The Reading/Writing Connection

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When the reading of literature is used as a stimulus for writing assignments, it is assumed that students adequately comprehend the material they are reading. Unfortunately, this assumption is unwarranted: High schools and colleges have large numbers of students who are unable to understand literary texts. This inability is usually not due to students' lack of intelligence or basic skills; it is rather due to the fact that they lack appropriate background knowledge to actively construct meaning from text.

Although the teaching of reading comprehension has not traditionally been the work of the high school or college English teachers, many of us who teach writing use the reading of literature as the stimulus for writing in our classes. It seems necessary and, in fact, critical that we concern ourselves with students' ability to comprehend literature if we require students to write about literature. We must also take care to differentiate between problems our students experience because they are composing and problems they experience because of their inability to comprehend the literature they are reading. The reason is obvious: When students write papers about a piece of literature, their papers reflect their understanding of the literary text as well as their efforts to write about that understanding. Too often teachers concentrate their attention on their students' compositions, overlooking the real source of many students' composing problems: Inadequate background information to understand the texts they are reading or the requirements of the assignments they are to fulfill or both .

How Does The Human Brain Comprehend?

Because it is difficult to both completely understand and describe how the human brain comprehends, I have found it useful to describe the more easily understood comprehension mechanisms and processes of mechanical intelligence and then compare some of the comprehension processes of the human brain to them. Computers have processing components for manipulating information; memory components for retrieving data they need; and methods for bringing information from outside the system into the system. They also have programs and "software" for organizing and manipulating information to produce concrete products such as "print outs."

There are obvious differences between human and artificial intelligence such as emotions and creativity; still the human brain appears to have components which perform several of their functions in a fashion similar to the fashion in which components of computers function. The human brain has mechanisms for taking information in, sending it forth, storing and retrieving it from memory, and processing it.

Preparing Students To Read Effectively

If we assume that our students have a normal ability to learn when they come to us — a normal capacity to store information, to process it, to manipulate it, and to communicate it — then we can assume they can handle reasonable reading and writing tasks. What separates students from one another is not so much differences in their mechanisms for learning — their "hardware" — as it is differences in the background information they possess, their "memory," their cognitive skills, and as a result, the "programs" they have successfully developed to manipulate and communicate information — their "software." When students lack background information and the skills to process and complete the reading and writing tasks we assign them, we must provide them experiences which will prepare them for that reading and writing.

The process of helping students acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to prepare them for reading and writing is not a simple one. We cannot simply "load" information into them in the same fashion in which we might program a computer. Providing our students with the background knowledge they need to effectively complete our assignments requires our careful analysis of their needs, sensitivity to their backgrounds, and careful planning and preparation.

For example, if we ask our students to write about a sonnet, we have to determine whether or not our students can read the sonnet with sufficient understanding to write about it intelligently. Our own familiarity with the work being studied may cause us to underestimate our students' ability to understand it. It is easy for us to forget those times when we struggled for long hours trying to determine the meaning of a literary work. (I can refresh my memory, by trying to read a few pages of a statistics text.)

When I ask students to read and write about Shakespeare's "Sonnet 15," for example, I first prepare them to understand the sonnet's form so they are able to organize the information in the sonnet in a way that allows them to make meaning from it. Too often, students try to organize only individual lines of the poem into meaning units, forgetting that

sentences, phrases, and clauses within the poem are units of meaning also. Furthermore, they are perplexed by the vocabulary of this sonnet written almost 400 years ago. I need to draw their attention to references which are unfamiliar to them and to forms of language which have changed. One effective way I have found to accomplish this task is to give them a copy of the work that includes **glossing** of difficult words in the margin. This **glossing** provides them the necessary definitions of unfamiliar terms so that they can concentrate their attention on the meaning of the poetry.

Sonnet 15

When I consider everything that grows	
Holds in perfection but a little moment,	(stays)
*That this **huge stage** presenteth **nought** but shows*	{ (the world as a stage) (nothing)
*Whereon the **stars** in secret influence comment;*	(reference to astrology)
When I perceive that men as plants increase,	
Cheered and check'd even by the selfsame sky,	{ (encouraged) (restrained) (reference again to stars)
***Vaunt** in their youthful sap, at height decrease*	(swagger)
And wear their brave state out of memory:	
*Then the **conceit** of this inconstant stay*	
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,	
*Where wasteful time **debateth** with decay*	(realization/awareness)
*To change your day of you to **sullied night***	
And all in war with time for love of you,	(argues)
As he takes from you I engraft you new.	(old age and death)

When I am content that unfamiliar terms and language forms no longer create a barrier to their understanding, I try to help students focus on larger units of the poem. I divide the poem into four parts and direct class discussion to each of these parts.

Sonnet 15

When I consider every thing that grows	{ What idea is presented in these two lines?
Holds in perfection but a little moment,	
That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows	
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;	
When I perceive that men as plants increase,	What idea is presented by these lines?
Cheered and check'd even by the selfsame sky,	
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease	
And wear their brace state out of memory:	
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay	
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,	Who is the poet speaking of in these lines? What is his concern?
Where wasteful time debateth with decay	
To change your day of youth to sullied night;	
And all in war with time for love of you,	What will time take?
As he takes from you I engraft you new.	

I also focus on larger elements that further their comprehension of this sonnet as a literary work. In this work I call students' attention to extended metaphor — a term and concept which I have previously introduced to them.

Sonnet 15

When I consider every thing that grows	
Holds in perfection but a little moment,	
That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows	
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;	
When I perceive that men as plants increase,	
Cheered and check'd even by the selfsame sky,	
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease	Why is this extended metaphor used?
And wear their brave state out of memory:	
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay	
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,	
Where wasteful time debateth with decay	
To change your day of youth to sullied night;	
And all in war with time for love of you,	
As he takes from you I engraft you new.	

The examples described here are not meant to be exhaustive but rather illustrative of the types of activities which classroom teachers can create to provide their students with background knowledge which may enhance their reading of "Sonnet 15." Activities such as these not only provide students with skills which they may use when reading other texts but also provide them a repertoire of devices that foster comprehension of any unfamiliar material.

When activities which enhance their reading, specifically provide students with the means to analyze the techniques authors have used to achieve their purposes, students begin to think about the writing process itself. Student readers become conscious of the techniques available to them as student writers. Often this awareness becomes the foundation for their development as writers.