The “So What?” of Reading Comprehension

It really isn’t hard to avoid reading—you just ask someone what it means, or wait for the teacher to explain it.

Lisa, high school senior

Recently a student named Erin helped me reconsider my beliefs about why comprehension strategies are important to learn in any discipline. It was late in the evening, after a full day of teaching and working with colleagues. I had given two classes of my students a copy of Sandra Cisneros’s essay “Salvador, Late or Early” (1992). This short, difficult text is hard for readers of any age to grasp upon the first reading. I distributed copies with blank sticky notes, asking students to write two or three different connections they made to the essay.

As I was sitting at my desk reading what felt like thousands of yellow sticky notes with students’ personal connections written on them, I couldn’t help but feel I was wasting my time. I don’t think I had ever read more banal responses—words that in no way reflected the depth of the essay or thinking that students would need to understand it.

I was getting nervous and feeling stressed. In the morning twenty teachers from across the country would descend upon my room to watch what was supposed to be exemplary strategy instruction. No way could I let them see these student connections and present them as any sort of effective reading instruction.

I was also worried about this student in my class named Erin. Erin was a brat. I could just imagine a student sharing one of these connections with the whole class, and then having Erin respond in her usual way. She had a horrible habit of shutting down other people’s thinking. When someone said something she didn’t think was interesting, she’d say in the most obnoxious tone possible, “So what?” The sarcasm in her voice was deadly.
I was stuck. Should I let the visitors see the real “us”? Should I create an errand for Erin so she wouldn’t be in the room? I decided that I’d explain to the visitors beforehand about Erin. They would understand—we all have Erins in our classrooms. Perhaps explaining to the teachers what I had done to “help” Erin respond more positively would let them see that I too have problems with students, and work on them continually.

I had spoken to Erin privately about her rude comments, and I had spoken to her in front of her peers. I had even threatened to send her to the dean of discipline. Nothing worked. She had no desire to control her language and attitude. Every day I had to deal with whatever she threw my way.

I went back to reading the inane comments written on the stickies. After the fiftieth insipid connection, I had had it. Who could blame Erin when she said, “So what?” to any of these responses? Yeah, so what if this story reminds you of a tree? Yeah, so what if this piece reminds you of a tin cup? I couldn’t take it anymore.

And then it struck me. Maybe I should be the one saying, “So what?” The time had come to ask that question about this assignment. How had strategy instruction helped these students understand Cisneros’s writing? My students had followed my directions to the letter. They had done just what I had asked them to do.

It wasn’t their fault that they were making stupid connections. It was mine, because I hadn’t showed them how a meaningful connection could deepen their understanding of the text.

I decided to beat Erin at her own game. The next day in front of the visitors and the class I would share some connections students had written as part of the previous day’s work.

The next morning I explained to my students that although they had done just what I had wanted them to do, we needed to go further. We couldn’t stop here. I created a double-entry diary as a comprehension aid that would give students a place to hold their thinking and possibly force them to go deeper into the piece (see Figure 2.1). A blank copy of the double-entry diary form is in the appendix.

As the twenty teachers sat at the edge of the room and watched, I put a transparency of the double-entry diary on the overhead with a few examples from my
reading. I wrote a connection to the story on the left-hand side, then said, “Now, to complete the double-entry diary you are going to have to think about your connection and ask yourself a question. I want you to reread what you wrote and pretend that Erin has sneaked up behind you and read your connection. She then asks you the very important question, ‘So what?’” (See Figure 2.2.)

I tried to imitate Erin’s sarcasm, complete with head tilt and curling lip. I must have done a pretty good job, because everyone knew exactly what I meant. I looked at Erin; she looked at me. She nodded her head and started writing. Erin finally got it too. Never again did she use the words “So what?” in the same fashion. She continued to ask the question, but from then on, the way she said the words encouraged thought instead of shutting her classmates down.

As students were filling out the diary, I began to circulate. I went to Anthony first. Anthony wrote that his connection was that he had a baby brother just like the boy in the story. “That’s great, Anthony,” I said. I continued gently, “I know you love your baby brother very much—but so what? How does that help you understand the story better?”

A bit disgusted, Anthony looked up and said, “Do you know how much work a baby is?”

“Well, yes, Anthony. Babies are a lot of work, but I still don’t see the connection.”
A little light went on, and Anthony paused for a moment. Then he replied, “Maybe: even though Salvador is just a kid himself, he is having to help his mom with the baby, just like I have to help my mom. Salvador’s mom isn’t being mean to him. Salvador’s mom really needs and depends on him, just like my mom depends on me.”

“How does that connection help you understand the story better?” I probed.

“At first,” he said, “I thought the mom was being abusive because she was making Salvador take care of all the brothers and the baby. Now, I see that he is very important to his family. But I wonder, where is the dad? Maybe there is no dad, and that’s another reason why Salvador has to do so much. He’s the man of the house.”

I smiled. Anthony had not only made a connection to his personal life, but had used that connection to understand the text. When he took his connection back to the text, he went deeper into the story. Anthony asked a question that ultimately allowed him to infer meaning. He went beyond the words on the page and drew a fabulous connection. (Figure 2.3 shows a thoughtful example by another student.)

I headed for Jo Anna’s desk. She was chatting with a neighbor, her notes on the “So What?” double-entry diary sitting on the edge of her desk. I asked to see her sheet. She proudly handed it to me. All the columns were filled out, but once again her responses were superficial.

“Pick a line, Jo Anna, that you want to share with me.”

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**Figure 2.2 “So What?” Double-Entry Diary**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connection to the text</th>
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Jo Anna read one of her connections to me—she used a tin cup when she went camping just like the boy in the story did when he ate his morning cereal. Her “So what?” wasn’t really what I had in mind. She had written in the “So What?” column that it would be gross to drink out of a tin cup all the time. The only reason her family used tin cups when they went camping was because glass mugs might break when they were hiking.

“Hmmm.” I gave her a puzzled look. “Why, then, do you suppose Salvador uses a tin cup all the time?”

“That’s a good question,” said Jo Anna. “A tin cup makes everything you drink taste like metal, especially if you leave something in it for very long.”
“Jo Anna, I don't think rereading this again is going to help us answer this question. Could you think about your own life, and see if there would ever be a reason for someone to drink out of a tin cup all the time? Try to supply a possible, probable answer to your question.”

Once again, a light went on. “Oh my gosh,” she said. “Salvador drinks out of a tin cup all the time because he is so poor. Look,” she continued. “Go back to the first part of the story. See how the author has described the house? They are totally poor.”

I smiled again. “Jo Anna, you just did something a good reader does. You not only made a connection to your personal life to help you understand the text, but you also went back to the text for evidence to support your thinking.”

“Wait,” she said. “I'm not done. I have another connection. Last year there was this kid in my class like Salvador. He had messy hair and crooked teeth without braces. He wore the same clothes all the time and had really uncool shoes—you know the kind you buy at discount places? We made fun of him all the time. Do you think he looked the way he did because he was poor? That's so mean that we teased him. Maybe he couldn't help it. Maybe we should have cut him some slack.”

This is why I became a high school English teacher. I love literature because it helps me understand people. It teaches me about the human soul. Corny, but nevertheless true. My job isn't about raising state test reading scores or getting kids to the advanced reading level on someone else's scale. My job is about teaching kids how to read and think about text in meaningful ways that help them better understand the people around them.

To a good reader, Jo Anna's inferences are obvious. I went back and tried to name Jo Anna's thinking for her. I pointed out that she made a personal connection and that the connection caused her to ask a question. Her question couldn't be answered by rereading, so she had to answer it by drawing a conclusion. She verified her conclusion by going back to the text to find evidence. She returned to her background knowledge and made another connection to a real person. Perhaps in time she will use literature to become a little more humane.

That evening I was thinking about Anthony and Jo Anna and wondering how we could re-create their thinking again and again with different pieces of text. A lot had happened that day, and I wanted to make some sense of it. I needed to identify for myself and my students what they had done that was so remarkable, and then build on it in my teaching and class activities over the next few days. I realized that the problem with the first sticky note activity was that I had stopped students' thinking too soon. I needed to get them to extend their thinking in other ways beyond the first reading (see Figure 2.4).

Strategy instruction is an ongoing process of adapting lessons and activities to the needs of students and the specific content you want them to tackle.
The following example demonstrates how Larry, a science teacher from my school, adapted the use of the double-entry diaries with the concept of “So What?” After I shared my “So What?” experience with him, Larry collected notes from double-entry diaries that students had used to hold their thinking while reading a chapter from his science textbook. He has taken examples from different students’ notes and compiled them onto one sheet (see Figure 2.5). Larry then used this sheet as an overhead to review for the upcoming test.

What I do in the classroom is easy to replicate or adapt—there isn’t a secret or magic formula. It can be used by any teacher, in any discipline.

I try to select interesting pieces of text that make kids want to know more about content. I model how I read—how I make sense of text and how I negotiate difficulty. I try to give students a reason to read by sharing with them possible purposes or how they can set a purpose that will help them remember what they read. I show students different ways to hold their thinking as they’re reading so they can come back later and remember and reuse it. The following four principles guide most of my instruction:

Essential Elements of Comprehension Instruction
1. Assess the text students are expected to read. Is it interesting and pertinent to the instructional goal? Is it at the reading level of the students, or is it too difficult? If the text is too difficult, consider how you will make the text more accessible.
2. Provide explicit modeling of your thinking processes. As an expert reader of your content, identify what you do to make sense of text. Share that information with your students.

3. Define a purpose and help students have a clear reason for their reading and writing. Make sure they know how the information they read and write will be used.

4. Teach students how to hold their thinking and give them opportunities to use the information they've held.

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Figure 2.5 Science “So What?”

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I think back to my days in high school and college as a student. I know I was taught a lot that I don’t remember—or use. The information that I remember and use came from constructing meaning while learning about something new. My focus as a teacher has really shifted from covering a body of content and marching through a series of lessons to content comprehension. Strategy instruction is freeing, because I don’t feel this incredible pressure to teach every classic novel or SAT vocabulary word or grammar rule.

The biggest issue for any high school teacher thinking about making changes or additions to the curriculum is time. I hear this from almost every high school teacher I’ve met with over the last few years. What we’re being asked to do is almost impossible. We’re being asked to teach ridiculous amounts of material. We’re being asked to teach kids how to read and write and think in sophisticated ways, and we’re given a very, very short time in which to do it. Something has got to give.

An English teacher recently said to me, “I want my kids to read eight novels, but they’re not doing it. What should I do?” I don’t know if he was just expressing frustration or asking me for an easy solution, but I don’t have one to give. My reply to teachers with these concerns and frustrations is this: I want to lose 30 pounds and eat chocolate cake all the time. It’s not going to happen. I have to decide if I can eat chocolate cake once a month, or cut back in a different way to lose weight.

It’s a trade-off. Only you can decide whether it is worth giving up some content for the time it takes to design comprehension instruction that means something to your students. If you don’t value the thinking strategies, you won’t give up content. If teaching kids to memorize what is in the textbook is most important to you, then this type of work won’t be very successful.

We are also putting pressure on ourselves to cover vast amounts of content. Many state standards don’t tell us that we have to teach certain novels in English classes. State standards don’t always specify what years of U.S. history we have to cover in the history curriculum.

Many students will dutifully complete any strategy assignment from a teacher. After all, that’s how I found myself one night facing a desk covered with sticky notes and banal comments. But that doesn’t mean the assignment truly has any value for students, or is pushing them to think harder as readers.

I don’t know if teachers can work any harder than they’re already working, so we’ve got to find ways to make students carry more of the thinking load in our classrooms. As I walk out of school with my colleagues at the end of each day, we’re all tired. We’re carrying heavy bags of books and papers, and our shoulders...
are slumped. Meanwhile, our students bound past us to the parking lot, running and jumping down the steps two at a time, full of energy. I once heard someone say, “School should not be a place where young people go to watch old people work.” We’ve got to figure out how to work smarter, because what we’re being asked to do is really a challenge.

A young teacher from my district recently came to visit my classroom. He had told his teaching teammate he was coming in to see me teach. His teammate had read some of my work and said, “Take a lot of notes and find out what she does that’s supposedly so great.” This young teacher shared that request with me. He then smiled and said, “You’re really not doing anything great. What you’re doing is something I can take back and do in my classroom.” Then he got a bit flustered and his face turned red, because he had said something that might be perceived as unkind.

I took his words as a compliment. What I’m doing is not unique or revolutionary. I use simple principles of good teaching to design comprehension lessons, activities, and materials. I give students models, time to practice, and time to think. It’s common sense, and a lot of it comes from my own process as a reader.

What Works

1. Ask yourself, “Why am I doing this?” and “How will it help students think, read, or write more thoughtfully about my content?”

   **Teaching Point:** Good readers use reading, writing, and talk to deepen their understanding of content.

2. Remember that strategies are only options for thinking. One comprehension tool is not more important than another. There is no specific order, sequence, or template for introducing strategies to students.

   **Teaching Point:** Good readers have a variety of ways to think about text. They can make connections, ask questions, infer, and visualize, as well as sift and sort the value of different pieces of information.

3. Ask yourself as the expert of the content and the best reader in the class: “Is this activity authentic?” Would a mathematician, scientist, historian, or artist ever read in ways that approximate what you are asking of your students? If not, how could you make the activity more genuine?

   **Teaching Point:** Good readers don’t need end-of-the-chapter questions or isolated skill sheets. They ask their own questions, based upon their need for a deeper understanding of specific aspects of the text.
4. Don’t isolate strategy instruction into discrete, individual activities from day to day. Plan lessons based on student work from the previous day, using student response as a way to analyze how thoughtfully kids are approaching text.

**Teaching Point:** Good readers reread and return to text to build and extend their knowledge of specific concepts, or to enhance their enjoyment of texts they have enjoyed previously.