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Toward the Next Generation of Comprehension Instruction

A Coda

P. David Pearson



My colleagues—the editors and authors of this diverse array of chapters—have written an important book about reading comprehension instruction, and at just the right time. It is important because it achieves two essential goals on behalf of all those professionals committed to comprehension as the core of reading instruction. First, it reasserts the fundamental, research-based principles that have guided responsible comprehension instruction for nearly three decades. Second, it responds, in both explicit and implicit ways, to the recent criticisms of comprehension instruction, especially instruction that helps students learn how to use comprehension and metacognitive strategies to understand otherwise puzzling text,

As important as these goals are, they are not the real genius of this book. Its real genius is that it is written by teachers, for teachers. All of the authors in this book know what classrooms are like—either because they teach in classrooms every day or because they spend a lot of time working with teachers in classrooms and in professional development settings. This means that authenticity and integrity pervade every chapter in

this book. Teachers will immediately sense this authenticity on their way to realizing that this book offers an endless supply of useful suggestions for creating comprehension inside classrooms.

Achieving the Major Goals

Research-Based Principles

In the spirit of honoring the importance of reading to learn, I will frame my synthesis of the research-based principles on which this book is based as an account of what I learned from reading the chapters in this important volume. I have organized them as a set of principles that I, being a focused and highly strategic reader, inferred from reading across all the chapters. I believe, and I hope, they are an appropriate summary (maybe even a synthesis) of the wonderful ideas in this text.

Teaching Comprehension Is a Moral Enterprise

Let's begin with the broadest and, I think, most important principle. Teachers don't enter into the kind of instruction privileged in this volume just so students can and will read better. They do it because they know that comprehension opens a world of opportunity—that the ability to make sense of text, to engage with the big ideas of literature, and to learn about how the world around them works makes it possible for students to live a good life, a life in which reading is a never-ending source of learning, enjoyment, and reflection. We may not think about it every day when we enter the classroom, but it really is true that we teach comprehension to create a competitive workforce for the global economy, to promote a literate citizenry worthy of our democracy, and to guarantee that each student we have the privilege of serving has the tools to live an “examined” life. It is useful sometimes to step back and ask ourselves why we do what we do. The authors of this book invite us to do just that. Actually a few of them—including Zimmermann, Upzack Garcia, and Commins—*insist* we do just that.

Comprehension Instruction Begins and Ends in the Hearts and Minds of Students

We've known about the impact of knowledge on comprehension for several decades; that was the fundamental message we learned from schema theory in the 1970s. And many of the authors of this volume have published eloquent accounts, both in this volume and in previous works, of how we can

use knowledge to promote comprehension. What has changed in the last few years is that we are much more aware of the complementary idea that knowledge is as much a consequence as it is a cause of comprehension: Knowledge begets comprehension begets knowledge begets comprehension. . . . This is the kind of virtuous cycle we would like to promote in schools instead of the vicious cycle we are all too well aware of—the one in which reading failure prompts reading avoidance prompts failure, and so on. Put differently, we can and should say that good comprehension instruction puts the interests, needs, and knowledge resources of students at the heart of comprehension instruction. In her chapter, Marjorie Larner truly enacts this principle when she directly asks students themselves how comprehension instruction has affected them as learners.

*Reading to Learn Is Always a Part of Learning to Read*¹

They don't always say so out loud (as Gina Cervetti, Anne Goudvis, and Brad Buhrow do), but one of the goals that the authors of this volume share with me is to do everything possible to downplay the commonly expressed distinction between learning to read and reading to learn. I have tired of hearing the phrase that in grades 1–3, kids learn to read, and after that they read to learn (Pearson and Cervetti in press). The authors of this volume reject that idea, either explicitly or implicitly. In its place they champion the idea that learning from reading should be part of the reading equation from the outset of kindergarten and first grade. Kids should always be reading content that is worth knowing. They should encounter ideas that promote the acquisition of knowledge, insight, human understanding, and joy. Even though this book is more about reading than writing, I would add (and I think that all the authors would agree) that students should also be writing about things that matter, about those very understandings, insights, and moments of joy. Then and only then will they learn that reading and writing are tools for learning—a message some of our commercial curricula seem hard-pressed to promote.

If we want to promote this idea that reading to learn is always a part of learning to read, we need to really emphasize the tool metaphor—that reading and writing (and I would add language, especially what we have

¹ These ideas first appeared in a revision of my own perspective on the Radical Middle that I wrote for the second edition of Rona Flippo's book *Reading Researchers in Search of Common Ground* (in press). They appear here with the permission of the author and the editor.

		TABLE 1: LANGUAGE PROCESSES AS LEARNING TOOLS			
Learning Tools		DISCIPLINES			
		Literature	Science	Social Studies	Mathematics
	Reading	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Writing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Language	✓	✓	✓	✓	

come to call *academic language*) are tools for learning. And they are best put to service in acquiring knowledge and inquiry skills in disciplines like science, social studies, mathematics, and literature. As a vivid example of this principle, in her chapter, Tanny McGregor talks about extending the use of the thinking tools of language throughout the school day. By the way, I think it is better to think of literature (not language arts but literature) as a discipline on a par with the subject areas of schooling.² Then the process parts of the language arts (reading, writing, and language) are released from the sole grasp of literature and are available for all the disciplines. Think of it as a matrix with disciplines across the top and tools for learning down the side, as depicted in Table 1.

Were we to take such a matrix seriously, we would have very different basal reading programs than those currently on the market because the distribution of disciplines and genres would be much broader in scope than is currently the case. This broader scope would have the side benefit of broadening the appeal of basal content to a wider range of learners than is possible with the literature-centric basal programs in today’s market. But what is really important about this reconceptualization is that it means that the acquisition of knowledge, understanding, insight, and (yes) joy would always provide a context for honing our language-based learning tools. Wouldn’t that be a great expectation to hold—that when we learn new ideas, we improve our language skills!

² I agree with those who argue that the subject matter of literature is the human experience itself—life and death, love and hate, friendship and betrayal, harmonizing with or harnessing the natural environment, and so on.

Comprehension Is as Dependent on Affect as It Is on Cognition

There is no denying the importance of cognitive activity and outcomes in the comprehension process. I just said as much in acknowledging the importance of knowledge. And I have spent most of my career championing cognitive connections between the texts kids read and the background knowledge they bring to the classroom. But we have not (or at least I have not) always paid as much attention to the affective side of understanding as we (I) might, focusing more on the ideas that students gain from reading rather than on feelings or motives.

In nearly every chapter in this volume my fellow authors encourage us to broaden our view of comprehension, to worry as much about the *will* and *thrill* of reading as about the *skill*. This perspective comes packaged in many forms, each with different terms. In the chapters that emphasize literature, including those by Leslie Blauman and Chryse Hutchins, we are reminded that encouraging aesthetic responses to literature is core to the literary experience (my preference has always been to deal with aesthetic response before more everyday comprehension responses so as to encourage personal responses while they are still fresh in students' recollections). We are also reminded that even when students read the informational texts of social studies and science, they can—if teachers ground the experience in “hands-on” science or “minds-on” social studies—promote a high degree of engagement. Reading about how the natural or social world works need not, should not, be *boring* (to borrow from the most popular of adolescent terms to describe school!). Finding ways to connect these texts to students' lives is one way of achieving engagement, as is providing choice. Not everyone has to read the same text about gravity or the War of 1812; it makes for interesting discussions, in fact, when students bring different perspectives and knowledge sources to the table. Students can even choose the ways in which they want to demonstrate their understanding; Susie can answer some constructed response questions, Miguel can write an essay, and Darien can make a PowerPoint presentation about the very same text. And each form of response represents an opportunity to assess student comprehension.

Scaffolding Is the Central Instructional Metaphor in Guiding Students Along the Path of Independence

When Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) coined the scaffolding metaphor as a way of describing what expert tutors do to promote problem solving among students, they could not have possibly imagined how popular the term

would become as a way for educators to describe the pedagogical journey from teacher-dependent to completely independent learning on the part of students.

The instant I read Wood et al.'s account when it appeared in the mid 1970s, I was smitten. It captured exactly what I was trying, albeit clumsily, to communicate to teachers about the genius of instruction. I soon incorporated the term into my teacher lexicon—along with prior knowledge, comprehension strategy, inference, and metacognition—as terms to describe the basics of comprehension instruction. It was the core concept behind another popular metaphor, *the gradual release of responsibility* (hereafter GRR), that Meg Gallagher and I coined in 1983 to describe the genius of the work that Joe Campione and Ann Brown were doing with learning-disabled students at the Center for the Study of Reading.

What was, and is, so compelling about the scaffolding metaphor is that it captures most of the important insights we have developed about good pedagogy. Here are my top four insights.

1. *We reduce the amount of scaffolding across time (and lessons) as students develop greater independent control in applying any strategy, skill, or practice we want them to use with regularity.* This is the most common and obvious of insights about scaffolding, the very core of the GRR framework. But it does *not* mean, as many infer, that we always begin a sequence with modeling, then moving to guided practice, and finally independent practice. We could begin a sequence by asking students to “try it on their own,” offering feedback and assistance as students demonstrate the need for it. James Baumann, an instructional researcher who has made significant contributions to comprehension research, once asked me in a conference session on strategy instruction, “David, how much explicit instruction should a teacher provide?” My response: “As little as possible.” And I meant it sincerely. There is no inherent virtue in explicit instruction and modeling. We offer if and when students demonstrate less than completely independent control over an activity; and we provide just enough scaffolding so that students can perform the activity successfully. It is a “Goldilocks” phenomenon—not too much, not too little, but *just the right amount*.
2. *We vary the amount of scaffolding offered within any given lesson as students demonstrate the capacity to control the strategy, skill, or practice.* It is extremely powerful for a group of students,

within the context of a single lesson, to demonstrate to themselves that they can do more on their own by the end of a lesson than they could at the beginning.

3. ***We can and should vary scaffolding between students within a single lesson.*** Part of the genius of the gradual release of responsibility framework is that it applies in so many situations. We have already suggested that we can vary the scaffolding provided to students across lessons and across time within a lesson. But we can also differentiate the nature and amount of scaffolding across students within a given lesson. For example, in a discussion about a story or an informational text, one student may benefit from a clue about what page to look at to find information relevant to answering a question, a second may be helped by restating the question in different words, and a third by turning an open-ended (Why did Henry take Jake's backpack?) into a forced choice question (Did Henry take Jake's backpack for revenge or money?).
4. ***We are prepared to revert to greater (or lesser) scaffolding as text and task demands create varying scaffolding needs.*** This, for me, is the most powerful and important insight about scaffolding. If we accept the general notion that reading comprehension represents an interaction between a reader, a text, and a "task" within a socio-cultural context (RAND Reading Study Group 2002), then we must accept the idea that our comprehension "ability" varies with the text and task. And the path to progress is not always a straight line: Show me a reader who is a master comprehender today, and I'll show you one who isn't tomorrow. All I have to do is to up the ante on the complexity of the text, the obscurity of its topic, or the cognitive demand of the comprehension task. As teachers, we must always be prepared to revert to greater scaffolding when one of these elements (text, topic, or task) creates greater demands on readers. Just as surely, we must be prepared to withdraw that scaffolding when these "stars" of comprehension are more positively aligned. It is this insight that I had in mind when I responded to Baumann's query with the "as little as possible" explicit instruction answer. And this is precisely what Debbie Miller has in mind when she admonishes us to release responsibility a little faster than we have in the past.

Responding to the Critics of Strategy Instruction

In some ways, it is clear that an underlying purpose of this book is to respond to the criticisms that have been leveled at comprehension instruction, particularly strategy instruction, over the last several years. Keene, in the opening chapter, lays out a compelling account of all the things we have learned because we have been engaged in strategy instruction as a profession for the past thirty years. And there is an assumption, in most of the chapters, that others in the profession are questioning some of the basic assumptions about strategy instruction. The response is effective, I believe, because the authors of the chapters in this book realize what I also know to be true—that the critiques offered of strategy instruction are often a critique not of thoughtfully designed and executed strategy instruction, but of some hypothetical caricature of strategy instruction. So my fellow authors have redoubled their efforts to lay out first principles to guide our efforts, along with compelling examples of what good strategy instruction should look like. I think they have accomplished that goal. This book is justified on these grounds alone.

In my personal view, the fundamental reason why strategy instruction has been vulnerable to critique is that when it gets implemented in commercial reading programs (which is surely the site of its most widespread implementation), the dynamic, adaptive, and responsive character it has in the hands of the authors of the chapters in this volume is replaced by rigidity and inflexibility. Even worse, if and when it becomes the object of assessment (as is highly likely in our current hyper-accountability context) it is likely to become even more set in stone. Risking the label of a troglodyte, I would remind readers that when I wrote about comprehension strategies with Roehler, Dole, and Duffy (1992), we cautioned teachers that (a) good reading strategies are as adaptable as they are intentional and (b) good strategy instruction is as adaptable as it is intentional. Both reading strategies and the instruction we offer to support them cannot survive in an environment that requires strict adherence to accountability demands.

So I would argue (indeed I have quite recently [Pearson in press]) that strategy instruction, especially in the ways in which it has been put into practice in the modern curriculum (e.g., basals and kits), stands in need of reform. It may not be as effective as conventional discussions that, in one

way or another, focus on knowledge acquisition (McKeown, Beck, and Blake 2009; Wilkinson and Son 2011). And it may breed an excessive reliance on abstract, content-free, metacognitive introspection about strategy use (Pearson and Fielding 1991).

When strategy instruction becomes too generic and abstract, too “isolated” from the goal of acquiring knowledge and insight, it is in danger of becoming an end unto itself—what Pearson and Fielding (1991) speculated might become “introspective nightmares.” We get these nightmares when the enactment of the strategy becomes more complicated than the ideas that the strategies were supposed to help students acquire. I am not arguing that we should throw out all forms of strategy instruction. To the contrary, I remain committed to high-quality strategy instruction, instruction that demonstrates the purpose and utility (what they buy you in terms of learning goals) of strategies at every step along the way. Put differently, I endorse the dynamic, adaptable, thoughtful model of strategy instruction put forward in the chapters of this book. So I am completely on board with Ellin Keene’s conceptualization of the outcomes and dimensions of understanding or Debbie Miller’s advice to move more rapidly toward independence, Cris Tovani’s notion of a tool kit for getting yourself unstuck, and Samantha Bennett’s integration of comprehension instruction with planning and assessment. These fellow authors convey precisely the approach to strategy instruction we must take to compensate for the more “compliant” enactments we find in some of the commercial attempts to promote strategies, especially those that couple it with standards and assessments for strategy use.

To ensure that strategy instruction gets off to a good start, students must acquire “insider” knowledge about why and how we use strategies, as Ellin Keene and Cris Tovani (among others) have always contended. And they benefit greatly from the instant feedback demonstrating to them that strategies are useful—that pulling out just the right tool to help you over a hurdle at just the right moment makes you a smarter, more effective, and more strategic reader.

In a sense, strategies suffer from the same rap as phonics rules. Ideally they are only a means to an end. It’s when phonics rules or strategies become their own goals that the system self-destructs. In such circumstances, both teachers and students are more likely to engage in mock compliance. Thus the strategies get put into a special “school talk” box that is hauled out only when the assignment requires it and then put back on a shelf well out of

reach for everyday reading. The only way to block mock compliance is to provide guided apprenticeships that help students learn how, when, and why to apply strategies so that they can see their transparent benefit.

A Final Plea

I close this coda with a plea to all readers of this wonderful book on reading comprehension. And the plea is simple: Don't get too enamored with comprehension as the sole solution to all the problems of modern reading instruction. Comprehension instruction can make the critical difference in student engagement and achievement, but only if it gets enacted in an ecologically balanced instructional program, one that ensures that students get a fair shot at a lot of other reading and language skills and understandings. Writing in 2002, Nell Duke and I argued that comprehension instruction, especially ambitious strategy instruction (which we fully embraced and championed), could only be nurtured in a pedagogical surround that paid adequate attention to phonics and word recognition, vocabulary, rich discussions of text, sound writing instruction, opportunities for students to read a wide range of texts and genres independently, high-quality assessment, and motivation and engagement. To that list, writing from today's perspective, I would echo my colleagues Stephanie Harvey, Anne Goudvis, Brad Buhrow, and Gina Cervetti in keeping knowledge acquisition high on one's pedagogical agenda. I know that the authors of this volume share this view of ecological balance. I encourage all those who read this volume to embrace such a view. If and when you do, you'll find that your comprehension curriculum will be more powerful and more fruitful than ever. Happy teaching—and learning.

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