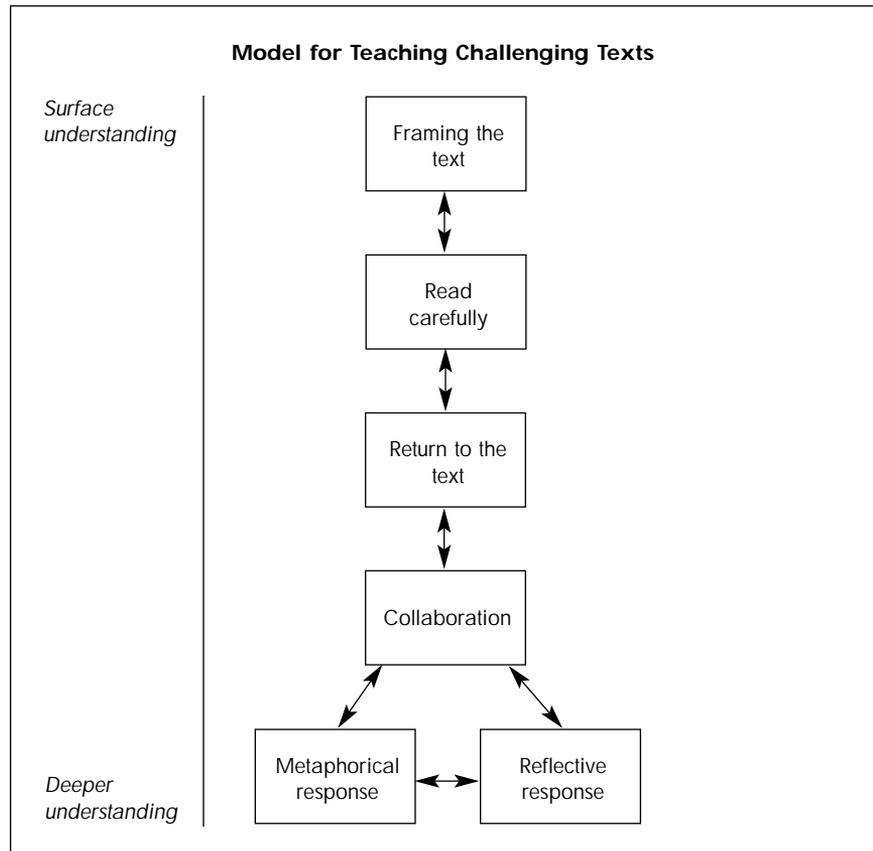


Teaching Challenging Text

I call it the “Sunday Afternoon Shadow”—that feeling that slowly emerges in the back of my brain every Sunday afternoon around two o’clock. It begins with a vague awareness that the weekend is winding down and that within hours I’ll once again be standing in front of my classes. Even after nineteen years in the classroom the Sunday Afternoon Shadow brings a hint of apprehension, particularly on the eve of any Monday when my students are to begin reading a difficult book. Thinking about how to approach the teaching of any new book raises some familiar questions: How do I plan to teach this unit? How and where can I, their teacher, intervene to help my students tackle this challenging work? What can I do to help them achieve deeper comprehension? Where do I begin on Monday morning? And where do I go from there?

To assist me in the planning process, I refer to a model I developed with a colleague, John Powers. This model, which is depicted in Figure 2.1, helps me to decide what I can do to support my students’ reading of any challenging text, fiction or nonfiction. Having this model in front of me reminds me to consider the following as I plan the unit:

Figure 2.1



- What support do my students need before they begin reading the book?
- What support do my students need before reading each chapter?
- What strategies will assist them to read the text with purpose and clarity?
- How can I encourage a second-draft reading to facilitate deeper meaning?
- Which collaborative activities will help deepen their understanding?
- How can encouraging students to think metaphorically deepen their comprehension?
- How can I help students see the relevance this book plays in their world?

That is a lot to consider before teaching a book. To help clarify how the model depicted in Figure 2.1 helps me answer many of these questions, let's play with a piece of text and examine each of the stages of the model in greater detail.

Focusing the Reader

“Love,” by William Maxwell, is a favorite short story of mine. I was reminded of this story recently as I was eating breakfast and scanning the newspaper. Turning to the obituary section, I was startled and saddened to read of the passing of Julian Foster, who had been a political science professor of mine in college. Dr. Foster was one of those exemplary teachers who developed a passion in his students for his subject matter. He was the first teacher to make me understand the roots of both political liberalism and political conservatism; in doing so, he shaped my thinking well into adulthood. His enthusiasm for political science was infectious—so much so that I went on to become a congressional intern. Julian Foster’s class was always challenging and invigorating, and it was the one class I always looked forward to attending. Today, more than twenty years later, I am thankful he was a teacher of mine. My life is richer for it.

There are many Julian Fosters out there—teachers who touch us, who stay in our hearts years after we leave their classes. When I share “Love” with my students, I frame the story by telling them the story of a teacher who meant a great deal to me. I ask them to reflect on a special teacher in their lives, briefly pausing to allow time for them to write and share their recollections.

Effective First-Draft Reading

Although my students write and share their teacher memories before reading William Maxwell’s “Love,” I ask you simply to hold a memory of a special teacher in your mind as you read this story about another remarkable teacher, Miss Vera Brown.

Love

Miss Vera Brown, she wrote on the blackboard, letter by letter in flawlessly oval Palmer method. Our teacher for the fifth grade. The name might as well have been graven in stone.

As she called the roll, her voice was as gentle as the expression in her beautiful dark brown eyes. She reminded me of pansies. When she called on Alvin Ahrens to recite and he said, “I know but I can’t say,” the class snickered, but she said, “Try,” encouragingly, and waited, to be sure that he didn’t know the answer, and then said, to one of the hands waving in the air, “Tell Alvin what one fifth of three eighths is.” If we arrived late to school, red-faced and out of breath and bursting with the excuse we had thought up on the way, before we could speak she said, “I’m sure you

couldn't help it. Close the door, please, and take your seat." If she kept us after school it was not to scold us but to help us past the hard part.

Somebody left a big red apple on her desk for her to find when she came into the classroom, and she smiled and put it into her desk, out of sight. Somebody else left some purple asters, which she put in her drinking glass. After that the presents kept coming. She was the only pretty teacher in the school. She never had to ask us to be quiet or to stop throwing erasers. We would not have dreamed of doing anything that would displease her.

Somebody wormed it out of her when her birthday was. While she was out of the room, the class voted to present her with flowers from the greenhouse. Then they took another vote and sweet peas won. When she saw the florist's box waiting on her desk, she said, "Oh?"

"Look inside," we all said.

Her delicate fingers seemed to take forever to remove the ribbon. In the end, she raised the lid of the box and exclaimed.

"Read the card!" we shouted.

Many Happy Returns to Miss Vera Brown, from the Fifth Grade, it said.

She put her nose in the flowers and said, "Thank you all very, very much," and then turned our minds to the spelling lesson of the day.

After school we escorted her downtown in a body to a special matinee of D. W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World*. We paid for everything.

We meant to have her for our teacher forever. We intended to pass right up through the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and on to high school taking her with us. But that isn't what happened. One day there was a substitute teacher. We expected our real teacher to be back the next day, but she wasn't. Week after week passed, and the substitute continued to sit at Miss Brown's desk, calling on us to recite and giving out tests and handing them back with grades on them, and we went on acting the way we had when Miss Brown was there because we didn't want her to come back and find we hadn't been nice to the substitute. One Monday morning she cleared her throat and said that Miss Brown was sick and not coming back for the rest of the term.

In the fall we had passed on into the sixth grade, and she was still not back. Benny Irish's mother found out that she was living with an aunt and uncle on a farm a mile or so beyond the edge of town, and told my mother, who told somebody in my hearing. One afternoon after school Benny and I got on our bikes and rode out to see her. At the place where the road turns off to go to the cemetery and the Chautauqua grounds, there was a red barn with a huge circus poster on it, showing the entire inside of the Sells-Floto Circus tent and everything that was going on in the three rings. In the summertime, riding in the backseat of my father's open Chalmers, I used to crane my neck as we passed the turn, hoping to see every last tiger and flying-trapeze artist, but it was never possible. The poster was weather-beaten now, with loose strips of paper hanging down.

It was getting dark as we wheeled our bikes up the lane of the farmhouse where Miss Brown lived.

“You knock,” Benny said as we started up the porch.

“No, you do it,” I said.

We hadn’t thought ahead of what it would be like to see her. We wouldn’t have been surprised if she had come to the door herself and thrown up her hands in astonishment when she saw who it was, but instead a much older woman opened the door and said, “What do you want?”

“We came to see Miss Brown,” I said.

“We’re in her class at school,” Benny explained.

I could see that the woman was trying to decide whether she should tell us to go away, but she said, “I’ll find out if she wants to see you,” and left us standing on the porch for what seemed like a long time. Then she appeared again and said, “You can come in now.”

As we followed her through the front parlor I could make out in the dim light that there was an old-fashioned organ like the kind you used to see in country churches, and linoleum on the floor, and stiff uncomfortable chairs, and family portraits behind curved glass in big oval frames.

The room beyond it was lighted by a coal-oil lamp but seemed ever so much darker than the unlighted room we had just passed through. Propped up on pillows on a big double bed was our teacher, but so changed. Her arms were like sticks, and all the life in her seemed concentrated in her eyes, which had dark circles around them and were enormous. She managed a flicker of recognition but I was struck dumb by the fact that she didn’t seem glad to see us. She didn’t belong to us anymore. She belonged to her illness.

Benny said, “I hope you get well soon.”

The angel who watches over little boys who know but they can’t say it saw to it that we didn’t touch anything, and in a minute we were outside, on our bicycles, riding through the dusk toward the turn in the road and town.

A few weeks later I read in the *Lincoln Evening Courier*, that Miss Vera Brown, who taught the fifth grade at Central School, had died of tuberculosis, aged twenty-three years and seven months.

Sometimes I went with my mother when she put flowers on the graves of my grandparents. The cinder roads wound through the cemetery in ways she understood and I didn’t, and I would read the names on the monuments: Brower, Cadwallader, Andrews, Bates, Mitchell. In loving memory of. Infant daughter of. Beloved wife of. The cemetery was so large and so many people were buried there, it would have taken a long time to locate a particular grave if you didn’t know where it was already. But I know, the way I sometimes know what is in wrapped packages, that the elderly woman who let us in and who took care of Miss Brown during her last illness went to the cemetery regularly and poured the rancid water out of the tin receptacle that was sunk below the level of the grass at the foot of her grave, and filled it with fresh water from a nearby faucet and arranged the flowers she had brought in such a way as to please the eye of the living and the closed eyes of the dead.

Deepening Comprehension Through Second-Draft Reading

In any well-crafted story, novel, or play, there are often layers we do not see on our initial reading. In “Love,” for example, there is much foreshadowing that occurs that you may have not noticed on your first read. Reread the story, and this time search for the many hints that Miss Vera Brown was going to die. Look for clues you may not have noticed the first time you read the story. Underline or highlight as many as you can find. When you are finished, compare what you found with what my senior classes found the last time I shared this story with them. Their list follows; don’t look until you’ve tried it yourself.

Funeral/cemetery imagery

Maxwell’s use of language evokes funeral and cemetery images:

- “graven in stone”
- “wormed”
- “raised the lid of the box”
- “go to the cemetery”
- “dim light”
- “churches”
- “angel”

Flower imagery

Flowers are beautiful when they are young, but even in their beauty, they begin to wilt and die.

- pansies
- asters
- sweet peas

Use of language

- She was there to “help us past the hard part.”
- “Many happy returns to Miss Vera Brown.”
- “her delicate fingers”
- “We meant to have her for our teacher forever.”
- “We intended to pass right up through the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and on to high school taking her with us.”
- “She belonged to her illness.”

The circus poster

The circus poster was once colorful and a sign of youth, hope, and optimism—though the narrator could never see the end of it. Now, when the boys ventured out to visit their ill teacher, the poster was weather-beaten with loose strips of paper hanging down.

The Importance of Collaboration

I'm guessing that even as a sophisticated reader, the evidence of foreshadowing you found in "Love" is not a direct match with the foreshadowing my students found. You probably uncovered hints they missed, and they may have found some evidence you did not see. The richer the text, the harder it is for any single reader to uncover it all on a first reading. Because of this, it is important that students be given time to discuss what they discovered while reading.

The student responses you just read came out of a twenty-minute whole-class discussion. No single student, not even the brightest, noticed all that evidence of foreshadowing upon revisiting the text. The level of understanding found in the details listed above occurred only after students were given time to discuss, to collaborate, to share what they saw in the story. The elevated comprehension that came from their discussion recalls the work of Edgar Dale, who notes in his book *Audio-Visual Methods in Teaching* (p. 43) that we remember

- 10 percent of what we read
- 20 percent of what we hear
- 30 percent of what we see
- 50 percent of what we both see and hear
- 70 percent of what we talk about with others

Dale reminds us that the act of collaboration itself raises the reading comprehension of every student in our classes; thus, it's important for us teachers to build in meaningful collaboration time for our students.

Using Metaphor to Deepen Comprehension

Students often have trouble thinking in metaphorical terms. To help introduce this concept, I use the following exercise.

1. Explain to students what "intangible" means and then have students brainstorm a list of random intangible items. List these on the left-hand side of a t-chart.
2. Ask students if they can infer what "tangible" means. On the right-hand side of the chart, have students brainstorm a list of random tangible items.

If your students are like mine, their brainstorming might result in the following:

Intangible Items

love
hate
betrayal
jealousy
envy
trust
friendship
commitment
anxiety
confidence

Tangible Items

skateboard
CDs
driver's license
bracelet
pizza
backpack
locker
Eminem
movies
video games

3. Have the students complete the following sentence by selecting one intangible item and one tangible item and then exploring the relationship between these two items as follows:

(Intangible item) is like a **(tangible item)** because _____
_____.

Here are some of my students' responses:

Friendship is like a driver's license because it will expire if you do not renew it.

Nicole, 14

Jealousy is like a backpack because it can get heavy carrying it around.

Omar, 15

Trust is like a video game because there are many levels to it.

Josh, 15

4. Once students have tried this and have shared with one another, I challenge them to extend their metaphors. I change the sentence template to the following:

(Intangible item) is like a **(tangible item)** because _____ ,
_____ and _____.

Using this new template, the previous student samples are stretched:

Friendship is like a driver's license because it will expire if you do not renew, it takes skill to obtain, and it requires that you pass a test.

Jealousy is like a backpack because it gets heavy carrying it around, it's hard to zip up, and everyone can see you wearing it.

Trust is like a video game because there are many levels to it, it requires practice, and it's hard to repair once it's broken.

This exercise is a good way to introduce metaphorical thinking. Once students grasp this concept, they are ready to apply it to their reading. For example, think about the love the boys had for Miss Brown in "Love." How would you describe it? With the story in mind, complete the following sentence:

The boys' love for Miss Brown is like (a) _____ because _____
_____.

Again, here are some of my students' responses:

The boys' love for Miss Brown is like an old oak tree because it has strong roots.

Karen, 16

The boys' love for Miss Brown is like a sprained ankle because it hurts a lot right now, but the pain will ease with the passing of time.

Steven, 15

The boys' love for Miss Brown is like a scar, because although it will fade, it will always be there.

Miguel, 15

When I read these responses, it becomes evident to me that these students understand the story "Love" at a deeper level. They see and feel what the author intended.

Leading Students to Meaningful Reflection

When I read stories and books with my students, I want their experience to be much more than simply liking the story, or understanding the characters, or being intrigued by the resolution. When students read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, I want them to understand the plot, to admire

the courage of the characters, and to recognize Harper Lee’s use of literary devices. All these elements make *To Kill a Mockingbird* a great book, and it would be a shame if these elements went unrecognized. But I also want my students to move *beyond* the text and consider its implications to them as human beings who live in the world today. There is more to reading a book or short story than just recognizing the writer’s craft and enjoying the plot. We must get to what the story means to us *now*. Why, after all, should we read a story that takes place seventy years ago? Why do we devote valuable class time for this book? We must answer the question “We read the book—so what?” We must ask students to reflect on their reading—to consider the book in a contemporary context. What does this book say to us *today*?

After reading and discussing “Love,” for example, I want students to think of the bigger ideas in this story. I want them to consider the connections these ideas may play in their own lives. After “Love,” I might ask them to consider one or more of the following questions:

- How is death handled in various cultures? Which approach seems “best”?
- Do adolescents need mentors today more than ever?
- How do you know when a person has come of age?
- Can a teacher really make a difference in your life, one way or the other?

Literature enables students to experience a safe “practice run” through the great issues confronting us, and having students reflect on their reading by connecting it to a contemporary point of view is essential. One of my favorite essay questions when my students finish a book is simply “Why did we read this? Write an essay explaining the value this book holds for the modern teenager.”

The lesson I just described, centered around the short story “Love,” serves to introduce my adolescent students to the concept of deeper reading (you may also choose to use it with your students). Let’s briefly examine each activity in this lesson and the thinking that went into each.

Focusing the Reader

The activity Instead of handing out the story and having the students read the story cold, I begin by telling them about a teacher who meant a

great deal to me (Julian Foster). Then I ask my students to consider a teacher who meant a great deal to them, and to do a five-minute quick write about this teacher. After the writing, we have a brief classroom discussion, hearing about all the great teachers who have graced the students' lives.

The thinking behind the activity When you start your car on a freezing morning, it is best to let the vehicle warm up for a minute or two before beginning your drive. It is better for the car and provides a smoother ride. Much like a car on a cold morning, students need to be warmed up as well before they start driving through difficult text. When students first arrive, streaming noisily into class, they are rarely ready to begin reading difficult text. This is true whether they are reading an article for the first time or are in the second week of reading a novel. As the period begins, they are thinking of other things: girlfriend/boyfriend problems, Saturday night's dance, today's track meet. Telling them my story of Dr. Foster is a strategy to get them to begin thinking about influential teachers. It is designed to get the students ready and focused for the upcoming reading. By activating their schema (in this case, their recollections of influential teachers in their lives), a sense of anticipation is built before they begin to read. I find that having students share stories about the teachers who meant a great deal to them always gets them focused and ready to consider Miss Vera Brown.

Effective First-Draft Reading

The activity After getting students focused, I ask them to silently read the short story.

The thinking behind the activity All of you who are reading this book are experienced, expert readers. You needed no specific directions before reading "Love." I simply needed to ask you to read the story. This is not the case with many adolescent readers. Even students reading at or above grade level often need help, especially if the text is unfamiliar or complex. Telling students simply to "read the chapter" without giving them any other direction or support can produce poor reading. Specific strategies are necessary to help students read text carefully; and, though none were used to introduce "Love" to you, a number of classroom strategies are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Deepening Comprehension Through Second-Draft Reading

The activity After a first reading, I have the students read the story again, this time searching for the foreshadowing of Miss Brown's fate. I tell them to look for hints they may have missed during their initial reading.

The thinking behind the activity When rereading "Love," students are always surprised to see how much they missed on the first reading. They have a good time discovering the clues as they revisit the story; but, more important, they are introduced to the idea that rich text is layered and that even expert readers usually need more than one reading to get under the surface of a story. Activities like this chip away at the "I read it one time and am finished" mentality, allowing students to learn that it takes more than an initial reading to see the layers of carefully crafted text.

The Importance of Collaboration

The activity After the second reading, I have students generate ideas together, asking them to work on uncovering the foreshadowing in the story or extending their metaphors.

The thinking behind the activity Students' thinking improves when they share ideas. When my students discussed their evidence of foreshadowing in "Love," everyone's reading comprehension deepened. The key is to train your adolescent students to have discussions that are meaningful. (Strategies to encourage students to raise their reading comprehension through meaningful collaboration are discussed in Chapter 6.)

Using Metaphor to Deepen Comprehension

The activity Students are asked to create a metaphor to describe the boys' love for Miss Brown.

The thinking behind the activity Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life. Whether we are hitting the nail on the head or realizing that love is blind, we use metaphor daily to communicate deeper levels of meaning. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson note that "most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature" (p. 4). They use as an example the following commonly used metaphorical statements that liken argument to war:

Your claims are *undefensible*.
He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
His criticisms were *right on target*.
I *demolished* his argument.
I've never *won* an argument with him.
You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*
If you use that strategy, he'll *wipe you out*.
He *shut down* all of my arguments. (p. 4)

Using war as a metaphor for argument deepens our understanding of “argument” in a way that literal language cannot. Similarly, thinking about characters and themes in metaphorical terms deepens our understanding of our reading in ways literal thinking cannot.

David Sousa, in his book *How the Brain Learns*, discusses the importance metaphor plays in developing the thinking of our students. Among other things, Sousa notes, metaphor enables readers to:

- make much more complex connections when they read;
- understand abstract material as well and as rapidly as literal language;
- enhance their thinking processes by encouraging students to seek out associations and connections they would not ordinarily make;
- gain insight into relationships among ideas that help to forge a more thorough understanding of new learning. (p. 148)

Having students think about Miss Brown in metaphorical terms stretches their thinking about the character and, in doing so, leads them to a deeper understanding of the story.

Leading Students to Meaningful Reflection

The activity After reading “Love,” students might be asked to consider how various cultures deal with death. Which approach seems “best”?

The thinking behind the activity Teaching literature gives us a powerful opportunity to have students reflect on the human condition and to consider their own place in the world. Carol Booth Olson, in *The Reading/Writing Connection*, says that, “in essence, the reader/writer who has been immersed in the text world steps back to ponder not just *What does it mean?* but *What does it mean to me?* When students make connections while constructing the gist, they are using their personal experiences and background knowledge to enrich their understanding of the text and make their own personal meaning” (p. 14).

The best reflection can be inspired through exploration. When students are asked to share their thoughts about how various cultures cope with death, they will explore their own thinking on this subject. In doing so, they are taking steps toward a richer understanding not only of their reading, but also of their world.

Developing Self-Sufficient Readers

When I first taught William Maxwell's story "Love" to high school students ten years ago, I handed the story to them as they walked in the door. I told them we would be reading the story in class that day and that they were sure to like it. We read it together, and then they answered some questions I had prepared to help me assess whether they had paid attention to the reading and "understood" it. All in all, it was a typical day in sophomore English class.

When I teach the story now, I plan the lesson with the reading model presented at the start of this chapter, Figure 2.1, in mind. What a difference in my students' performance! They are better prepared before reading the story, more motivated to begin reading, and more engaged while they read. Individually and collaboratively, they make meaning from the text, revisiting it a number of times to deepen their understanding. They move beyond the text, making metaphorical and reflective connections.

After finishing the lesson, I ask the students about the lesson design. I revisit each stage with them, this time discussing the purpose of each step. I explain that experienced readers often work through these stages unconsciously. My goal here is twofold: (1) to show my students that going through this process helped them reach deeper levels of understanding as they read; and (2) to demonstrate to them that if they learn the strategies of good readers they will eventually internalize and utilize them automatically as their reading abilities mature.

My students find it humorous when I tell them that after they graduate from high school I will not be going with them to college or their place of employment to help them with their reading. They will not be able to call me on the phone and ask me to read their textbooks or employee manuals to them. Once they leave school, I tell them, they are on their own. Thus, I have to get them to internalize what good readers do when confronted with challenging text. After leaving my class, my students may not always remember what they read, but I want them to leave me knowing how to read.