

Teaching Reading

Beyond the Plot



BY MARGARET METZGER

Ms. Metzger describes her technique for teaching high school students to read well. She may not be able to make all of them love reading, but she can give them the skills to comprehend any difficult piece of text.

AS CITIZENS, parents, and reading adults, we worry about our children's inadequate reading skills. Although many students can decode, most are superficial readers, comprehending only surface information.

Many students do not know how to comprehend difficult text. They think that if they have passed their eyes over the material, they are finished. Students see reading as a passive activity, in which one either "gets it" automatically or doesn't. Meanwhile, schools talk about increasing literacy, but they are so overwhelmed with children who can't decode that they ignore the majority of mediocre readers.

When asked about the subtleties of a particular passage, students stare blankly at the page. They are particularly confused about the point of view and the reliability of the narrator, and they are lost in metaphors. Because students do not realize when an author is playing with them, they assume

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that all writing is equally important, serious, and true. Sometimes students cannot even follow the plot.

Students (and some adults) believe that they are poor readers because they read fiction slowly, even if they read nonfiction very well. They do not understand that good reading has little to do with speed or material. Students (and some adults) start with an assumption of inferiority: "I never get the hidden meaning" or "I have always hated reading." When students search for

hidden meanings, they assume that there is one single answer that teachers or authors are withholding from them. They do not understand that anyone can learn how to read on multiple levels, just as anyone can learn, with effort, increasingly complex skills in sports or computers or music.

As a high school teacher, I worry about reading comprehension. I tried all the usual solutions. I read the research, went to conferences, wrote study guides, planned

discussion questions, wrote curricula for different reading levels, and varied my pedagogy. My students wrote, discussed, debated, and acted. To a limited extent, these techniques helped students understand a particular text, and they liked the literature more after we studied it. Students claimed that they learned to read better in my class, but many students still slipped past me. Many were just glib in class discussions; the confused kept quiet. Although the vast majority understood an assigned reading after we had worked on it together, they couldn't apply the general strategies to a new piece.

Because reading is invisible, I was at a loss. I couldn't follow my students' reading processes. I longed for the certainty of teaching writing, where at least I could look at drafts of papers and figure out where students had gone wrong or right. When a student in literature class offered some outrageously incorrect interpretation, I spent half the class period trying to untangle the confusion. While I helped one student, the others were confused for different reasons or were simply bored. I needed help in two areas: I needed to know what students were thinking as they read, and I needed to reach all students.

A Solution

Five years ago I solved the problem. Now I am confident that I have a technique to teach high school students to read well. I can't make them love reading, but I can give them the skills to comprehend any difficult piece of text. Even freshmen in a public school can become confident, independent readers.

Five years ago I modified a pedagogy known as the Socratic Seminar, sometimes called the Paedeia Approach, based on the work of Mortimer Adler and Dennis Gray. A Socratic Seminar is a focused discussion on a short piece of writing. Noncompetitive discussion moves toward a collective and deeper understanding of the reading rather than to one right answer. Students talk through possible interpretations. Dennis Gray focuses the seminar on the ideas presented in the readings and on issues of group process.

Adler and Gray developed simple logistics. The teacher gives each student a short passage, preferably less than one page. Before class, students read and take notes on their reading. During class, the students divide into an inner and an out-

er circle. One group holds a discussion while the other group observes.

The teacher's preparation is relatively simple: choosing the readings and thinking of open-ended questions. The questions must be "real questions" to which the teacher does not know the answers, as opposed to "teacher questions," which are intended to allow the teacher to check whether the students understand a particular fact or idea. Sometimes the teacher prepares background information in order to set the reading in some context. During the class, the teacher facilitates the discussion.

The Socratic Seminar is standardized, almost ritualistic. Students spend about five minutes rearranging the classroom desks in two circles and choosing the groups. Members of the inner group read the passage aloud two or three times. The first discussion lasts 10 minutes. The outer circle then gives 10 minutes of feedback. The students change places. The new inner circle (the students who began in the outer circle) holds a 10-minute discussion and then receives feedback from the outer circle for 10 minutes. That takes a tidy 45 minutes, leaving about five minutes for describing the next day's reading and for conducting any other classroom business. This timing can easily be adjusted. Ideally, each discussion would be about 20 minutes long. But most schools still have 50-minute classes, so shorter discussions allow every student to speak. Because the pacing is predictable each day, the students can move quickly through the transitions; the teacher doesn't need to give daily directions.

A New Purpose For Socratic Seminars

Using Gray's format and objectives, I added a crucial goal: students would learn reading strategies for understanding difficult texts. To accomplish this aim, in addition to the usual critiquing of group dynamics and discussion, the outer circle observes how the inner circle comprehends the text. In other words, students focus on *how* they are reading as well as *what* they are reading. I want students to watch how the problem is solved, not just the final answer. My goal is for students to observe, name, and practice different strategies for understanding literature.

Often teachers feel so desperate for some class participation that they accept any verbal statement, fearing that they will suppress conversation if they make judgments about

the quality of student responses. Therefore, students don't know which answers are right and wrong, particularly since it is out of fashion to say that any answer is wrong. As soon as teachers hear a reasonable answer, they move on to the next question. It's as though in a math class, after several solutions were given, the teacher just moved on to the next math problem without saying which solutions were right and to what degree.

Most students do not understand how their more articulate, insightful classmates reach conclusions about literature. Unless teachers explain why some interpretations are more valid, class discussions confirm students' belief that some of their classmates "just get it" and that literature is inaccessible to them. Again, imagine a math class in which no one explains how a problem was solved.

The Experiment

I began my experiment with 48 students in two freshman classes. On the first day, I gave a 15-minute explanation of what we were going to do and why. We would simply work on the goals of noncompetitive discussion in order to gain deeper understanding of the text. I would lead the discussion in the inner circle, while the outer circle took notes on process. I warned the students that things would get more complicated as we went along and that I would add new directions every few days.

At first all I wanted was for the freshmen to talk directly to one another and to explain their understandings and confusions about the text. I wanted them to be engaged in a lively discussion in which they tried to understand the meaning of the text beyond what they already knew about it. I wanted them to challenge their assumptions about the reading and to depend on one another for clarification. Based on Gray's suggestions, I chose the Pledge of Allegiance as the first reading. Although students are familiar with it, they haven't thought much about what it means.

From the first day of Socratic Seminars, I emphasized reading techniques. When we finished the discussion of the Pledge of Allegiance, I asked students to summarize the kinds of questions we had asked. Students responded, "We focused on key words like 'pledge' and 'allegiance.'" I then pointed out the more general principle: "Okay, so we had to figure out what

key words meant first. Do you think that might be a helpful method on some other piece of writing?" They agreed. "Yep, we ought to know what the title means."

Another student said, "We talked a lot about the four references to the unity of the nation: the United States, the republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible." Again I asked for the general principle. "Is the general principle that we should always look for references to the unity of the United States? Of course not; that's the content of this particular reading. So what is the general comprehension technique we were using?" Most of the students saw that we were looking for repetition of words or terms to see what was most important to the writer. Some students argued that any repetition would probably be worth noting.

They looked for other comprehension techniques. One student noticed, "We tried to figure out when the Pledge of Allegiance was written by remembering when people were thinking about the unity of the states." When I asked for the general principle, I got the reply: "We don't always have to ask Mrs. Metzger. We can figure things out for ourselves if we just keep looking at the page and use some plain old common sense. But it doesn't always work. We needed a teacher to tell us that the phrase 'under God' was added later. No amount of Sarcastic Seminar work would help us figure that out. You just have to know some stuff."

As the readings got more complex, the comprehension techniques also got more complex. However, students saw that, even with the most difficult passages, the basic techniques were always useful. It was always important to reread, know vocabulary, follow the punctuation, follow pronoun references, and ask questions about the unclear parts.

This was the initial pattern for classroom management:

1. Read the passage aloud three times.
2. The inner circle discusses.
3. The outer circle summarizes important parts of the discussion.
4. The whole class articulates the methods used to reach understanding.

The Teacher's Role

For the first two weeks, I took the role of a traditional group leader in the inner circle. I planned open-ended questions, facilitated discussion, and orchestrated the

conversation. After I had served as group leader of the inner circle for two weeks, the students kicked me out. They tried to comfort me. "Don't take it personally, Mrs. Metzger, but we don't think that we need you in the inner circle. We know what we want to talk about before we come to class, and your questions aren't always too helpful. You talk too much in the inner circle. And we end up directing all our comments to you. So you are really hurting the group process." I agreed and left.

The students were right. Discussion worked much better without my leadership. Different students emerged as leaders, and they all took more responsibility for the discussion. They also paid more attention to one another.

After that, I asked students daily if they wanted me to sit in the inner or outer circle. When the material was particularly difficult or if students needed background information, they asked me to sit in the inner circle. Sometimes they invited me to join the inner circle, but only as a participant, not as a leader. Usually I sat with the outer circle.

The students in the outer circle were having more trouble than the ones in the inner circle. They did not know how to take notes on the inner circle's conversation. Freshmen talk to one another all the time, but they don't analyze logic or group dynamics. They also have little practice taking notes on conversation. Left on their own, students often allowed their minds to wander and turned in skimpy notes.

As I sat with the outer circle, I tried to model the behavior and note taking I required. I showed students my own notes so they could see how much of the conversation I transcribed and the kind of notes I took.

During seminars, I had to stand back, be quiet, and not instruct. Often students were confused at points I did not predict. When we read the poem "Ozymandias," I expected the students to be stumped by the enigmatic line: "the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed." Instead, one student thought the sculptor's face was buried in the sand. Another student thought the inscription "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" was spoken by the "traveler from an antique land."

To give the students a chance to help one another through muddled understandings, I needed to stay out of the way of their misunderstandings. If I had been in

the inner circle, directing every question, students might not have been so willing to reveal their confusions. Sometimes students were so outrageously confused that I could barely contain my teacherly self, but I kept quiet, and they always made at least some headway toward clarity. At one point, I lost my composure and laughed out loud at an interpretation. One boy said, "I guess we're not doing too well. She's laughing at us." Another boy added, "Well, it's better than yesterday when she was grimacing. Just ignore her." I apologized, and they straightened themselves out eventually. To my great joy, they occasionally said to one another, "Well, we still don't get this, but we're better off than we were five minutes ago. How did we get so mixed up, anyway?"

Because I emphasized the reading strategies, not the final interpretation, I spoke up only when the strategies chosen seemed wrong for the material. If students forgot to examine comparison in a highly metaphorical passage, I might ask them to try again. Occasionally, the interpretation of meaning was so far afield that I felt compelled to comment. One class thought Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us" was about ecology. These urban students equated nature with environmental disaster!

Improving Discussion and Articulating Comprehension

It was soon clear that students needed to improve their discussion skills before we could advance. So I moved back temporarily from the emphasis on comprehension techniques and asked the outer circle to observe group dynamics. Freshmen loved this. I asked students to watch a variety of issues. "Take notes on the major questions that are asked." "Take notes on body language" (their favorite). "Take notes on the differences between boys and girls in discussion." "Take notes on the group's reaction to the loudest and quietest members." "Watch one person and write down what that person is doing." "Figure out what derails and propels the discussion."

Following one of Gray's rules for Socratic Seminars, members of the inner circle could not respond to the outer circle's commentary about their group processes. The quality of the discussions improved. Students who had monopolized class discussion all year, impervious to my pleas for more courteous behavior, modified their

behavior when peers told them they talked too much. The class discussed how to include the quiet members. Freshmen observed the differences between male and female discussion habits. They suggested to one another ways to improve discussion skills. Peer pressure worked in favor of education.

After the group process improved, I intensified the work on comprehension techniques. As the outer circle observed how the inner circle reached comprehension, I asked the students to create labels for the techniques. For example, the label “make movies in your head” describes the act of visualizing an author’s description.

At first labeling comprehension techniques was a disaster. The students could label comprehension techniques after the discussion was over, as we had done with the Pledge of Allegiance, but they could not listen to a discussion, take notes, figure out how the inner circle had reached its conclusions, make up labels for the technique, and listen to the rest of the discussion continue — all at the same time. It was a difficult task. Most students froze; they claimed they couldn’t see any comprehension techniques and couldn’t think of labels at the same time. I tried to explain again. Again, no success.

I realized that students felt overwhelmed. So I sat with the outer circle and informed the inner circle that I would interrupt regularly as the group discussed the beginning of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. After the students used one comprehension technique, I made the referee’s signal for “time out” and stopped the discussion. I then asked the inner group to summarize the last few minutes of their discussion and asked the outer group to name the comprehension technique.

Finally, it worked. Once students knew when a technique began and ended, they could concentrate on finding a label. I did not have to feed them answers; I just had to break down the task.

Early Comprehension Techniques

For the sake of clarity here, I will quote the whole passage the students read from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and then list the techniques they claimed they used to interpret it.

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in

with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

The students specified the following techniques.

1. Think about metaphor. Imagine the scene being described.

2. Think about parts of the metaphor. (For example, tides are out of our control, so are dreams coming true beyond our control?)

3. Imagine what happens when you change the metaphor slightly. (What would it mean if it said “boats” or “canoes” instead of “ships”?)

4. Concentrate on individual words. (In this case, “mocked” and “resignation.”)

5. Figure out why some words are capitalized.

6. Figure out the verb tenses. When does each event happen? (Does the Watcher turn away, and then the ship lands, or is the ship unable to land until the Watcher resigns himself?)

7. Think about how one paragraph relates to the next.

8. Notice that the structures of the paragraphs are very different. What do the different structures add to the meaning? (Why doesn’t the second paragraph end with “This is the life of women”?)

9. Think about and speculate about why some of the sentences are in such convoluted order. How does form fit content?

10. Paraphrase the two long sentences for clarity.

11. Think about the repetition of one word from one paragraph to another, particularly if that word seems key to understanding. How does the one word the two paragraphs have in common (“dream”) change meaning from one paragraph to the next?

12. Consider whether the gender of the author makes any difference.

13. Ask about the author’s attitude toward men and women. Is she against one or the other?

14. Does the writing seem to tell the truth? How would you know?

Impressive as it is, this list does not include the most important technique we

worked on all year: understanding appropriate levels of abstraction before forming opinions about the material. The good reader does not trivialize or over-generalize what the author is trying to say. Cinderella is not about foot fetishes or love throughout the universe. The story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac on a mountaintop is not about rural domestic violence. Students must be able to read a book and abstract from the details and plot to a general and appropriate statement about meaning and theme.

I told my students an anecdote about a freshman years ago who said, “I love English class because I can say anything I want to say because all literature is about everything.” Although the boy’s enthusiasm was cute, his notion was wrong. All literature is not about everything. *Romeo and Juliet* is not about broccoli farming in Idaho. It just isn’t. I know that there are theories afloat in academic circles that all meaning of all texts is determined by what the reader brings to the reading. In part, I accept this theory, but another part of me thinks that this theory could only be held by academics who haven’t taught high schoolers, who can truly muddle meaning.

Later Student Work

Students moved to the appropriate level of abstraction after they used other comprehension strategies. When freshmen read the ending of *The Great Gatsby*, I watched in stunned silence as they decoded multiple metaphors in six minutes. True, the students came to class well prepared. They had spent time on the reading the night before, and they had all written a journal entry about what confused them in the text, what comprehension techniques they used, and what they now understood. When they came into the classroom, they announced that they loved Fitzgerald. They worked through the text systematically. They gave multiple interpretations, all of them valid.

Students first visualized Nick rubbing off the dirty word from Gatsby’s steps. “What kind of person would do that?” they asked one another. One student said, “Holden Caulfield.” I was impressed with the connection, but the other students said that that answer didn’t help people who hadn’t read *The Catcher in the Rye*, so everyone should stay on the text. Students decided that Nick was someone who respected Gatsby’s house and didn’t want it

cheapened by vandalism. But also that Nick couldn't do much — rubbing out one dirty word doesn't really stop evil.

The students then moved to the end of the book, starting with the paragraph about the Dutch sailors:

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for the Dutch sailors' eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know then that it was already behind him, somewhere back in the vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter — tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning —

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Students used all the techniques they had listed with the reading from Zora Neale Hurston. They checked out vocabulary (orgiastic, transitory, pander). They visualized the setting (“The lawn isn't really blue, but he's looking out over water.”) They followed key words from paragraph to paragraph (“The dreams of the sailors are like Gatsby's dreams, the boats going back and forth across the Long Island Sound are like the boats that the Dutch sailors came on and the boats in the last sentence.”) They focused on metaphors (“The houses can't really evaporate, so we must be in his mind, like a fade-out in a movie.

He's imagining the island like it used to be. He's thinking about how the past has influenced the future, just like he does in the last two paragraphs.”) They paraphrased the long sentence about the Dutch sailors. They worked on verb tenses about the sailors, Gatsby's dream, and the future tenses in the last paragraphs. They focused on key words like “aesthetic contemplation” and “beat ceaselessly.” They asked themselves whether Fitzgerald was telling the truth. (Being very young, only 14 years old, they decided that we can overcome our pasts and that their futures would never be controlled by their pasts. I kept quiet.)

But all this work would not have gotten to the core of the passage unless they had gotten themselves to the right level of abstraction. They asked themselves, “So, what is this about — really?” One student said the paragraphs were about this country's beginnings in hope and wonder. Another said the passage was about everyone's dreams that things will get better. Another student said it was about the failure of both the country's dreams and the characters' dreams. And one student said, “It's about all of us. It's about the power of dreams in the past, present, and future. And how the future is always pulled backwards because of failures in the past.”

Somehow, working through all the intermediary steps enabled students to do the difficult tasks of abstracting, generalizing, and concluding. The conversation was smooth, thoughtful, purposeful, and decisive. The students knew that they could figure out this excerpt if they paid attention to each word, went step by step. I had never seen young people work so efficiently through such difficult material. They knew they had done well, and they finished quite pleased with themselves. I stood up and clapped.

Students kept lists of reading techniques that emerged during the Socratic Seminars. Some students had lists of more than 50 reading strategies. Many strategies focused on close reading of individual words; other strategies were broader, such as paying attention to the point of view, the bias of the writer, the cultural context, or flaws in logic. Students' comprehension improved dramatically when they understood that authors make choices: everything could be written another way, so why does the author choose this format, this style, this example? The awareness that writing is crafted allowed the students to imagine different choices, thereby consid-

ering the author's reasoning and purposes.

The Final Exam

After the success with *The Great Gatsby*, I knew that the freshmen could now read anything. The semester exam tested their reading ability on material they had not seen, using the Socratic Seminar format. “Your final exam will be based on material you haven't seen before. We might as well start at the top. You will prepare two readings, one by Shakespeare and one by Dante.”

Before the exam students marked both readings and wrote an essay about each one. Rather than give verbal feedback to the inner circle, the students in the outer circle wrote an essay about their observations. The students agreed on rubrics for grading the exam.

Both classes were outstanding. Students were calm, focused, and thoughtful. They were sophisticated about group process. No one dominated; almost everyone participated. They easily admitted when they didn't understand a word or sentence, and they helped one another achieve clarity. They listened well to one another, and each comment built on what was last said. The tenor of the discussion was relaxed and serious.

Students demonstrated that they could successfully unpack complex meaning. Although six of my students had diagnosed learning disabilities, five of them did well on this reading unit. The sixth student, who had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, did not achieve well because he could not focus on details of the readings or logistics of the seminar.

Problems with Seminars

Although the Socratic Seminars ended in unqualified success, the class bumbled along at times. Like all curricular experiments, Socratic Seminars don't work perfectly at first. I made many mistakes just from inexperience; I have since worked out most of the kinks.

The first day's discussion was lively but chaotic. I know this because I videotaped it and winced as I watched. Both freshman classes were enthusiastic, but the enthusiasm didn't lead to much depth. The discussion had many problems. Although at the time I thought I was help-

ing, the video showed that I derailed the conversation every time I asked a question. I interrupted more than I led. The students spoke only to me, not to one another. Students blurted out whatever popped into their heads at the moment, regardless of what was happening in the whole discussion. At one point, six of the 11 students spoke at once. Each speaker started on a new topic; the conversation did not build on itself. The second group (the students who began in the outer circle) had an even worse discussion; the conversation was strained, slow, and dull.

Freshmen immediately liked the chance to “talk a lot” and claimed that they had listened to one another. But I doubted it. Seminars seemed to them like school-approved chat sessions. The novelty of the situation was carrying the day, not the intellectual requirements.

I didn’t give much instruction to the outer circle except to take notes on “how the group works — who talks a lot, who listens, who moves the conversation forward . . . that sort of issue.” My directions were inadequate. One student observed that “at first it was really noisy and then it got quieter.” Although true, her analysis was much too skimpy. Another student was far too aggressive and critical, with comments like “Josh dominated the conversation like he always does. He thinks he’s so smart. It drives me crazy.”

After the chaotic first day, I felt that everything needed to be improved immediately, but I decided to focus first on the feedback sessions because I didn’t want my freshmen to self-destruct under one another’s tactless criticisms. So on the second day, we discussed what would be useful feedback and how we all feel when we are personally and publicly attacked. At the same time, we needed honest feedback. After our chat about sensitivity, the comments were gentler but not better. The problem was not only that the freshmen were too blunt with one another but also that they thought feedback meant criticism. I began to give my own feedback. I tried to speak with specific, constructive, and focused comments. Modeling feedback created a big improvement. Still, students weren’t very sophisticated about group process.

I decided to turn to the reliable tool of student journals as a way of getting a lot of information. I needed to know individuals’ responses to the Socratic Seminars. I asked students to write three jour-

nal entries each week, which I read on weekends.

From the journals I learned that even though I was worried about the quality of the feedback, the freshmen loved giving and getting it. I hadn’t realized that they had never done this before. They thought it was great fun telling one another how they acted in groups. Their comments ranged from funny to compassionate to profound: “If Sivon doesn’t quit tapping his foot, I’m going to throw something at him.” “Caitlin finally tried to speak and no one paid any attention to her. Just because she’s quiet doesn’t mean she doesn’t have good ideas. We have to figure out a way to pay attention to the quiet ones.” “Everybody thinks Larry is the smartest kid in the class, so when he speaks we all just roll over. But sometimes his ideas are so much above the rest of us that they don’t really help the conversation along. He just speaks and we all sit there stunned. It’s kind of disrupting. But maybe it’s our fault for giving him so much power. Maybe he’s wrong sometimes — but who would dare to say so, except maybe Sara.”

The students needed to hear one another’s comments verbally. With the students’ permission, I read a few journals aloud and said, “Now, that’s real feedback. Tell one another your insights out loud. I want to see some honesty and courage here. Most of all, think about what would promote someone else’s growth. Give comments that will be helpful to someone else, not just comments to make yourself look smart. Never say something you couldn’t stand hearing about yourself.” It took two weeks for the feedback to be useful, insightful, and kind.

While incorporating journals into the Socratic Seminar experience, freshmen also began preparing the passages. Class discussions would be much stronger if students came to class prepared by having read and thought about the readings.

Students read the nightly assignments at least three times and marked up the readings. I wanted them to write their initial reactions, questions, and thoughts directly onto the passage. At first students didn’t understand the instruction “Mark up your readings,” and they just circled a few words or wrote one question at the end of the page. I explained that they should highlight important or difficult sentences. If they found words they didn’t understand, they should look them up and write the definitions on their papers. I was cau-

tious about giving complete instructions about marking up the passages because I wanted students to figure out for themselves what they did and didn’t understand. Each day I looked over their marked-up passages as a homework check. I passed around the best homework for the others to see. Passing around samples worked because students saw that each page could be covered with the reader’s comments.

On the fourth day, I took home a set of marked-up passages and commented on the content of the “mark ups.” As one would expect, some of the students were just filling the pages, while others were writing genuine questions about the reading. Almost all the students claimed they had never underlined or marked up readings because most assignments were out of textbooks. Therefore, no one had ever asked them to engage in this basic technique for close reading. Soon most of the students were coming to class with passages highlighted in different colors, vocabulary words circled and defined, and questions written all over the page.

Another early problem was students’ false belief that the class had said absolutely everything there was to be said about a particular passage. To counteract this fallacy, I assigned a paper on passages we had already discussed. One boy who had argued vociferously against the “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance changed his mind completely. In his paper he argued that the entire Pledge was about the monolithic nature of this country, and it was good that the Pledge of Allegiance acknowledged that we as a nation might be accountable to a higher power or morality. He ended by saying that he had reacted negatively to the word “God” but had ignored the more important word “under.”

Student Evaluations

At the end of the unit, I asked the freshmen three questions about the experience. They responded enthusiastically, insisting that I repeat this unit the following year.

1. What did you learn about how to read?

• I think that the most important thing I learned was not to be intimidated by the reputation surrounding a book or the way a book looks. For example, I wouldn’t have been interested in reading *My Antonia* if I hadn’t been interested in reading the passage.

• I learned a lot about comprehension while reading. Before, if I didn't understand a passage, I would just sort of skip over it and think, "Oh, it doesn't really matter." But now I try to use the techniques we used in class and I can usually understand that passage better. Another thing I learned is that many times I do not read deep enough, so I end up missing the whole point. So now I am trying to get the deeper meaning of most things I read (sometimes there is none).

• My comprehension is much stronger. Instead of just throwing up my hands and giving up, I know now some steps to understanding literature.

• The best part of this was studying what methods to use to come to comprehension. They were very helpful when we listed them and used them, but I didn't like watching the other group and taking notes on them doing it.

2. What did you learn about participating in discussions?

• I learned how to be more careful in letting other people talk and not shutting other people off.

• I learned how to refute someone else's ideas politely and without offending them. I also learned how to take criticism.

• Even though I didn't speak much during the discussions, the few times I did, I realized it wasn't as bad as I thought.

• I am a very quiet person and most of the time I don't speak unless called upon. In this situation, raising hands is not required, so it was very difficult for me.

• I learned that it is very important to listen to everyone else all the time, because every time I spaced out I could be missing something important. I also learned that I am not always right. I also learned that a discussion should move forward and people will just get annoyed if someone keeps asking the same question and dragging the conversation back.

• I learned to listen. I always participate a lot, but I sometimes don't listen. Many quiet people have good ideas that aren't heard, so I learned to listen.

• I learned that saying something "wrong" is not the end of the planet. I learned how to listen and talk. I was not very good at doing both, and I feel I have improved on that.

• I was able to understand the importance of moving forwards, of speaking about what the person before you has spoken about.

• I learned the difference between par-

ticipating and thinking.

3. How did the whole class improve in the Socratic Seminar?

• People were able to expand on ideas that others brought up. We were able to look at the readings from different points of view. In the beginning, we found it hard to keep the discussions going, but now we find that we don't have enough time to say everything we want to.

• I think at first we had no idea what was coming. But I think we all became more aware of how the class as a whole was coming and we were happy that we were doing well. I think the whole class did a really good job sticking with it and we had a lot of fun.

• When we began, our discussions didn't make that much progress in clarifying and analyzing the piece. We would just spit out answers to your questions. By the end of the semester we all built our ideas, worked together, and made a lot of progress. We were also more eloquent and our conversations were a lot more natural by the end of the semester.

• By the end, we wasted less time — the discussion was more condensed. We focused better and learned to recognize the passages that could be explored. We also learned to work well as a group to the point that we could do well without a leader.

Teacher Evaluation

As the teacher, I agreed with many of the students' assessments about the seminars. I also saw other inherent advantages to this method.

• Students' ability to read difficult texts improved. Because of the requirements and expectations of the Socratic Seminar format, comprehension improved instantly. Students read and wrote questions about a short piece of reading each night. Their attention was focused; the reading was interesting.

• At the beginning of each discussion, we read the passage two or three times, each time more slowly. Therefore, during a single class period, the same page was read four to six times. Simply the act of rereading helped students focus their attention and notice details. By reading passages aloud, students realized that emphasizing different words could change the whole meaning of a passage. It was no longer enough just to skim over an assignment and consider it finished.

• Discussion skills, both listening and speaking, improved dramatically. Since only half of the class was in a discussion at once, individual participation was more obvious. The quiet students could not hide. But more important, it was obvious who dominated the discussion in a constructive or destructive manner. Some students had developed strategies to camouflage their lack of preparation, such as just repeating what had been said or what the teacher said. A smaller discussion group exposed thoughtful and thoughtless responses.

• Students learned that knowledge is not limited. The sense that one can always learn more was reinforced by having two groups discuss the same material, with the stipulation that the second group could not repeat what the first group said. At first students thought that this would be impossible, but of course they learned that the first group tended to clarify surface comprehension questions (such as vocabulary and pronoun references) while the second group discussed more subtle issues of style and meaning. A few times students asked for additional discussion time on a single piece. After one class discussed for 2½ days the two short opening paragraphs of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, three students wrote papers on the same few sentences and found that there was still more to say.

• Students made connections between different texts. Sometimes students saw that knowledge of one passage would interlock with understanding the next passage. A few days after reading the Declaration of Independence, we read the Gettysburg Address. Students noticed immediately that Lincoln had extended the meaning of "all men are created equal" to include African Americans. Students saw connections between the selection from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* about old age and Shakespeare's speech about the seven ages of man. Although I did not plan any of these connections, students made them immediately.

• The freshmen applied the learning from the Socratic Seminars to other situations. Social studies teachers reported that my students requested Socratic Seminars and, even more gratifying, that they were noticeably better readers of primary sources. After our unit ended, the skills they learned carried over to other literature throughout the year.

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Teaching Reading

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Although this explanation has been long and involved, actually doing Socratic Seminars is simple. The daily procedures are predictable. The preparation is minimal. Students take responsibility for classroom discussion.

Best of all, Socratic Seminars are flexible — they can be used for many purposes. Not all classes use Socratic Seminars to teach comprehension techniques. In a social studies class, members of the outer circle may take the role of different historians or political groups listening to an argument. Art classes critique works of art. Math classes talk through problems. The format is also adaptable for many age groups, from elementary students to graduate students. The length of time spent on Socratic Seminars is likewise variable. It isn't necessary to do a whole series of seminars, though practice perfects the discussions. Seminars might happen once a week or only once per unit. Teachers can adapt the pedagogy to meet their students' needs.

Most of the rules can be broken. I once instructed a group of teachers that they had to stay on text during a seminar; they could not tell anecdotes. We started with the Pledge of Allegiance. After the group discussed pledging to the flag and not to the ideals of the country, one teacher told the poignant story of her Cuban father wrapping her and her sister in the American flag and telling them to run for the helicopter because the Americans wouldn't shoot at a flag. I was glad the teacher had deviated from the rules; it reminded me that pedagogy is only a means, not an end.

I first tried Socratic Seminars five years ago. Since then, I have worked with other teachers, different age groups, and student teachers. The first group of freshmen are now college sophomores. I met some of them recently and asked if they remembered the two months we spent on Socratic Seminars five years ago. They all remembered.

One young woman said, "I learned confidence as a reader. I know I can work my way through anything they assign at college. Sometimes in freshman English, when we were way off base, talking about some wild tangent, I just wanted to yell, 'Look at the words!' That's what the Socratic Seminar taught me — to look at the words." **K**

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