The Power of Purposeful Reading

To help students master challenging text, teachers must clarify the meaning behind the mission.

Cris Tovani

Students often seem mystified when asked to determine what is important in an assigned reading. Teachers see this confusion when students' book pages are overly highlighted in bright yellow. Media specialists see it in requests for printing out massive numbers of documents from the Internet. Parents see it when their children complete reading assignments and equate note taking with copying entire chapters. It's frustrating for everyone concerned, but especially for the students. As one of my 11th grade students told me,

> Most of the time, I don't like to be told what to think, but at school I have to be told, especially when I read hard stuff. I have no idea what's important.

At the beginning of the year, I ask my students how they know something is important in an assigned reading. More often than not, they reply, "Anything in bold print is important." When I ask why bold print makes text important, they respond, "I don't know why. It just does." Clearly, these students are using ineffective reading strategies that seem logical to them. As Mike Rose notes,

> Every day in our schools and colleges young people face reading and writing tasks that seem hard or unusual, that confuse them, that they fail. But if you can get close enough to their failure, you'll find knowledge that the assignment didn't tap, ineffective rules and strategies that have logic of their own.[1]

Several years ago, I surveyed my fellow teachers at Smoky Hill High School in Colorado to find out what skill they thought students most needed to improve their comprehension of assigned readings. The number one response was that students don't know how to determine what is important in the text.

I agree with my colleagues. Being able to distinguish big ideas from minutiae is a skill that adolescent readers desperately need. But how do we teach it?

Reflecting on My Own Reading

I can often inform my teaching practice by carefully observing my own processes as a reader, noticing what I do when I start to struggle with a text and drawing on my own thinking strategies. The same strategies that I use to help myself are often useful to students.

Recently, I decided to pay attention to how I determine what's important when reading an unfamiliar text, hoping that I would gain insight into how to help my students do the same. I needed to select a text that was unfamiliar to me, preferably with content out of my comfort zone. I chose a chapter in a chemistry book that several of my students were reading—and complaining about.

As I started to read the chapter on ionic and covalent bonds, my mind began to wander. When I forced my attention back to the text, consciously watching my thinking, I realized that I was in trouble. I had no way of determining importance. My two stumbling blocks were lack of background knowledge and lack of clarity about how I would use the information. Because my background knowledge in this topic was limited, I thought everything was important. Because I didn't know how the information was going to be used, I decided to try to remember everything in bold print. I quickly discovered that there was a lot of bold print, and trying to remember the information without directly applying it was nearly impossible.

I concluded that the same thing probably happened to my 11th grade students in this chemistry class, and I began to appreciate what these students went through. But I also realized that if I'd started out with a *purpose* for my reading, I would have had a way to sort out which information was important and which was trivial according to that purpose.

We can't expect students to determine what information is important in a text if they don't know how they are going to use the information. Teachers can help students determine importance by sharing with them the purpose for reading a given text. This purpose may be to ask specific questions as they read. It could be a mission to find a specific piece of information or to read the text and form an opinion.

Giving students a purpose for their reading and telling them what's important to look for may feel like "dumbing down" content. Yet when I retrace my own reading process, I find that when I know why I am reading something, I tend to dig in deeper and work harder. When I know what I'm looking for, I read more effectively than when I think everything on the page is equally important.

I know from teaching English that there are many different ways to read a given text, especially fiction. Among many possibilities, I can simply follow the plot; I can notice how the protagonist changes from the beginning of the novel to the end; I can watch for repetition of words and motifs; or I can analyze the author's use of metaphor. Usually, I notice multiple features as I read. But I rarely encounter a text and notice everything on the first read.

I'm good at reading fiction and have lots of experience knowing what to look for. My students, on the other hand, are not so practiced. If I don't provide a purpose for their reading, they may not notice or remember anything, just as I didn't know what to notice in the chemistry text as an inexperienced reader of that subject.

The Need for Clarity

Too many educators seem to expect students to read the teacher's mind. Last summer, as my daughter Carrie was preparing for her first year in a large, prestigious, and potentially intimidating high school, she took advantage of older students' wisdom to get a feel for the school. She asked every older kid she encountered, "What do I need to do to survive my freshman year?" Interestingly enough, she always got the same answer: "Just figure out what the teachers want. Once you do that, you'll be fine."

After hearing this response over and over again, I asked myself why so many kids feel the need to "figure out" what the teacher wants. Why don't teachers clarify what they want? Then I posed this question in terms of my own teaching practice. I began to wonder whether I make *my* students play the role of mind reader, and if so, why. Do I assume that if I told students what is important they wouldn't read or think? That I would be shirking my responsibilities by not making students figure out what's important on their own? Do I reason that no one in the "real world" is going to tell them what's important when they read something, so they'd better start figuring it out now?

Yet in everyday work situations, people frequently ask questions and get clarification about key documents they read on the job. When a supervisor thinks something is important, he or she usually points it out so that employees can benefit from having a focus.

Purpose is an amazing thing. Purpose not only provides a way to sort information, but it also gives the mind a job so that the reader doesn't just read the words while thinking about something unrelated to the text. If we want our students to wrestle with meaning and work hard to comprehend, teachers will have to limit the scope of reading tasks by making purpose explicit.

Purposeful Guidance

Instead of expecting students to guess what's essential, teachers can greatly improve comprehension by explicitly identifying what information students need to glean from a text. For example, when assigning a reading about the period before the U.S. Civil War, with the eventual goal of discussing causes of the war, the teacher could focus students' attention on that goal. It's not enough to tell students, "Here are all the reasons for the Civil War. Now, go read about them tonight." With such broadbrush guidance, students would probably just look at the bold text or highlight randomly as they read. It's more powerful to tell students something like, "Tomorrow we are going to work on an activity that will increase your understanding about how the Civil War got started. While reading this assignment, figure out three incidents that contributed to the war. Mark those places with sticky notes, and on each sticky note describe the incident in your own words." Such instructions provide a way to hold students accountable for understanding and retaining crucial information they read.

When guiding students on what to focus on in assigned readings, I try to be realistic. There is no way my students are going to learn everything I know about any subject in one semester. I get the chance to revisit the curriculum and course of study year after year; my students don't. Teachers must decide—and help students focus on—what is essential to take away from any reading.

One of my favorite tools for helping students focus and retain their thinking as they read is a simple sheet that I call a comprehension constructor. It is both a checklist to guide students through the thinking process and a tangible way to make their thinking clear, which helps me evaluate it. The comprehension constructor shown on page 51 ("How to Read Nonfiction with Purpose") helps students approach a book of nonfiction, prompting them to use questions they care about to drive their reading.

Purpose: Fake It to Make It

Another strategy is helping students invent their own motivating purpose. Because reading difficult or unengaging text without any purpose is deadly, it's essential that we teach students what to do when teachers don't give a clear purpose for a particular reading. I have found that students can focus and comprehend better when they set their own purpose for an assigned reading than when they plunge ahead with no purpose at all. I explicitly teach students to set what I call a *fake purpose*. Fake purposes force readers to pick a focus. Among the suggestions I make for creating a fake purpose are

- *Be a selfish reader*. I tell students to ask themselves how what they read is going to affect them personally. When they expect to get something out of a reading, students put more effort into the task. Being a selfish reader may mean asking such self-serving questions as, How could I use this information? How is this information different from what I already know? Could this make my life easier in any way? These questions may sound vain and trivial, but they are a good place to start creating a personal purpose for reading.
- *Reread with a new purpose*. Rereading can be a great fix-up strategy for a student who has come away from a piece frustrated in terms of comprehension. But rereading only helps when the reader reads differently and with a specific purpose. Reading a chapter in the chemistry textbook while thinking about getting a driver's license isn't going to enable the student to construct meaning. Some of my students' favorite purposes for rereading are to formulate a question the teacher can help answer, paraphrase a section, visualize what happened in a section, and look for an answer to a previously asked question.
- *Read to connect*. I encourage students to always connect their reading to information or experiences that they are already familiar with. By making a conscious effort to relate new information to known information, students can better relate to the topic and more easily retain the information.

The goal of having students set fake purposes is to give them practice in approaching and setting goals for specific kinds of reading. With practice, students become accustomed to looking for and paying attention to certain features in certain texts. For example, after reading many novels, I know to pay attention early on to details of character because character often drives plot.

Readers wield a great deal of power when they learn how to harness purpose. To help students do so, teachers need to strike a balance between spelling out why and how to read a text and helping students find their own motivations. As educators, we have a responsibility to be clear about our instructional purposes. After all, we are the experts of our content.

But it's also important to teach students how to set their own reading purpose when one isn't given. So when students encounter a loan officer or a college professor who wants to play "Guess what you need to know," they will be a step ahead of the game.

How to Read Nonfiction with Purpose

1. Study the front and back covers and table of contents of the book and skim through the pages. Jot down four questions you have about the topic.

2. Decide which parts of the book you will read. As you read, jot on sticky notes information you learn that helps you address your questions. You should have at least eight sticky notes.

3. Write down what you have learned about this topic. Include new questions and any new connections you've made about the subject.

Endnote

1. Rose, M. (1989). *Lives on the boundary* (p. 8). New York: Penguin Books.

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