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The Paper Interrogator —

A Tool For the Critical Reader

by James Loft

If students are too easily and quickly influenced by their reading, an aid which may be easily produced is available to the teacher. It will enable students to re-examine their thoughts, to realize that more than one persuasive technique is being used by the writer and, moreover, to be consistently cautious and aware as they read. This is only part of the total process of critical reading.

This aid, a Paper Interrogator, is an instrument designed to assist the students to pre-examine the material, examine it as they read, and re-examine it in relation to their original thinking. With other aids and appropriate instruction, the end result will be an attitudinal change rather than just a mechanical technique in critical reading.

The approach in Table 1 is suggested originally with modifications later as needed.

Phase 1: Pre-reading

Suitable questions are listed vertically at the top of a piece of graph paper. These are questions designed by the teacher with reference to specific reading matter and are considered essential in directing the student's critical examination of the material. They become progressively

more thought-provoking and complex, and this progression serves to provide logical steps to accommodate individual students with individual and specific abilities.

Phase 2: Reading

As the students actually read, they rate the material by filling in blocks with an x at the bottom of the graph each time a particular question is pertinent. For example, students observing the "bandwagon" technique would fill in the appropriate block at the bottom of the page directly below that question. If later they observe the same literary approach, they fill in another block with an x on top of the original one and in the same column. Students, at this point, are merely noting the incidence of this propaganda technique and are reserving judgment about its quality.

Phase 3: Re-examination

When the student has completely finished reading and rating with blocks on the vertical lines the last phase is to sit back and consider the entire article as a whole. This re-examination is done by considering the questions on the left side of the graph

paper which are written horizontally.

These re-examination questions are rated just once and marked with a dot on the horizontal lines to the right of the questions. Students are to be instructed and watched, so that, the dot is marked low or near the bottom if the propaganda technique was used very little and conversely marked high on the scale if the material contained a great amount.

As the student re-examines the reading material, it is intended for him to make a qualitative judgment. During the actual reading, i. e. Phase 2, a quantitative judgment was continually being made with qualitative judgment suspended.

The very same questions are used in the vertical and horizontal positions for reconsiderations.

Upon completion of reading the material, not every question needs to be rated, because that question may not have arisen either in the second or third phase. The relationship between pre and post judgment now may be tangibly observed on the graph paper.

With continual usage of this tool, the students themselves can compose the questions along with the teacher for greater preparation in the readiness stage.

In explaining the mechanics of the Paper Interrogator, care must be taken to explain and then do only one stage at a time. The first phase of readiness should actually have the students involved in doing it, and only then should the next phase be

explained. This is equally true with the second phase of continually rating and the third, phase of re-rating the entire material.

Care is needed in writing the questions. The structure itself may invoke a pre-conceived idea. Or if a question is inferential or ambiguous, the student's thoughts may not be founded on a sound premise.

The Paper Interrogator can cause the student to have a questioning state of mind, to continually examine and re-examine material. It will clearly establish student-teacher purposes, moreover, give some constructive structure to a skill which too frequently gets only passing comments.

(Mr. Loft is Reading Teacher in Wayne Community Schools.)

