

Unrehearsed Reading: Helping Students Question and Respond to a Text

by Ryan Dippre

The October 2009 issue of *Classroom Notes Plus* opened with Beth L. Hewett's "Writing Onstage: Giving Students an Authentic Model." Hewett brought up Robert Zoellner's idea of Talk-Write, in an inventive lesson that allowed students to see the teacher engage in the "unrehearsed act of writing" (Hewett, 2009, p.2). It was an inspiring article, even for someone like myself who already practiced some version of Talk-Write during the school year.

I read Hewett's article at a time when I was running into a different but related problem with my students. While they were writing well and reading dutifully, they seemed to miss what I saw as key points in the text, and if they did notice them, they failed to bring them up in class discussions. I had tried several mini-lessons to engage students more meaningfully, but these didn't have much effect.

Hewett's article sparked an idea for how I could close the gap on my students' reading and discussing skills. I had given the students several lessons in writing, and their writing was on target and proficient. Why not do what Hewett did, only with reading? That is, why not let my students watch me in the unrehearsed act of *reading*?

I started cracking books and searching for answers. Milner and Milner's *Bridging English* mentioned, in about half a page, reading "At the Point of Utterance" (Milner and Milner, 2003, p. 121). They made the interesting point that "a helpful way to encourage inexperienced readers is for you, as the most experienced reader, to respond to a work with which you are unfamiliar." The title of that section led me to James Britton's "Shaping at the Point of Utterance." Britton's essay focuses on writing, but his desire to "associate spontaneous shaping, whether in speech or in writing, with the moment by moment interpretive process by which we make sense of what is happening around us" swayed me toward believing in the possible effectiveness of unrehearsed reading. (Britton, 1982, p. 140).

My students struggled with both interpretation—identifying important points in the text and determining possible meanings—and shaping those interpretations in class discussions. I decided to use unrehearsed reading.

The Set-Up

I began by deciding to use a novel. I was sure that the unrehearsed interpretation of short stories and poems could be effective, but I wanted my students to see a slow development from my interpretation to my discussion questions. Remember: my students were not only failing to see

important points in a story, but they were failing to bring them into conversation when they *did* see them. To work on this extensively, I chose an extended work.

I asked a colleague to choose a book for me. I wanted to know nothing about it when I gave it to the students. I chose this colleague because at times I get the impression she belongs to every book club in the northeastern United States. She came up with a book for me in about ten seconds—Pa Chin's *Family*—and was even able to provide thirty copies. I taped the box shut without looking at the cover artwork and shoved it under my desk until the time came.

As a quick caveat, let me add that clearly general practice calls for teachers to be familiar with books under discussion in their classrooms, but on a rare occasion like this one, presenting an unread work can be purposeful and warranted.

The Pitch (Session 1)

We began the novel in mid-February 2010. I handed the novel out to students and explained that I had no idea what it was about. This was not a huge surprise to them: I had outlined the plan briefly a few weeks before, and had also sent a letter home to parents detailing my intentions and goals. For the benefit of the students, I outlined those goals once again on my SmartBoard:

- Students will define what tension is in a literary work;
- Students will identify tension in *Family*;
- Students will use context clues to identify details of setting in *Family*;
- Students will define a symbol;
- Students will use dialectical notes to track their thoughts in chapters of *Family*;
- Students will identify symbols in *Family*;
- Students will analyze symbols and tension in *Family* for a deeper understanding of the work;
- Students will connect symbols and tension in *Family* to outside texts, historical events, and personal histories;
- Students will generate original discussion questions for a large class discussion;
- Students will respond to other classmates' discussion questions in large-group discussion.

These, of course, are not our only goals; however, they are at the heart of what I am trying to accomplish in the unit, and I want students focused on them.

I also pulled up a chart that listed other units and goals from our school year to help students understand that we would be taking a different approach.

The First Read (Session 2)

Our first read began as a class. First, using my SmartBoard, I brought up a dialectical-notes chart (also known as a double-entry journal). This chart provided space for me to jot words, phrases, or ideas from the reading on the left

side, and respond to them on the right side. My students also created dialectical-notes charts in their notebooks. Then, without looking at the back of the book, the inside cover, or the introduction, I read the first page aloud without stopping.

After I finished reading the first page, I went back over what I “saw” in the work. Speaking aloud, I identified all of the symbols and tensions that I saw. Working from beginning to end, I listed these on one side of my dialectical notes and made my notes on the other side. (See Figure 1.) The students, for this phase, did little more than mimic what I did.

Once I had finished my notes, I asked the students what they saw. They brought up very little, but I wasn’t worried. I had identified a great deal, after all, and I was sure that at least some of them had seen what I had seen.

We finished the class by breaking down how much we were going to read that night. Since none of us knew where the book was headed, we looked at how much time we had to read it on the big calendar at the back of the classroom, divided the number of pages by the number of days, and decided that we needed to keep a pace of around 15 pages per day to get the book read.

This class took place on a Friday, so students were given pages 8–44 to read for homework and asked to create two dialectical notes per chapter and to find two instances of tension.

Introducing Discussion Questions via the Questioning Circle (Session 3)

When the students returned the following Monday, I displayed my dialectical notes and reviewed them for the class. I explained why I included each one and how I perceived its importance in the developing story. From there, I asked students to list some of their notes.

If at this point I hadn’t been sure that students understood this approach to reading, I would have done another in-class reading. However, it seemed time to link what students were learning to in-class discussions.

I began by explaining that discussion serves different purposes in different disciplines. In the discipline of English, I said, discussion helps readers clarify aspects of a work of literature, see more deeply than they might have on their own, and connect the work to ideas outside of the classroom, such as personal affairs and general aspects of the human condition. I stated the four qualities of literature discussion listed by Dixie Lee Spiegel (2005, p. 10–13) in her book *Classroom Discussion*:

Discussion is open-ended (There’s no right answer to a discussion question!)

Figure 1: Model Dialectical Notes Created for *Family*

Quotes	Notes
“The wind was blowing hard.”	Nature in a negative light
“They looked weary,”	The people in the story, even though we haven’t met them yet, seem tired.
“[...] the snowfall was becoming heavier.”	Snow, meaning winter, which commonly ties in to death and dying. Of what, though?
“Howling mournfully”	The wind has a sadness in it somehow (personification)
“the wind joined with the sound of footsteps in the snow to form a strange, irritating music”	Human actions and nature are intertwined, even if that communion is not positive
“the bright warm sun of spring will never return again”	This passage seems oddly certain, even though it is probably meant to imply a feeling that will pass
“brightness of their homes”	This is the first positive in the reading. The brightness of home contrasts with the darkness of the streets.

Discussion is recursive (Discussion always falls back on itself and is never linear.)

Discussion is collaborative (We work together instead of just throwing out ideas.)

Discussion is constructive (We come up with ideas as a group that we never could alone.)

I moved on to show my students how to write discussion questions. The method I selected for our work with *Family* was Christenbury and Kelly's Questioning Circle (as introduced in *Questioning: A Path to Critical Thinking* [NCTE 1983], and referenced in *Bridging English* [Prentice Hall, 3rd. Ed., 2003]).

I made it clear to students that this is just one possible way of writing discussion questions, but that I chose this because it offers a useful structure to help readers think more deeply about a work of literature.

This method consists of three circles: The Matter, Personal Reality, and External Reality. (See Figure 2.) As explained by the authors, "the first circle, the matter, represents the subject

of discussion or questioning. The second circle, personal reality, represents the individual's experiences, values, and ideas. The third circle, external reality, is, for want of a better term, the 'world': the experience, history, and concepts of other peoples and cultures." (*Questioning*, p. 13)

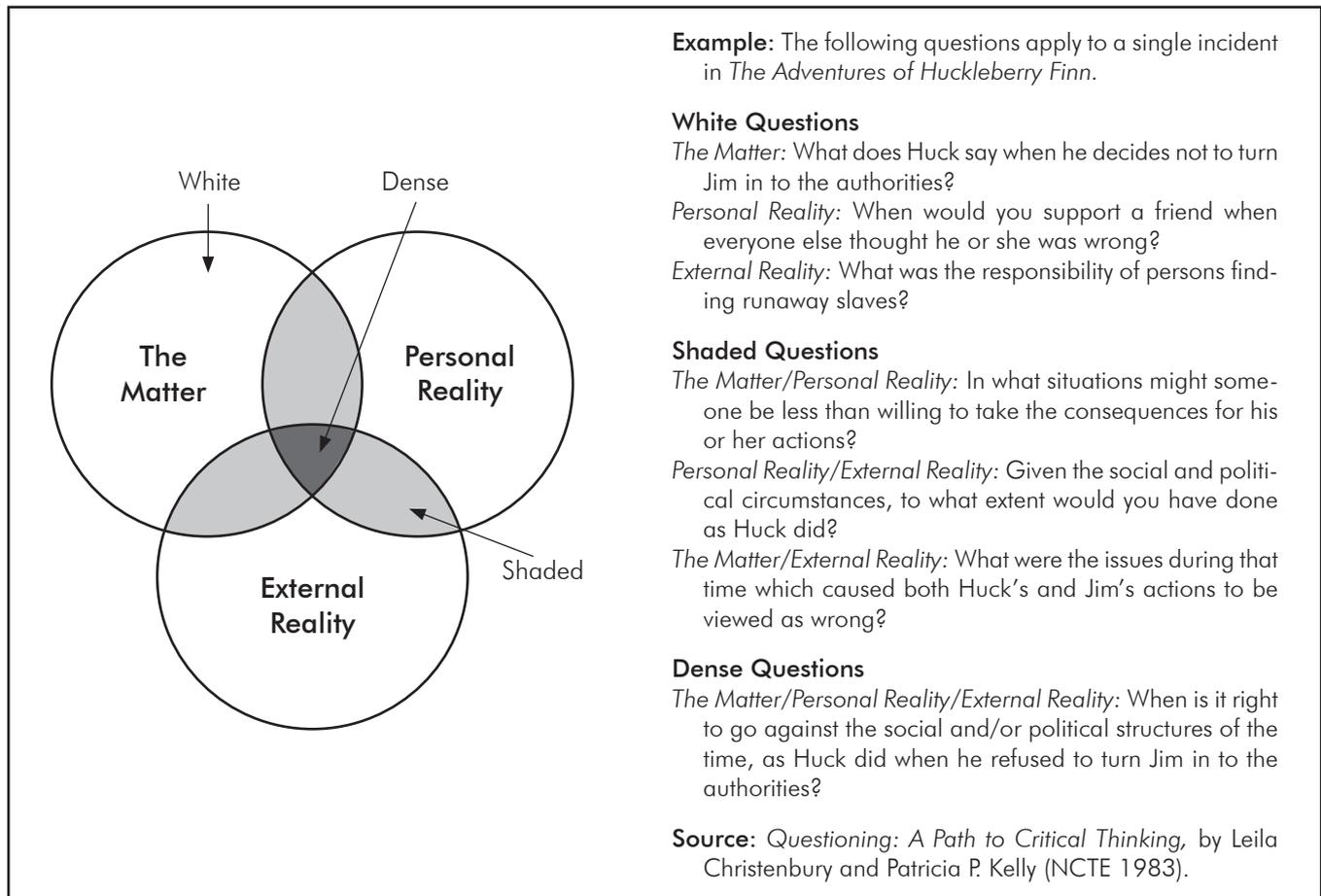
The three shaded areas show where components "mingle and enrich each other"; "the area where all three circles intersect, the dense area, represents the central, most important questions, the questions that subsume all three areas and whose answers provide the deepest consideration of the issue."

To model the process for students, I first walked step-by-step through the following set of discussion questions based on *Family*, explaining how each one was phrased differently and fit its category:

Matter: How did the students respond to the government's edicts, and why?

Personal: Do you feel that you would have responded in that manner to the government's intrusions? Why or why not?

Figure 2: The Questioning Circle



External: What should people do when they disagree with their government?

Dense: How would you respond to the situation of oppression faced by the students in this selection of *Family*, and is it right for you to respond in this way?

When I was sure students understood how the questions differ in type, we began a class discussion in response to the questions themselves, particularly the “dense” question. This took us to the end of the period, and the homework I gave was to follow the same steps I did and create a similar set of four questions for the next day, based on the night’s reading assignment.

Figure 3: Sample Student Discussion Questions

Two Dense Questions for Discussion: 3/4/10

① **Matter:** Do you think that the traditions of the time (drinking, late nights, etc.) are age appropriate?

② **Personalize:** If you were a Chinese youth during this time would you feel proper partaking in these activities?

③ **Externalize:** Would the youth in the book fit in to present-day U.S. youth "culture"?

④ **Dense:** Do you feel that certain traditions, like drinking young, are age appropriate and would you feel comfortable in a society like that or do you feel they would feel comfortable in present-day U.S. society?

*① **Matter:** Do you think that the Kao family acted appropriately throughout the whole attack?

② **Personalize:** Have you ever felt this level of fear?

③ **Externalize:** Has any part of the world ever experienced this level of fear?

④ **Dense:** Have you ever experienced a level of fear like the Kao family did during the whole attack or have you just seen it happen to part of the world?

Large Group Discussion 1 (Session 4)

The next day, we reviewed the reading for the night and launched into a discussion using the questions of students who felt confident enough to volunteer theirs. We began with the “Matter,” “Personal,” and “External” questions and moved from there to the “Dense” questions. This gave all of the students, even those who had struggled to come up with dense questions, a chance to offer something for discussion.

I was pleased with this discussion. Although I still felt I had to take the lead, and had to throw out a question myself, the students had a strong grasp of the concept overall and were starting to identify symbols and tension very well. I gave the assignment of writing another set of discussion questions

for the next session. At the end of the period, I collected the homework from the class, which was a useful indicator of students’ comfort level and understanding at this point.

It was in sessions 4 and 5 that I felt I could slowly hand the reins of discussion over to the students and scale back my unrehearsed modeling.

Large Group Discussion 2 (Session 5)

At this point in the unit, I felt that most students understood well both what to look for in the text and how to apply that to discussions. After I checked the homework during this class period, I asked students to write down their “dense questions” on a separate piece of paper, put their names on it, and put it in the “Mystery Hat”—an old cowboy hat. (The “Mystery Hat” idea is from Lisa Mitchell’s “Discussion Angles,” also presented in the October 2009 issue of *Classroom Notes Plus*.)

After discussing the reading and clarifying any confusion, we pulled and responded to discussion questions from the “Mystery Hat” for the remainder of the period. The students loved this and complained at the end of the period that I hadn’t read all of them. Aside from the assigned reading, I gave no homework.

Discussion Panel Set-Up (Sessions 6 and 7)

The class began with a quiz and review of the previous night’s reading.

	Distinguished	Proficient	Apprentice	Novice
Question Quality	Questions of all five types are present throughout, and allow serious expansion and consideration on a variety of topics.	Questions of all five types are present throughout the discussion, and are open-ended and expansive in nature.	Questions of all five types are present throughout the discussion, though some are repetitive and not all are open-ended.	Some question types are missing, and questions present are either repetitive, not open-ended, unrelated to course material, or all of the above.
Understanding	All students clearly and noticeably link class discussion and information from the novel together in answering and clarifying questions.	All students project an adequate understanding and interpretation of both the reading and class discussions.	Most students project an adequate understanding and interpretation of both the reading and class discussions.	Few or no students project either an adequate understanding or interpretation of either the reading or class discussion.
Moving the Discussion	The discussion questions build off one another in a way that each question brings insight and a clear line of thought to the next question.	The discussion questions are well organized and move fluidly from one to another, with few dead spots of conversation.	The discussion questions are organized in a logical fashion, with several small dead spots of conversation.	The discussion questions are not organized in a logical fashion, and dead spots are frequent and extended.
Delivery	Students use explicitly clear pronunciation and carefully time the production of their thoughts to generate maximum interest.	All students use clear pronunciation and communicate thoughts easily to the audience.	Most students use clear pronunciation and communicate their thoughts in an understandable manner.	Students struggle to either use clear pronunciation or communicate thoughts in an understandable manner.
Time	Discussion lasts twenty minutes.	Discussion lasts fifteen minutes.	Discussion lasts less than fifteen minutes.	Discussion lasts less than ten minutes.

Figure 4: Discussion Rubric

Throughout the unit I read at the same pace assigned to the students, so at this point the students who had read far ahead had begun to get upset that they couldn't discuss the work with me before or after class, as is my custom.

With "Discussion Panels," I borrowed again from Mitchell. I placed the students in groups of four according to ability level. I made certain that each student who seemed to be struggling with discussion was paired up with at least one student who had demonstrated through homework and class participation that he or she understood both how to read a text and how to build discussion questions.

The period was given entirely to organization. After the students were in groups, we organized the reading assignments so that each group had just about an equal number of pages to discuss. As a class, we decided that we could expand the discussion beyond the night's reading assignment after the first few minutes of discussion.

Once pages were assigned, we created the scoring rubric for the panel discussions. (See Figure 4.) I made sure we did this as a class because I wanted to know what the students expected of themselves when leading a discussion. This took us through Session 7.

Discussion Panels (Sessions 8 through 11)

Discussion panels may warrant more or less time depending on the assigned reading, students' comfort level with the various discussion methods, and other factors. Four class periods may be suitable for most class settings.

In our discussion panel sessions, class discussions were led entirely by the students. I was surprised and impressed by how they carried themselves during the discussion. At one point I even remarked, "You are all more focused and 'on task' for each other than you are for me!"

I remained in the background for sessions 8 and 9, noting who was participating and who was not. All students not leading the discussion were required to make at least one in-depth response, and all but three students received 100% credit for this. I took care to participate only infrequently, letting the students take the lead and keep it.

Table Discussions (Session 12)

The final discussion was a "Table Discussion" (courtesy once again of Mitchell.) We had finished the book at this point, so

I wrote down seven “tensions” that had existed throughout the novel. The students were again grouped into fours (new groupings), and each group was seated at a different table with a different tension assigned. Each group was given several minutes to explain how its tension was resolved in the work before moving on to the next tension. This allowed the students to work with their earlier dialectical notes, their discussion questions, and their newfound discussion abilities in a less structured manner.

Conclusions

In hindsight, I see that it was unnecessary to keep reading at the pace of my students throughout the entire novel. However, the students seemed to enjoy asking “Did you read last night?” and it kept me from shaping my thoughts and interpretations too fully before the class period began, so it all worked out well.

I began this unit as a well-meaning “sage on the stage” and concluded it as a “guide on the side.” I felt that the students were able to gain a great deal from my unrehearsed reading at the beginning, and they carried this through with them to the end of the unit and into other units later in the year. It was inspiring to see these students, many of whom were already strong readers, develop into focused, interrogative readers. I know my district can’t afford to keep buying class sets of books that I’ve never read simply for this unit, but regular doses of unrehearsed reading in the form of short stories and poems throughout the year may prove just as effective as a full novel.

References

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Ryan Dippre teaches English at Delaware Valley High School, Milford, Pennsylvania. He can be reached at ryan.dippre@gmail.com.