

A Teaching Focus vs. A Teaching Direction: Climbing Lessons

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Historically, our lessons have had a teacher-directed “focus,” such as teaching students to predict or teaching the cause-and-effect text structure. Rather than identifying a teaching focus, however, consider identifying a teaching direction. If we are trying to facilitate student independence in complex texts, and to help them reach beyond competence towards excellence, then our lessons can set up a “direction” towards which students can reach.

This challenge is analogous to setting something tantalizing on a top shelf and saying to a child, how can you get it down? They will literally learn to climb, much to our paradoxical joy and horror, by trying to get the item placed out of their reach. For a tangible illustration, try rationing Halloween candy or other holiday treats by placing them on the refrigerator or in a high cabinet. Most four-year-olds will make it their childhood mission to access the inaccessible confection.

We can set lofty comprehension goals for lessons which, although not quite as compelling as milk chocolate, can encourage students to climb and reach. Such stretching can lead to the very independence and excellence we want for students, but we have to make room for student risk, experimentation, reflection, failure, and self-evaluation. Begin by asking yourself: What lesson direction allows students to practice skills and strategies independently (or nearly independently) in meaningful ways, yet is focused enough to remain instructionally manageable for both my students and me? Here are three lesson directions that require students to climb to reach them.



Direction 1. Reaching for Deeper Understanding

Ask students to mine the text for deep meanings and subtleties. Ask, “What do you know about what is written on the page?” followed by “How does knowing this contribute to making the text make sense?” This is very different than asking students to find the answer to a specific, teacher-developed question. With the former question students find answers for themselves, with the latter they find answers for us. If students think first about what the text says and also pay attention to the problem solving they engage to gain varying levels of understanding, then they are more equipped to delve into more complex and unravel its nuanced meanings. Here are other questions for initiating lessons that reach for deeper understanding:

- What do you know about this text already? *Requires students to engage strategies for figuring out what they already know, such as looking at headings, pictures, or charts, or scanning the text.*
- What can you figure out about what this text says or how it works? *Requires students to engage with the text and problem-solve.*
- What can you discover about this text? Are there subtle ideas or connections that you will only find by reading very closely? *Requires students to reread and to search for meaning.*

Direction 2. Reaching for Tighter Relationships

As we work in schools and classrooms, we see a tremendous number of students who practice reading passively. As a passive activity, reading involves decoding the words, closing the book, and never thinking again about what the text said. However, when readers are actively engaged, text becomes a conduit for thinking deeply about the world in which they live. This means finding relationships, or links, between ideas within and beyond the text. Here are some examples of questions students can learn to ask themselves as they are reading texts and discovering these links. Lists of student generated “relationship” prompts, such as these, hung as anchor charts around the room, can serve as tools students can use independently to reach for the big ideas in any text.

Relationships Within the Text Itself

- How is this word related to another word in this text?
- How is this word related to an idea in this text?
- How is this part of the text related to another part of the text? (e.g., How is the beginning related to the end?)
- How does the character behave in relation to the events of the text?
- How does the text structure relate to the author’s point/theme/message?
- How does this text relate to the bigger concept that we are studying?
- What’s the relationship between the text and the illustrations/graphs/charts?

Relationships Between Texts

- How is this text related to another text I have read?
- How are these events related to the events of another text/context?
- How is this character related to other characters I know/have met?
- How is this text’s structure related to the structure of another text I have read?
- How are the ideas in this text the same as or different from the ideas in another text?

Relationships Between the Text and My Experience

- What experiences in my life help me better understand this text?
- What does this text present that I have limited or no experience with?
- What does this text make me want to experience?
- How well does this text serve as an alternative to an experience?
- What experiences have I had that are similar to something in the text? How are the two different and/or the same?

Direction 3: Reaching for Stronger Opinions

When readers regularly integrate information across and beyond a text to arrive at insightful ideas, it naturally follows that they begin to formulate opinions about the texts and topics about which they read. They might begin to think about why characters and points of view change throughout the text, and about whether they agree with these changes or whether the author presented the topic in a convincing way. As they read many texts across a topic presented from several different points of view, they can begin to consider their own take on the topic, which can be supported by citing evidence from the text.

Forming an opinion may begin as simply as having students explain why they like or dislike a text. As idea formulation develops for students, they can become impassioned and motivated to share their ideas with others. In this final teaching direction, we look at opinions that form from reading, and ways help readers think about how to communicate their positions by using textual evidence to support their perspectives. You will notice that all the

prompts for this lesson direction end with “How do you know?” or the equivalent. You may also notice that all of these questions implicitly require students to first access the main ideas of the text.

- Why did the author write this text? How do you know?
- Does the author prove his or her point? Explain.
- Do you agree with this author/text? Elaborate.
- Do you think the character made the right decisions? Why?
- Which authors are most similar/different in their views or beliefs about this topic? How do you know?
- As a result of reading this, what beliefs have you formulated about this topic? Explain.

Reaching is inherently layered with the expectation that learning is a process of trial and error. Some efforts will yield the intended results while others will not, but by virtue of trying, students stumble upon the happy discovery that reaching can sometimes help them attain even more than they hoped for.