understanding. Two main aspects are apparent: internal dialogues with a text, which have embedded social contexts, and public ones with others who have also read, viewed, or heard the text. For example, understanding an idea delivered by an author in the form of an essay or novel requires that readers interpret the text; that is, read and consider it by bringing to bear past experiences (their “horizons”), recognizing contexts (or “horizons”) of the writer or writing, deciding on purposes of reading and interpreting the text, developing claims about the text based on evidence, and sharing and negotiating the claims and reasoning with others.

The CCSS’s representation of understanding belies the distinction Gadamer proposes: instead of exploring “an unfolding process of understandings,” students must learn that there are right answers that will prove their capacity to demonstrate understanding, particularly on a single test. There is no opportunity in that context for students to demonstrate a “relational” or inquiry process, one that leads to an interpretation or stance on a text. This dilemma raises questions for school teachers, who must prepare students to prove their capacity to demonstrate understanding: how can teachers observe what appears to count as understanding for the developers of the CCSS in planning curricula? More broadly, how can teachers engage students in complex and situated practices that help them develop understandings of texts and demonstrate those understandings?

Further, the situated and complex nature of defining understanding raises questions for teachers and teacher educators: What does understanding look like in classrooms? How can teachers recognize when students are engaged in the process of understanding particular ideas, practices, sequential actions, etc.? In the next section, we describe a telling case (Mitchell, 1984) of a classroom interaction that occurred during the graduate course on interpreting and teaching literature. In particular, the case becomes a cautionary tale of teachers' misunderstandings of a student's understanding.

Example Classroom Interaction: (Mis)Understanding

Context: We received a grant from the College of Arts and Sciences to team-teach a course designed for teachers and graduate students of literature; and we secured approval from the students and the Internal Review Board to use course materials and records to also conduct research, particularly on the interactions among participants around texts. The class met once a week (15 meetings) for nearly three hours. Most of our students were classroom teachers, graduate assistants, or preparing to become college instructors. Because analyzing classroom discourse “provides an empirical and grounded approach to understanding how language” is central to observing how interactions are constructed in classrooms (Green & Stewart, 2012; Bloome et al., 2005), we audio recorded each class meeting. During the following week Doug transcribed most of the recording so that we could analyze the transcript before the next class meeting. Our initial analysis and discussion led us to reflect on what transpired during class and to reflexively plan the next session.

For the purposes of this article, the chosen interaction occurred during the first class meeting (January 9). Students were assigned to read “Disliking Books at an Early Age” by Gerald Graff (2000), who reflects on the value and struggles of acquiring a “critical vocabulary” for purposes of interpreting and talking about texts. We planned the first class as a forum to introduce and model key interpretative principles and practices for the course.

One principle, for example, focused on the necessity of citing textual evidence when offering or refuting an interpretation; personal opinion or experience would represent only a beginning. In a meeting before the first class, we agreed to emphasize that principle; and during class both of us modeled making a claim about a text, pointing to textual support, and proposing an interpretation.

Justin's Apparent Understanding of Graff's Text:

Near the end of the first class session, as we turned toward Graff's essay, one of the students, Justin, offered an interpretation of the argument. He said, “The way that you perceive [the text] is the way that you perceive it/.../I mean you're not wrong/it's the way that you read it” (see Appendix B, Table 2, lines 364-370). Before the sequence represented in Table 2, Justin pointed to an excerpt where Graff describes an epiphany: that his classmates' stumblings “were not too far off from the thoughts of/famous published critics.” Justin proposed an interpretation, stating that an inexperienced reader or discussant of literature doesn't have to “have a perfect grasp of” the community's “framework” or “lexicon;” that is, “if you understand that there is something significant” in the text. Instead of addressing Justin's point, Doug redirected the response by stating, “to add on to” why Graff believes it is “so important that we learn to talk about what we read...” In other words, Doug dismissed Justin's point by not directly addressing it; instead, he reshaped it to create what he viewed as a more accurate portrayal of Graff's text.

However, through transcribing and analyzing the sequence of the interaction, we observed that Justin had indeed offered a view of how students might develop more confidence in talking about literature, particularly through voiced “stumblings” or incomplete grasps of the text, which Gadamer might describe as an openness to the text or an awareness of the shortcomings of one's foreknowledge. By shifting from Justin's perspective, Doug ignored an apparent rich point (Agar, 1996)—that is, a moment of confusion that can occur between people during an interaction when they have different assumptions or background experiences. For example, the instructors expected students to cite textual evidence when making claims about literature; Justin presumed—citing Graff—that inexperienced readers may offer incomplete interpretations, demonstrating that they do not have “a perfect grasp” of a text or the expected discourse used in discussion of the text. Instead of exploring the difference, Doug implicitly dismissed Justin's point.

In the next sequence, Elisabeth described more of Graff's argument and offered a personal anecdote to clarify Graff's perspective. Justin then proposed a second interpretation of Graff's position (Table 2, lines 352-370) as an implicit alternative to Elisabeth's. He said that Graff gained confidence when he learned that he didn't have to be right or wrong, that “the way that you perceive [the meaning of a text] is the way that you perceive it” (364); “I mean you're not wrong/ it's the way that you read it” (369-370).

Elisabeth interrupted, “but you’ve still got to explain it” (373), and her emphasis on “explain” implied that interpretation is beyond right and wrong. Justin stated that he agreed; however, he proposed an apparently dubious argument, “I mean you can eventually figure out what you’re trying to say/don’t feel bad/about not/being really intellectual” (385-389). No one spoke for four seconds.

Once again, instead of encouraging Justin to offer clarification or helping him to shape or rephrase the argument and his understanding of Graff, Elisabeth inhaled and slowly exhaled; Doug broke the silence by shifting to another part of Graff’s text, ignoring Justin’s statement, presuming a lack of understanding—and more importantly, an apparent commitment to personal opinion. Yet, analysis of the interaction before the next class meeting suggested that Justin not only reflected the practice of initiating an interpretation by pointing to evidence of the text and offering his understanding of it, he also reflected the “stumblings” that Graff suggests are indicative of students entering academic conversations. In other words, on the first day of class, offering an initial interpretation of an assigned text, Justin reflected the practices Graff suggested; however, the two instructors were listening for a particular interpretative practice in demonstrating understanding of the text: citing textual evidence and refraining from personal opinions.

Implications of Example Classroom Interaction:

Initially, during the class and immediately following it, we believed Justin suggested that right and wrong interpretations do not matter, that perceptions or opinions are primary and students need not worry about intellectual reasoning in their responses to literature. Yet, after analyzing the transcript, we recognized that Justin did indeed demonstrate an understanding of Graff’s argument; however, because of our own “horizons” as readers of Graff’s text and of the situation and purposes of the first class meeting, we could not see or appreciate the understanding that Justin struggled to articulate. We did not understand his understanding, or the process of arriving at his claim. In fact, Graff describes what we as teachers and more experienced readers demonstrated: “Many literate people learned certain ways of talking about books so long ago that they have forgotten they ever had to learn them. These people fail to understand the reading problems of the struggling students who have still not acquired a critical vocabulary” (p. 45).

Through the analysis of the transcript, we recognized that Justin, as he worked to present his perspective on Graff’s argument, displayed his discomfort and struggle through

the many pauses between words or phrases. We developed a more accurate understanding of the interaction and of Justin’s argument only after transcribing, analyzing, and discussing it. We recognized our missed opportunities to probe Justin for clarification or lead him to explore nuances of his argument. On the first day of class, we encouraged a particular approach to interpretation: that it does matter what you say about a text and how you provide textual evidence for the claim.

Conclusion and Implications

Based on an example from a college classroom, most people would expect understanding to be complex. Yet, what happens in the college classroom speaks to multiple ways understanding a literary text or argument might play out with younger students. Although understanding can be defined as a process and a product, instructional objectives that address students’ understanding during class discussions are often ambiguous. As teachers, we expect students to take risks and demonstrate steps in a process toward developing understanding; yet, we simultaneously expect them to accurately portray the argument of a text, or adhere to principles of a preferred interpretative practice.

For example, at moments when students utter responses to texts, we focus on apparent interpretative inaccuracies—ones we might perceive as indicative of not reading. Instead, we might observe the developmental nature of their responses, or the “stumblings” when engaging in a literary discussion with a more informed other in the room—one who has typically read the text in question multiple times. We might recall, as Gadamer suggests, that *understanding* is a relational term; it is grounded in the linguistic and social, and therefore, there is a negotiated aspect of the unfolding process of understanding within a community of people.

Of course, as teachers, we are expected to assess students’ understanding, and we are given the power to make those evaluations—and we rarely have time to transcribe and reflect on what transpired. However, there are consequences of our assessments of students’ understandings, particularly for what they have access to for learning, for how they perceive their own academic and personal development, and for how they are evaluated and for what purposes. Therefore, we must strive to make transparent to students what we mean by understanding, how we arrive at understanding(s), and how we represent them, to whom, under what conditions, and for what purposes.

By inviting students into the conversations of interpretation and understanding—such as the meeting we had before the first class—teachers can make visible to students the negotiated nature of understanding within local contexts and the implications for other contexts, situations when students might need to transform their understandings (not simply transfer them, as if that were possible). Gadamer argues that understanding does not happen in a vacuum but in relation to “tradition”—in other words, to a body of previously articulated understandings. Understanding is rarely—if ever—an entirely singular or individual act, and like the learner of any new discourse, we do not, indeed cannot, enter a tradition or discourse of interpretation in full command of its language usages, conventions, and established meanings.

As Wiggins and McTighe suggest, we learned that misunderstandings provide a rich moment to explore contextual factors that lead to assessment of a students’ understandings. Furthermore, if we put aside our ethnocentrism and ground our observations in the interactions of the participants in whom we are observing, we can grow closer to addressing the complexities of understanding, guiding our students along the way.

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Appendix A. Table 1. Examples in the CCSS of *Understanding* as a Noun

	Qualities	Sentence from CCSS (page number)
Understanding as a Noun	Can be specified and required for college readiness	“Just as students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, so too must the Standards specify the literacy skills and <i>understandings</i> required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines” (3).
	Students expected to demonstrate and have applicability outside of classroom	“Indeed, the skills and <i>understandings</i> students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace” (3)
	Can be retained or developed and mastered	“Students advancing through the grades are expected to meet each year’s grade-specific standards, retain or further develop skills and <i>understandings</i> mastered in preceding grades, and work steadily toward meeting the more general expectations described by the CCR standards” (4).
	Are embedded throughout the Standards	“The need to conduct research and to produce and consume media is embedded into every aspect of today’s curriculum. In like fashion, research and media skills and <i>understandings</i> are embedded throughout the Standards rather than treated in a separate section” (4).
	Are defined by broad standards and specific ones and must be retained and demonstrated	<p>The CCR and grade-specific standards are necessary complements—the former providing broad standards, the latter providing additional specificity—that together define the skills and <i>understandings</i> that all students must demonstrate” (10).</p> <p>“Students advancing through the grades are expected to meet each year’s grade-specific standards and retain or further develop skills and <i>understandings</i> mastered in preceding grades” (11).</p>

Appendix B. Table 2. Classroom Interaction Centered on Interpreting Texts

Speaker	Line	Discourse	Notes
Justin	355	there's debate between the critics	Graff observed this
	356	it was more so	
	357	that he gained the confidence that you don't necessarily	Voice quickens
	358	have a right	
	359	or a wrong=	
Elisabeth	360	=yeah	Encouraging J to continue
Justin	361	perspective	
	362	on how to [shifts]	
	363	I mean	
	364	the way that you perceive it is the way that you perceive it	i.e., the text
	365	it's ok if you see it one way	
	366	and	
	367	you know	
	368	[pause]	
	369	I mean you're not <i>wrong</i>	
	370	it's the way that you read it	
	371	so	
	372	this=	
Elisabeth	373	=but you've still got to explain it	Tone suggests disagreement
	374	you still got to put it=	
Justin	375	=yeah right	Apparent agreement
	376	that's the other thing	
	377	you can't	Shifts
	378	[pause]	
	379	and that's why I thought he was kind of	paraphrases Graff
	380	'it's ok to not	
	381	be super complex and try to	
	382	I mean just	
	383	if you can talk your way around it	
	384	[pause]	
	385	I mean you can eventually figure out what you're trying to say	
	386	don't feel bad about	
	387	not being	
	388	really intellectual	
	389	[pause]	
Elisabeth	390	[inhales as if to speak, but doesn't]	
Doug	391	[four-second pause before speaking]	