Around the Reading Workshop in 180 Days

A Month-by-Month Guide to Effective Instruction

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with Suzette Serafini-Youngs

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I’m glad I did it, partly because it was well worth it, but chiefly because I shall never have to do it again.

—MARK TWAIN

I was reminded of these words from Mark Twain after pitching another book proposal to Lois Bridges, my editor at Heinemann, about the reading workshop. After writing The Reading Workshop: Creating Space for Readers, I believed the quote in the epigraph to be prophetic: I would never write another book about the reading workshop; I was glad I had written the first one, but I had said all that I wanted to say about reading workshops, and I would eventually be moving on to write about new ideas and theories.

Well, here I am again, thinking and writing in greater depth than ever about my preferred visions for the reading workshop, about the lessons I have conducted during my years of teaching elementary school, and about the various communities of readers I have tried to create and support in every class I have taught, fourth grade through college. Through my experiences with conducting workshops around North America, I have decided that I have more to say about reading workshops and am ready to write about my new ideas and approaches to helping intermediate-grade students develop into sophisticated readers.

In my first book, The Reading Workshop: Creating Space for Readers, I explained how my preferred vision of a reading workshop looked and operated, but I did not explain in detail the things I had to do to get the expectations and procedures I described into place. I did not describe in detail how the procedures, comprehension lessons, learning experiences, and discussions that took place in September were different from the ones that took place in March. The reading workshop evolves over time. All of the necessary components do not get introduced in the first week of school and then remain the same for the next forty or so weeks.

The basic premise of this book, Around the Reading Workshop in 180 Days: A Month-by-Month Guide to Effective Instruction, is to help teachers understand how to implement a workshop approach to reading instruction in the intermediate and middle grades, beginning with the first day of school and continuing until the day we say good-bye to students sometime around May or June. Throughout this book, I will describe the details of
my teaching practices and workshop procedures that I enacted in my classrooms as the school year progressed. I will also share various lesson plans, resources, assessment forms, and instructional strategies that I have found to be successful in the reading workshop.

However, what is really at the heart of a workshop approach to reading instruction is helping readers change the way they think and talk about what they read, not accumulating various resources or instructional strategies. The reading workshop is not primarily about procedures, although consistent procedures help teachers and students make sense of and organize their school day. Reading consists of both cognitive operations and social practices, and our pedagogical strategies should reflect this dual theoretical orientation.

Make no mistake, in *Around the Reading Workshop in 180 Days*, I describe how I organized my reading workshop, how I helped children choose appropriate texts, how I encouraged invested discussions, how I helped students comprehend what they read, and other equally important instructional strategies. But, what I am really trying to convey is how I tried to change the nature of the interactions among teachers, students, and texts.

Martin Nystrand (1997) suggests the quality of student learning is closely linked to the quality of classroom talk. I fully agree. If we are going to improve the quality of literacy learning and reading instruction in elementary and middle school classrooms, we must elevate the quality of the talk that occurs there. We must bring to our teaching a level of integrity and intellectual rigor that seems to be absent in the current educational and political climate, with its focus on increasing standardized test scores.

Aidan Chambers (1996) has suggested that literature discussions become spaces for “shared contemplation.” He contends students need to be able to offer ideas in a spirit of communal investigation, a space where “half-baked” ideas can be offered and considered without fear of retribution. I agree. If my students have to wait until their ideas are fully baked, there will be little or no worthwhile conversations about what we have read and thought.

Reading comprehension is the process of generating, articulating, negotiating, and revising interpretations and understandings within a community of readers. These four processes of comprehension provide a theoretical basis for many of the instructional strategies conducted in my reading workshop. The reading workshop should become a space for students to feel comfortable sharing ideas, where students can generate and negotiate interpretations without fear of punishment, and where they have opportunities and support for revising their interpretations and understandings. In other words, a space where readers are supported and challenged to make sense of what they read and experience.

In my third book, *Lessons in Comprehension: Explicit Instruction in the Reading Workshop*, I described in detail how my reading comprehension lessons went, not how other teachers’ lessons should proceed. There is a fine line between describing what I did and prescribing what teachers should do, and I walk this line with every chapter I write. As I described the lessons, resources, and procedures I used in my reading workshop in that book, I provided readers with a window into my thinking and the decisions I made during various comprehension lessons. The goal of that book was not to have teachers try to sound like me or to sequentially deliver the comprehension lessons I described. I just wanted teachers to get a sense of what I did and what was possible for them.
At a workshop I conducted recently, a concerned classroom teacher asked me why I included only 64 lessons in my book when there were 180 days in her school year. An alarm went off! After taking a deep breath and recognizing the sincerity in her question, I tried to explain that she was responsible for the lessons that took place in her classroom, not me. I suggested that she consider my book as a guide for her teaching, not a scripted curriculum to obediently follow. I explained that she would have to draw upon all of her resources, instructional strategies, and knowledge of readers and reading to construct and conduct lessons that would be successful for her students. I finished by suggesting it was her responsibility to make informed decisions about the types of lessons she should offer, not mine. She went away a bit dismayed, but then, so did I.

There are numerous components that I believe to be essential in establishing an effective reading workshop, such as reading aloud and discussing literature, explicit comprehension lessons, literature study groups, classroom-based literacy assessment, and a well-stocked classroom library. However, how these components are organized and enacted can vary from classroom to classroom. My goal in writing professional development materials is to support teachers in their teaching, not to take over their curriculum. I hope the descriptions of my classroom and teaching that I provide throughout this book help you see a preferred vision for your own teaching, not simply a better window into mine.

How the Book Is Organized

In Around the Reading Workshop in 180 Days, I begin with a theoretical discussion that provides the foundation for the practices described throughout the rest of the chapters in the book. I have titled this section “Summer Vacation.” In this chapter, I explain some of the theories and insights that support the organization, procedures, and comprehension lessons I use in my reading workshop. I use this section to discuss various literary theories and reading research that support effective reading instruction.

“Summer Vacation” provides readers with the reasons I do what I do in my reading workshop and should help teachers articulate why a reading workshop is an effective approach to reading instruction to concerned stakeholders like parents and administrators. I never begin a university class or one of my many seminars on the reading workshop without discussing the theoretical foundations of my teaching. It is important to understand why certain practices are enacted, not just how they are enacted. Until teachers’ theories and understandings of reading and reading processes expand, any changes made in their teaching practices will be mostly cosmetic.

Of course, you could always skip this chapter and jump ahead to Chapter 2 and start reading, but I highly recommend reading Chapter 1 first. But, as T. S. Elliot said in his Book of Practical Cats when referring to the Rum Tum Tugger, “for you will do as you do do, and there is no doing anything about it” (1939, 13).

After the first chapter, I have organized the rest of the book by chapters that coincide with each month, September through May, of a traditional school year in the United States. The months I have chosen to begin and end with are arbitrary, and teachers at year-round schools or schools down under should have little difficulty transposing these chapters to fit their school schedules.
In addition to an extensive list of recommended professional resources and children’s literature, each chapter will include the following components:
❖ an introduction
❖ detailed descriptions of the various lessons and learning experiences I provided each month
❖ recommended lessons from my book *Lessons in Comprehension: Explicit Instruction in the Reading Workshop*
❖ a featured lesson in comprehension for each month
❖ various assessments I used to come to know my students as readers
❖ connections to the writing workshop
❖ a list of things I hoped to see, hear, and have established by month’s end
❖ suggestions for further reflection
❖ a classroom vignette, titled “Window on the Workshop,” focusing on a particular unit of study, written by my coauthor, Suzette Serafini-Youngs

At this point I should probably introduce my coauthor, Suzette Serafini-Youngs. Suzette is an experienced intermediate-grade teacher who has incorporated a reading workshop into her teaching for more than ten years. She’s also a doctoral student in literacy education and a visiting instructor at the University of Nevada, Reno, where she teaches courses in literacy methods and children’s literature. Fortunately for me, she is also my sister. I have had the pleasure of spending time in Suzette’s elementary classroom over the past ten years. I respect the intellectual space she established in her classroom and the rapport she developed with her students. I believe that her vignettes will provide the reader with a window into the workings of a reading workshop, giving voice to the various experiences and lessons from Suzette’s own unique point of view. Each month she focuses on a particular unit of study, providing descriptions of how she planned, organized, and enacted these units in her elementary classrooms. I hope that her vignettes help teachers visualize how a reading workshop looks, feels and sounds throughout a school year.

**Some Concluding Thoughts for the Introduction**

So many of the things that make reading instruction truly effective cannot be simply incorporated into lesson plans, no matter the detail. There are nuances to quality instruction that remain unseen to the casual observer or educational novice. What often goes unnoticed is the language of instruction, the relationships developed between students and teachers, the reflective qualities of the teaching process, the ways students respond to the instruction provided, and the environment in which effective learning experiences take place.

The fact that I am an avid reader of children’s literature, spend countless hours reading and analyzing picture books and novels, and have an extensive collection of children’s literature to share with my students, may have as much to do with my effectiveness as a reading teacher as does the quality of the lessons I design. The fact that I am a reflective person, spending time writing about my teaching in my writer’s notebook, supports my ability to teach effectively. The fact that I subscribe to numerous
professional journals and read most of the professional development literature on literacy education available supports my ability to design and implement a reading workshop. The fact that I enjoy being around children, have a somewhat warped sense of humor, and like to listen to my students’ ideas has as much to do with the quality of my teaching as the lessons I create and enact. I hope that my passion for teaching, reading, literature, and children shows through in my writing.

I have created a literacy education website at serafini.nevada.edu that allows me to provide booklists and other up-to-date information for teachers and reading educators. I refer throughout the book to various resources that are available on the website for you to consider. I hope that you will wander around the site and find the ideas and resources helpful.

This book builds upon the foundation I created in my earlier writings yet adds to that foundation in new and exciting ways. I believe that Around the Reading Workshop in 180 Days: A Month-by-Month Guide to Effective Instruction represents the most complete platform statement about reading instruction that I may ever make. But, as the epigraph suggests, never say never.

Teaching is a courageous act. Therefore, so must be the act of writing about teaching. I have spent countless hours with teachers talking about teaching. I am reminded of how daunting the task of facing twenty-five or more children each morning can be, and I have developed an enormous respect for what teachers do each and every day. In this book, I want to describe what I did in my classroom without suggesting that other teachers do the exact same thing. To do so will require some restraint and finesse as I walk the fine line between describing what I did and prescribing what other teachers should do. It is with this in mind that I begin my journey around the reading workshop in 180 days.
Talking about literature is a form of shared contemplation, a way of giving form to the thoughts and emotions stimulated by the book and the meanings we make together out of its text.

—AIDAN CHAMBERS, TELL ME

Introduction

By the time we get to November, students are settling into routines, and the complexity of our literature discussions is expanding. In November, I focus on adding two essential components to the reading workshop: literature study groups and comprehension strategy groups. Literature study groups, sometimes referred to as literature circles, involve the intense study of one particular piece of literature by a small group of students, with a more knowledgeable reader, usually the teacher, facilitating the discussions. Comprehension strategy groups, sometimes referred to as guided reading groups, involve the teachers selecting particular texts to teach comprehension strategies to a small group of children through demonstrations and discussions as the teacher and students work through the text together.

As Aidan Chambers states in the epigraph, the discussions that take place in literature study groups are a form of shared contemplation, a type of talk that promotes and leads to what Peterson and Eeds (1990)
have called “grand conversations.” Literature study groups are designed to help students delve into a selected work of literature, examining the structures and elements of the work along with the author’s writing style and techniques. This intensive study of a single work leads to more sophisticated understandings of literature in general and of oneself as a reader in particular.

Comprehension strategy groups focus on particular comprehension and navigation strategies, where literature study groups focus on a particular work of literature. Although reading a work of literature in literature study groups helps students become better readers, the focus is not on particular reading and comprehension strategies per se, but the work of literature being read. In literature study groups, texts are selected that students can read independently or with minimal support. In comprehension strategy groups, texts are selected for the challenges they present to the readers, allowing teachers to help students develop strategies to deal with these challenges.

Comprehension strategy groups are an instructional approach where a teacher selects a particular text to demonstrate a specified comprehension or navigation strategy to a small group of readers. Although the text should present some challenge, the readers must be able to read the text to some degree independently for these groups to be successful. The teacher focuses readers’ attention on what they are doing when they read and the new strategy she would like students to appropriate in their future engagements with text.

The assessments I conduct during the months of September and October provide a window into students’ reading needs, interests, and abilities. This information supports the formation of small groups for comprehension instruction and literature study. In addition, these assessments allow me to provide individual students with focused instructional experiences at their point of need. Colleagues Barbara Taylor and P. David Pearson (2000) have conducted research studies on effective reading instruction programs across the United States. One key finding from their research is the importance of small-group instruction. They have demonstrated that teachers providing small-group instruction in reading comprehension strategies, based on the needs and abilities of individual readers, are more effective than teachers who provide instruction primarily in whole-group settings. During the months of September and October, most of my reading instruction and demonstrations occur in whole-class discussions or with individual students. In November, I begin to implement small-group instruction, introducing literature study and comprehension strategy groups, based on the needs of individual readers, into the reading workshop.

November is also a time to continue digging deeper into the responses we construct in transaction with literature and the elements and structures of the texts we read. During the first two months of school, I was primarily concerned with helping students generate and begin to articulate their interpretations of the literature we

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**Recommended Comprehension Strategies from Lessons in Comprehension**

2.1 The Hero Cycle
2.2 Using Diagrams to Understand Story Structures
3.2 Investigating Fonts and Visual Design Elements
3.4 Rules of Notice
3.7 Previewing a Text
3.8 Reading Postmodern Picture Books
4.2 Disrupting a Text
5.6 Suspending Closure
5.8 Drawing Inferences
shared. We investigated the types of responses we generated through reading response notebooks and various invested discussion strategies. In November, we focus on negotiating these interpretations with other readers in literature study groups. I begin to challenge readers to defend their interpretations, providing evidentiary warrants for their assertions. As readers offer interpretations up for interrogation and discussion, we focus on how our ideas are negotiated and revised through our shared contemplation of a work of literature.

In the first two months of school, I pay close attention to the ways my students respond to the literature we read, if they listen to each other’s ideas, how they respond to another student’s comments, and how they incorporate the literary terms I have introduced into our discussions. I pay close attention to two parallel developments that signal whether students are ready for literature study groups: (1) an increasing respect for readers’ ideas and interpretations, and a willingness to listen to, and negotiate, ideas with their classmates, and (2) an expanding level of knowledge of the elements and structures of literature necessary for progressing discussions beyond “I like the book.”

There are numerous signals I look for that indicate that these two features are beginning to develop within our community of readers. I notice that students are responding to each other in our group discussions, not just directing all of their ideas toward me. Students don’t interrupt each other as frequently, and they are listening to each other, considering alternative interpretations. Students begin asking each other questions and are discussing favorite authors, texts, and genres. The walking journal is progressing satisfactorily, with students frequently commenting on each other’s ideas and adding new strands to the written dialogue. Students begin using appropriate literary terms in their comments and attending to the visual and design elements of what we are reading and discussing. Students become engaged in the author and illustrator studies we conduct, interrogating the writer’s craft and illustrator’s techniques in greater detail. And most importantly, students are able to sustain independent and paired reading for thirty minutes or so and are able to solve any challenges that arise during the reading workshop block, allowing me to work with small groups without being constantly interrupted.

These are important developments in our community of readers. Until I begin to see and hear these signals, I am reticent to establish literature study groups in the reading workshop. Some years I introduce literature study groups in October, sometimes not until January. However, in most of my years of teaching, I have introduced literature study groups around the beginning of November.

**November Lessons and Learning Experiences**

**Poetry Discussion Groups**

Reading a poem du jour, I have exposed students to a variety of poetry, both simple, humorous poems and more complex ones, throughout September and October. Our daily readings of poetry have provided students with an opportunity to hear poems read aloud and discover some favorite poems and poets. The poem du jour is used to immerse students in the world of poetry, calling their attention to the various forms, formats, and contents of poetry. Now I focus students’ attention on a single poem in order to delve deeper into our interpretive processes.
As I notice more depth in our whole-group discussions, and more respect for the ideas offered, I begin our journey into literature study groups by launching poetry study groups and picture book study groups, before moving on to assigning full-length novels for investigation. The experiences we provide and the type of community of readers we have created form the foundation for literature study groups to be successful. If a solid literary foundation is provided long before we invite students into small groups to discuss a novel, our chances of having some of our conversations turn grand increase. The discussions that take place in small groups are directly affected by the quality of the discussions that take place in our whole-group sessions. Grand conversations usually won’t happen in small groups until they begin to appear in whole-group literature discussions.

I begin by selecting poems to discuss that are written by some of my favorite poets, including Nikki Giovanni, Langston Hughes, Myra Cohn Livingston, Naomi Shihab Nye, Eloise Greenfield, Lee Bennett Hopkins, Georgia Heard, Harry Behn, Ogden Nash, and Judith Viorst. I select poems that have engaged my students in the past and have provided an impetus for in-depth discussions. Whatever poem I choose, it must have the following two characteristics: first, students must be able to read and construct a basic understanding of the poem during an initial reading, and second, the poem must be complex enough to support our subsequent readings and discussions. In other words, the poem I select must simultaneously provide a door into meaning and room to wander once we get in. For me, these characteristics of openness and complexity are crucial for supporting our discussions and investigations of a literary work.

After selecting a poem to launch our discussions, I read it aloud a couple of times, asking students to simply listen and enjoy the poem. Georgia Heard has spoken about the importance of hearing poetry from a variety of voices to see how it may be read differently. So, after my second reading, I ask a couple of students to read the poem again in their own voices. We listen to the differences each reader brings to the poem and then break into small groups to discuss the poem. I usually assign students to this first set of groups to avoid behavior challenges, but I will allow students to create their own groups as we get better at discussing literature. I provide copies of the poem with plenty of white space around the text for students to write comments and questions. I ask students to read the poem once again to themselves and write their reactions in the space around the poem before sharing ideas with the group. I want readers to assume responsibility for reacting to the poem as individuals before sharing their interpretations with other readers. Each reader is responsible for generating interpretations herself, not waiting for other readers to interpret the poem for her.

After each reader has made some comments on her paper, I invite students to share ideas with their group. During this sharing time, I walk around and listen in on each conversation, making some notes and listening for things that support and challenge the kinds of interactions I am hoping to establish. I am as concerned with students’ interpretations of the poem as I am with their abilities to listen and talk effectively with other members of the group. At times, I will stop the discussions to make a particular point. These pullbacks are designed to help students focus on our processes for discussing as well as the poem itself. For example, if I notice someone leaning in to listen closely to another student’s ideas, I will call the class’ attention to the types of behaviors I want them to adopt. From these pullbacks and our discussions about small-group interactions, we create a chart that lists things that have helped us discuss the poem, and things that have blocked our discussions (see Figure 4.1).
I use these poetry groups to introduce students to small-group discussions. I want to make my expectations clear for students’ discussions and behaviors from the beginning. Too often, teachers allow small-group work to become chaotic. This does not have to be the case. However, don’t expect small-group discussions to begin without some challenges. By providing clear expectations for behavior, and support through whole-group discussions and demonstrations, we can make small-group work an important and successful component of the reading workshop.

**Picture Book Discussion Groups**

Poetry discussion groups are used to introduce the types of discussions and procedures we will be doing with picture books, and eventually novels, during our literature study groups. As we launch picture book discussion groups, more time is required for readers to read the work for discussion and prepare ideas to share. I need approximately five or six copies of various picture books for these discussions. If these multiple copies are not available, one copy of each book can suffice, but readers will have to share the text before they are ready to talk in small groups. I choose picture books using the same criteria I described for the poems I select: an openness for students to initiate understandings and a complexity that will allow students to dig deeper.

To begin, I give each student a copy of the book and a small stack of sticky notes to code passages in the text as they are reading. I demonstrate how to code passages readers want to share by writing a word or two on a sticky note to remind students of what they were thinking. I don’t require students to use their reading response notebooks for these poetry and picture book discussions because I don’t want writing to get in the way of their discussions at this point. Reading response notebooks, in particular book logs, will play a central role when we begin reading novels, but for these picture book discussions, I find sticky notes to be sufficient.

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**FIG. 4.1**

*Literature Discussion Ideas*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Helpers</strong></th>
<th><strong>Blockers</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>looking at each other when speaking</td>
<td>playing around in groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asking each other questions</td>
<td>being rude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening and caring about what each other thinks and says</td>
<td>constantly interrupting others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talking so everyone can hear</td>
<td>allowing one person to do all the talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giving everyone a chance to talk</td>
<td>not coming to the group with your own ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning to politely disagree</td>
<td>not talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>saying you are done when there may be more to say</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and poetry discussion groups, I want students to focus on their oral discussion techniques and group behavior.

Unlike with poetry discussion groups, where I selected the poems and assigned the students to groups, I allow students to choose which book they would like to discuss for picture book groups. I provide six or seven picture books and ask students to choose one to read and discuss. Sometimes it is necessary to ask students to pick their top three choices and arrange groups myself to accommodate all students. Sometimes it is necessary to add new titles to the choices available if some of the books are not selected by anyone. I want students to enjoy reading the books they select and be able to understand what they are reading. I want these first small-group discussions to be very successful for all of my students so they will help support more intensive literature study groups.

After selections are made and groups are formed, I ask students to read the picture book and mark passages or images they feel are significant and would like to eventually share and discuss with the group. Students need to come to the group prepared to talk about what they have read. This means that they have read the book, have marked passages or images they want to talk about, have generated some interpretations for themselves, and are willing to listen to others’ ideas.

Our first meeting usually last about ten to twenty minutes and generally consists of students sharing the parts of the story they liked and disliked, anything that was confusing, and any images that caught their attention. This informal conversation has to take place before students can move into more complex dialogue about a text. It’s like going to a party. You have to talk about the weather before you can talk about life-altering events. I have watched this phenomenon with both fifth graders and graduate students at university. Both groups begin by sharing their likes and dislikes and then move into more complex topics and issues. The trick is to not let students think that once the informal sharing of likes and dislikes is over, so is the literature study. Our discussions are just beginning.

Over the course of the next few days, I meet with each group individually to talk about their selected text. I listen as they summarize their discussions up to that point, and I might ask a few questions to clarify certain ideas. After listening to their ideas, I suggest a particular topic or theme for them to pursue further. I send students back to the picture book to generate ideas about our selected topic or theme. I do this with each group to demonstrate the importance of returning to the text and images in a picture book during the interpretive process.

Each group will then do a brief self-evaluation, focusing on the group’s discussions, behaviors, and interpretations (see Figure 4.2). I want them to attend to how the group worked together so we can improve our discussions as we get ready to launch literature studies on children’s and young adult novels.

As I have suggested earlier, if you want to have quality discussions, read quality literature that connects to the lives and experiences of your students. You will find several booklists of my favorite books that I have used for picture book discussions on my website. I will continually update these booklists to provide teachers with lists of new favorites as well as classic texts that have been used successfully.

Supporting Picture Book Investigations

The read-alouds that continue each day before launching small-group discussions are used to call students’ attention to the various elements and structures of the picture books we are sharing. As their literary docent, I call their attention to the characteris-
tics of written texts and visual images they may have overlooked or did not understand. This is where my knowledge of children’s literature, and its elements and structures, is so important. I cannot call students’ attention to those things I don’t know about or attend to myself. The more sophisticated a reader I can become, the more I will be able to support my students development as sophisticated readers.

In Reading Aloud and Beyond: Fostering the Intellectual Life with Older Readers, Cyndi Giorgis and I (2003) provide an in-depth discussion of artistic media and techniques used by contemporary illustrators along with a theoretical discussion of the relationships between text and illustrations. The information we provide in this book, or that can be found in any quality children’s literature textbook, will help you attend to and understand the elements and structures of contemporary picture books. Taking a refresher course in children’s literature, forming discussion groups with other educators to talk about picture books and novels, spending time at school and public libraries reading children’s literature, and reading professional resources that help you understand literary theories and the elements and structures of children’s literature will support your ability to teach in a literature-based reading workshop.

I now want to describe three examples of the types of learning experiences I provide during the reading workshop, in particular during our read-alouds and invested discussions of literature, before I begin to incorporate literature studies on novels in the reading workshop. One is a series of engagements I call disrupting a text, the second focuses on the interplay or relationships between written text and visual images in a picture book, and the third focuses on calling students’ attention to one of the most common structures in children’s literature, the home-away-home structure or hero cycle. These instructional experiences help readers attend to three important aspects of picture books: (1) the way illustrations and written texts are organized and designed, (2) the interplay between text and images, and (3) the overall structure of the sequence of events in a story.

**Disrupting a Text**

What I am referring to when I use the phrase *disrupting a text* is separating the visual images and written text in a picture book and discussing these two components separately. I have used two different ways to separate written text from visual images. One way is to type up the words of a picture book on a single sheet of paper, retaining the original line breaks from the book but simply omitting the illustrations. The second way is to make color copies of the visual images, or physically take a book apart, and display the images in storyboard fashion on a wall in the classroom.

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**FIG. 4.2**

*Picture Book Discussion Self-Evaluation Questions*

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**Answer and give examples for the following questions:**

1. Did group members listen to each other’s ideas?
2. Did members ask each other any questions?
3. Was anyone rude or impolite when talking?
4. Did you change any of your ideas after the discussions?
5. Did you go back and look at the book for ideas?
6. What big ideas did you generate from your readings and discussions?
Before disrupting a picture book, I spend time talking about the book in its entirety, reading it aloud and discussing the book in our usual way. Then I take away the written text and we discuss what we notice in the illustrations alone, and then we focus our attention on the written text alone. By disrupting various picture books, I have been able to help readers approach texts from different perspectives and notice things they didn’t see when we read the story as a whole. I don’t recommend this for every book as some wouldn’t warrant this type of visual analysis. The three books with which I have used this instructional strategy quite successfully are *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak (1963), *Voices in the Park*, by Anthony Browne (2001), and *Black and White*, by David Macauley (1990).

**Interplay Between Written Text and Visual Images**

The written text and images or illustrations contained in a text work in concert in a picture book to tell the story or convey information. Rather than disrupting the text, separating visual images from written text, in this instructional strategy we help readers focus on the relationship between visual images and written text in a picture book.

Research conducted by Perry Nodelman (1988) and Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2000) on the interplay between written text and visual images in picture books has suggested that the types of relationships between text and image fall into three general categories: (1) symmetrical, (2) enhancing, and (3) contradictory. In a symmetrical relationship, the information represented in written text and the visual image is basically the same. Although these two sign systems can never represent exactly the same ideas or concepts, in a symmetrical relationship, the written text and the visual images closely mirror each other. For example, there is picture of a green ball sitting in some grass, and the text says, “The green ball is sitting in the grass.”

The enhancing relationship is the most common in picture books; in this relationship the written text enhances the visual images, and the visual images enhance the written text. Not only is it a green ball sitting in some grass, but it is a tennis ball sitting on a tennis court at Wimbledon. The text may remain the same, but the visual images enhance the meaning of the ball in the grass.

In a contradictory relationship, the visual images contradict what is represented in the written text. Perry Nodelman refers to this relationship as having a sense of irony between text and image. This relationship is not common, but it can be found more prevalently in postmodern picture books, or books that use metafictive devices.

During the lessons focusing on the relationships between written text and visual images, I provide numerous examples of each type of interplay in specially selected picture books. We discuss how the text and the illustrations work together to tell the story. I introduce the three terms, symmetrical, enhancing, and contradictory, and make a class chart so we can refer to these ideas as we continue with our picture book investigations. I want my readers to attend to the written text and the visual images in a picture book as a whole, separately, and in relationship with one another.

**The Hero Cycle**

The third series of lessons addresses the overall structure of a fictional narrative. Since ancient times, storytellers have used what has been referred to as the hero cycle or a
home-away-home structure to construct their tales. *The Odyssey* is one of the oldest examples of this type of narrative. In a basic home-away-home structure, the main character leaves home on an adventure, meets challenges in the world, adapts and learns from these experiences, and returns home a changed, but wiser, person. The hero cycle is very common in children's literature, especially fairy tales. In most fairy tales, the main character, usually a child or a fictional animal, is sent out into the world to run an errand or seek her fortune, meets evil characters and faces other challenges, vanquishes her foes with the help of magical powers or her own cunning, and learns the lesson "There's no place like home."

Getting novice readers to understand the overall structure of a story is a challenge. They generally have been asked to retell or sequence events rather than focus on the overall structure of a story. Using examples where the structure is quite apparent helps readers attend to stories where the structure is more nuanced and complex.

The three learning experiences I have just described occur during our morning read-aloud and discussion, or with the picture book discussion groups during the reading workshop. As students meet to discuss their selections in literature study groups, focusing on novels or picture books, I am continually calling their attention to the elements and structures of literature during read-alouds and invested discussion times. Some days of the week, I introduce a literary concept in a short, explicit lesson and have students engage in their discussion groups almost immediately. I wander around and teach into these groups throughout the reading workshop time. Other days, the learning experiences I provide are longer and require students to engage in common experiences for the whole workshop block of time.

**The Goldfish Bowl**

Before launching literature study groups that focus on contemporary children's and young adult novels, I conduct a learning experience known as the goldfish bowl. The goldfish bowl experience is where I have one group of students discuss a picture book in front of the other students while we pay attention to what they say and take observational notes. This can be a daunting experience for many readers, and I am very careful about which students I select to be part of the featured group in the goldfish bowl. I want the group sharing their ideas to be successful and provide a positive model of literature discussion.

I explain to the students not in the goldfish bowl that they are going to be literary researchers conducting observations to understand how quality literature discussion groups operate. I ask students to bring a pencil and notebook with them so they can take notes about what they observe. I ask the group doing the discussion to try to forget we are even there. I want them to simply talk about the book as they would if they were off in a corner of the room doing their regular literature discussions.

As the featured group discusses the book, the other students and I take notes about what we notice and then we discuss what we have seen. We may add new ideas to our "Helpers and Blockers" chart or talk about the ways each student participated. The goldfish bowl experience gives students an opportunity to watch an actual discussion and make the experience of being in a literature study group more concrete for every student. It is my hope that this experience will help us conduct better discussions as we move into literature study groups.
Launching Literature Study Groups

As the discussions focusing on picture books and poems become more sophisticated, and children begin living up to the expectations we have created for the social interactions in small groups, I begin to think about what novels I will choose for our literature study groups. I am very picky about the books I use for these lit study groups. These books must be wonderfully engaging stories and complex enough to foster extensive discussions. As I suggested earlier, if you want grand conversations, read grand literature.

It is important for me to state that I do not believe that independent reading levels should keep children out of literature study groups. By utilizing books on tape, parents as reading partners, or peer helpers, or reading along with students myself, I am able to help all children understand the stories they select and participate in our discussions. I want any child who desires to be involved in a particular group to have the opportunity to participate. Over the years, students who have not been able to read a book by themselves have made significant contributions to their literature study discussions. It can be challenging finding support for all readers to participate, but it’s the only option I can consider. If teachers decide that a student is too slow a reader to be given a chance to experience a great book, they do a serious disservice to another human being.

I begin by selecting seven or eight books of which I have multiple copies and introducing each book during a book talk with the class. A book talk is a short presentation designed to help students understand what the book is about and entice them into reading it. I may read information from the back cover of the book or from a review I have found or share a few thoughts from my own experience with the book. I post sign-up sheets for every book I will be offering and invite students to sign up for a book of their choice. If this process gets too chaotic, I have students write down their top three choices and I form the groups myself.

I have read every book that I offer for literature study at least once, and I will read it again before the group convenes. In order to facilitate discussions, I read the book along with my students to experience the book once more and prepare for our upcoming discussions. This may be time-consuming, but it better prepares me for our discussions than trying to remember a book I haven’t read in two years. The literature study cycle allows me to have to read only one book at a time, another advantage of this literature study cycle.

I may make certain books available all year so that more than one group can read them. Other books that are not immediately selected can be taken down and new ones offered in their place. Students are not required to sign up for one of the first books, but if they wait too long they will get a visit from their friendly teacher reminding them that membership in literature study groups is expected from every student. I may ask these reluctant readers what books they might like to read and provide several new choices to help get them involved.

Theoretically, the books themselves create the groups. Children see a book that they really want to read and sign up for that book. However, some students will wait and see what books their friends sign up for; I watch for this and talk with students about the importance of selecting a book they really want to read. I give students a few days to look over the books available and make their selections. I choose one group that I feel will be successful as my first literature study group. I want the discussions and literature study experience to go well with the first group so that other groups look
The Literature Study Contract

I agree to read the book __________________________.  
(insert title of book here)

I will finish the book by the time the group decides.

I will take notes in my book log and use them to help me in our discussion of the book.

I will bring my book and book log to class every day!

I will participate in the discussion of the book.

I agree to help other students to better understand the book we have read.

I agree to work together in a group to celebrate finishing the book by creating a presentation for the class.

Date: ________________

Student Signatures:

1. __________________________________________

2. __________________________________________

3. __________________________________________

4. __________________________________________

5. __________________________________________

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forward to their discussions. Once I’ve selected a group, I ask them to read a few pages
of the book overnight to make sure they like the book and can make sense of it. After-
ward, I require members of the group to sign a literature study contract (see Figure 4.3).

Being a member of a literature study group demands commitment, not only to read
the book but to engage in discussions and negotiate and revise meanings with other
members. These responsibilities are not to be taken lightly. It should be an enjoyable
experience, but is an intensive one as well. The contract signals to students the level of
commitment necessary for the group to be successful.

I allow students about two weeks to read the average chapter book. Most children’s
and young adult novels range from 125 to 175 pages. If students read a page every two
minutes, which is slow compared with most proficient intermediate-grade readers,
they will be able to read fifteen pages each night for homework. If they read for thirty
to forty minutes, as required, they will be able to finish the book in approximately seven
to ten days.

Some groups take a bit longer, some shorter. I meet with some groups each day
while we read the book, and for some groups I wait until the book is finished before
we meet. I check up on each group during the reading of their novel to ensure there
are no major misunderstandings, but the bulk of our discussions take place when the
reading is completed. How much teacher support is required depends on the experi-
ence of the readers and the complexity of the book. I don’t want students to become
frustrated or confused at the beginning of a novel because the rest of the book may not
make sense to them and will become more frustrating.

To support my students as they are reading the book, I have created a book log
each student can use to take notes and bring ideas back to the group. I have included
a list of headings for sections of the book log that I have used in the past (see Figure
4.4). I want the book log to support students’ reading and interpretations, not to turn
into a book report. For each heading that I have listed here, I provide about a page or
half a page of space for students to write. When we meet as a group, students are re-
quired to bring their copy of the book and their book log to the discussion.

These book log categories are closely related to the headings and topics that I have
been using on our class discussion charts so that students are familiar with them and
able to respond appropriately in the book logs. I want students to write in their book

---

**Book Log Categories**

- Ideas About the Main Character
- Ideas About the Setting
- Impressions
- Literary Connections
- Personal Connections
- Wonderings
- Notes About the Story Structure
- Big Ideas to Share
logs each time they read, adding notes to help them share ideas in our group discussions. I also provide sticky notes for readers to code pages in much the same way we did during our picture book studies. I want to capture students’ initial reactions with the sticky notes, and their reflections with the book logs.

As our class discussions become more complex, so will the book logs. As students are made aware of other elements and structures of literature, for example, mood, symbolism, tension, irony, and theme, and begin to use these in our discussions, I will expand the book log categories to include them. In other words, the book logs we use in November are less complicated than those we use in April.

Literature Study Discussions

The first day the group meets with me, I begin by asking, “Well, what do you think?” It is my hope that students come to our discussions ready to share ideas and interpretations. Our first discussion is very informal. I invite students to talk about anything that interests them about the story or any connections they made with the book. I listen carefully to their discussions and take notes to reflect on the major points of interest they address. I will use these notes to offer suggestions for where the discussion may go in subsequent meetings.

As a literary docent, my role in these discussions is to help readers notice things they didn’t notice for themselves and to help them experience the work of literature in greater detail than they could on their own. To do so, I offer my ideas later in the discussions and then quite tentatively. I often begin my comments with “I was thinking . . .” or “What I thought before was . . .” I use this language to help children see that I am only one voice in the group, not the voice. I want my expertise to sneak into these discussions, not come charging in through the front door.

The Literature Study Cycle

In The Reading Workshop, I presented my version of the literature study cycle. In the chapter titled “Investigations,” I explained the organizational framework I used to allow me to work with one group at a time so that I could facilitate each literature study group’s discussions. Let me repeat myself: one group at a time. As good a teacher as I think I am, I know I can’t facilitate seven group discussions at any one time successfully. I believe that literature study groups are more successful when a more experienced, capable reader is part of the group, adding to the discussion in subtle ways but not dominating the proceedings. Because of this, I want to be part of each literature study discussion, and so I created the literature study cycle and rotated students through the various phases, allowing only one group to be discussing their book with me at any given time.

The cycle begins with a pool of readers reading independently and in pairs during the reading workshop. Time and procedures for independent reading, literature explorations, and paired reading are established during September and October and can take a variety of forms, as discussed in previous chapters. From this pool of readers, one group is selected to begin the cycle and launch a literature study group. I meet with this group to discuss their selections and responsibilities, and then I let them begin reading the novel. As this group finishes the book and begins the discussion phase, I can launch a second group. I meet with the first group each day and participate in their discussions as the second group prepares for their discussion. When the first group finishes their discussions, they move on to create a presentation for the class, while the second group moves into the discussion phase. I can launch a third group at this time.
if I choose, and the cycle continues. Eventually, six students may be preparing for discussions, six may be in a discussion group with me, and six may be working on their literature presentation. As this cycle progresses, there aren’t as many readers left in the pool as when we began.

The pace at which readers progress through these phases varies. Some literature discussions go on for a week or more, while others seem to finish in a few days. With the literature study cycle, this doesn’t matter. I don’t have to worry about one group finishing before another and needing a new book to read. Also, the membership in the various groups changes based on the next book to be read, not who is in the previous group. Because of the intense nature of the preparation and discussions in these groups, I want students going back to their independent reading and literature explorations between literature study groups. I expect every student to be involved in at least one group per semester, or approximately four or five per year. It is important to understand that literature study groups are only one small, but extremely important, component of the reading workshop.

**Some Final Thoughts on Literature Study Groups**

As reading workshop teachers, we have to have faith in our students that they will be willing to talk about their ideas, generate interpretations, and make connections to their personal experiences. We must also have faith in ourselves as teachers that we will be able respond appropriately to students’ questions, interpretations, and ideas. The more we know about children’s literature and about ourselves as readers, the better prepared we will be to meet these challenges.

As literature study groups evolve in the reading workshop, I require students to make presentations to the class demonstrating what they learned and experienced during their readings and discussions. These presentations take many forms, including skits, posters, models, and oral presentations. Students have used a variety of artistic media to extend their understandings of a work of literature. When this is all finished, we celebrate our hard work by sharing lunch and some specially selected desserts together. After all the hard work that goes into a literature study discussion, dessert seems a just reward.

Some of you may be asking about the assignment of roles during literature study groups. I simply don’t do it. I have written a few articles detailing my decisions not to use role sheets, and you will find these on my website. I don’t think assigning roles supports the kinds of discussions I am trying to conduct. I feel they distract students from the piece of literature.

I respect other educators’ positions on assigning roles and using role sheets, but I feel that students worry about their assigned roles rather than the piece of literature. Roles can reduce literature discussions to a set of procedures, where students blindly follow their roles without thinking about connections, wonderings, and impressions of a text. I think that assigning roles is more of a crutch for teachers, a way to bypass the often difficult work of deeply knowing a piece of literature and supporting students’ unpredictable discussions, than it is a support for students. Usually when literature study groups are not working, it is because of the lack of a solid foundation established during read-alouds and invested discussion strategies. Not all conversations will turn grand, but assigning roles won’t guarantee it will happen, either. Without an extensive knowledge of ourselves as readers and the elements and structures of literature, and
our willingness to listen and to negotiate meanings with other members of a community of readers, conversations will never turn grand.

**Launching Comprehension Strategy Groups**

Along with the introduction of literature study groups, I introduce comprehension strategy groups in November as well. However, before I form comprehension strategy groups, I have already been meeting with individual readers, especially those I have observed struggling with their reading and comprehension, and worked with them on various reading strategies to support their comprehension of text. I don’t wait until November to help readers read, I just wait to form comprehension strategy groups until I know my readers better.

All readers will be included in comprehension strategy groups, based on their needs, interests, and abilities. Readers who struggle to make sense of texts will get more focused attention than readers who are choosing appropriately, making sense of what they read, and monitoring their comprehension. But all readers will take part in these groups.

Early in November, I form comprehension strategy groups based on my continuing assessments of readers. The primary focus of the comprehension strategy groups, hereby referred to as strategy groups, is to demonstrate reading and comprehension strategies to small groups of readers during the act of reading actual texts. Explicit comprehension strategy instruction requires purposeful selection of texts at various levels to provide appropriate amounts of support and challenge for each reader, setting objectives based on readers' needs and abilities, and providing opportunities to apply these strategies in guided practice and independent reading. Although many of the comprehension lessons presented in my book *Lessons in Comprehension: Explicit Instruction in the Reading Workshop* are conducted in whole-group settings, all of the lessons can be used in comprehension strategy groups.

In Chapter 1, I discussed five critical dispositions that readers need to adopt before explicit comprehension strategy instruction is successful. Some of the readers in my strategy groups have not adopted these dispositions; therefore, the focus of my instruction with these students will be these dispositions. For example, if some students are not choosing texts appropriately for independent reading, they may not understand that reading is about making sense. Teaching these struggling readers to simply predict more often or visualize in more detail would be a waste of time. The lessons I conduct with struggling readers may be about selecting appropriate texts, understanding that the goal of reading is to make sense, and helping them be able to talk about what they have read. Once these five dispositions are firmly established, lessons in various comprehension strategies would be appropriate.

In general, the types of lessons I conduct in strategy groups fall into one of the following categories: cognitive, literary, and sociocultural perspectives. Many educational publications regarding comprehension strategy instruction focus almost entirely on the cognitive aspects of comprehension. The “seven magnificent strategies” of summarizing, visualizing, predicting, inferring, determining importance, monitoring comprehension, and asking questions seem to dominate most discussions on comprehension instruction. These cognitively based comprehension strategies are touted as based on scientific reading research, which generally means they have been proven to raise test scores. However, reducing our instruction to only these strategies, limiting one's
definition of comprehension to finding meaning in the text (see the section “Literary Theory 101” in Chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of this distinction), may do a disservice to our struggling readers. What I am trying to point out here is that comprehension is about more than discovering the main idea that resides a priori in a text, and reading is as much a social process as it is a cognitive operation. Because of this orientation, limiting my readers to the seven magnificent strategies may be dangerous.

In addition to the seven scientifically based cognitive strategies I have mentioned, readers need to be able to empathize with a character, question the authority of an author, and understand how various texts position readers according to race, gender, and social class. Readers need to be able to deal with the ambiguity inherent in a work of literature, remaining open to multiple perspectives and interpretations. These literary and sociocultural strategies are worth demonstrating as well, even if their research base isn’t recognized by the powers in charge at the moment.

**Some Final Thoughts on Comprehension Strategy Groups**

I need to be careful that the comprehension strategies I demonstrate and teach do not become an end in themselves. That is, getting good at predicting does not necessarily mean you are understanding what you are reading. The instruction I provide in my strategy groups must always demonstrate how various comprehension strategies are used to make sense of texts. Our goal is comprehension; therefore, our instruction must always be in service of meaning.

**Featured Lesson in Comprehension for November: Drawing Inferences**

Readers need to understand that meaning comes from sources inside and outside the text as they are reading. The process of using sources outside the literal text is often referred to as drawing inferences. In this series of lessons, I want readers to understand that when they read, they attend to the text, the experiences they have had in their lives, and their knowledge of the world outside the text in order to understand what they are reading. It is not just attention to the text itself that supports comprehension. To conduct this series of lessons, I draw on some Impressions-Connections-Wonderings that we previously created during an author study or literature discussion.

I display the ICW charts we created earlier in the year on the wall and ask students to closely examine them. I ask students to explain whether an entry referred to information in the text, info from an individual’s experiences, or someone’s knowledge of the world. I use three symbols: a book, for textual sources; a brain, for individuals’ experiences; and a globe, for world experiences. I want to call readers’ attention to the various ways we connect and respond to texts and the sources of information we use to construct meaning.

Another way to address this issue is to take some reading passages from a standardized test and ask students to tell me, considering only the types of questions being asked, whether the answers would be found in the text itself, could be constructed from a blend of textual information and readers’ experiences, or should be answered by thinking about the world outside of the text. Questions that ask for literal details can
be answered by looking directly in the text. Questions that ask you to take information from the text and draw conclusions or inferences require readers to attend to the text and infer from their thinking what an appropriate answer would be. Questions about what kind of genre the passage represents require readers to think outside the text about what they know about literature in general and the text itself. If readers can identify the different sources of information needed to answer these questions, maybe they will get better at answering these questions.

Using either strategy, we examine the types of questions or the entries on ICW charts to discuss the three sources of information available to readers. The goal of these lessons is to help readers understand how we draw on sources outside the text in order to comprehend the text.

**Literacy Assessments**

**Expanding Reading Response Notebooks**

Even though students have become more comfortable with the format used for their reading response notebooks, I introduce them to a new format designed to expand their response repertoires in their independent reading time. The response notebook format I introduce in November is directly related to the Impressions-Connections-Wonderings charts we have been using during our read-aloud discussions. The new format requires students to react to the text, discuss the connections they make to other texts and their experiences, and ask questions as they read (see Figure 4.5). I want students' homework to be related to what we do in our literature discussions in class.

For students to be successful with this new format for their response notebooks, I must demonstrate how to respond on these forms the same way I introduced the first version of the response notebook. I provide students with an outline of my expectations for this new notebook form, and send a note to parents so they are made aware of what is expected of their children for homework (see Figure 4.6).

**Literature Study Discussion Notes**

With the introduction of literature study groups, I begin to collect information about the ways in which students participate in these discussions. Using a literature discussion notes form (see Figure 4.7), I keep track of the ideas each member of the group shares and the elements and structures of literature that he is attending to. At the bottom of the assessment form, I list all of the elements, structures, and other literary devices I have been introducing during read-alouds and invested discussions to remind myself what to listen for.

**Literature Study Group Self-Evaluation**

I want students to be involved in assessing their own performance and growth as readers. One of the assessments I introduce during November is a self-evaluation focusing on members' preparation, participation, and behavior in the literature study group. Each member fills out one of these forms after finishing a literature study group (see Figure 4.8). I read through these self-evaluations and use them to understand how students are perceiving the literature study group format and expectations.
Reading Response Notebook

Title: ____________________________________________________________

Author: ____________________________________________________________

Genre: ____________________________________________________________

Impressions: ________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Personal Connections: ________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Literary Connections: ________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Wonderings: _________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Additional Ideas: _____________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________
Students will include the following in their notebooks:

**Title:** Write the title of the book.

**Author:** Write the author of the book.

**Genre:** Write the genre this book best fits into.

**Impressions:** Write about any ideas you generate when you are reading, things you notice, images or pictures that come to your mind when you read.

**Personal connections:** Write about any connections to your own life, or to things that have happened to you.

**Literary connections:** Write about any connections you make to any other books, magazines, movies, plays, or other things you have read or seen.

**Wonderings:** Write about questions that arise when you are reading.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Members</th>
<th>Comments Offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

metaphors – mood – point of view – episodes – tension/resolution

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Literature Study Self-Evaluation

Name: ____________________________________________________________
Date: _____________________________________________________________
Book Read: _______________________________________________________

1. What did I do to help my group work together?

2. Did I use my book and book log to discuss the book?

3. What ideas did I share with my group?

4. How did I help others understand the book we read?

5. What did I do to help with the presentation?

6. Anything else that should be mentioned?

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Connections to the Writing Workshop

Units of study focusing on particular authors, genres, what it means to be a writer, and the writer’s notebook have helped organize the writing curriculum. As expectations rise in the reading workshop, so do the expectations we hold for our students as writers.

As we spend more time studying an author or illustrator in the reading workshop, I also focus on particular authors in the writing workshop. We use authors as mentors throughout the writing workshop, encouraging students to extend their study of a particular author to examining that author’s writing style and the craft elements he or she uses to construct works of literature. In the reading workshop, we teach students to read like proficient readers; in the writing workshop, we teach them to read like talented writers.

Reading like a writer focuses the reader’s attention on elements and structures from a different perspective. Not only do we want students to be able to read and understand personal narratives, but we want students to write personal narratives of their own, drawing on the craft and techniques of quality authors. Reading books about writers, using authors as writing mentors, using the literature we read to stimulate ideas for our writing, understanding the characteristics and boundaries of genres, and investigating the craft and techniques of quality writing are just a few of the connections between the reading and the writing workshops.

Things I Hope to See, Hear, and Have Established by Month’s End

1. Students are using and discussing the reading comprehension strategies I have been teaching. These strategies are not an end in themselves; they need to be used to make sense of what is being read.

2. Instruction is conducted in a variety of settings and groupings, including whole group, small groups, pairs, and individuals.

3. Language arts standards are being read and used to help guide curricular decisions. Standards are one part of the negotiation process when developing reading instruction experiences.

4. I want to have completed at least one literature study group by the end of the month. So much time has gone into getting them set up and started that I want to have a few students experience the full literature study cycle by the end of the month. It is my hope that the completion of one group, and their presentation and enthusiasm, will entice others to participate in literature study groups.

5. I am using think-alouds to demonstrate my own reading strategies to my students. Finding language to explain what happens in our minds when we read a text is a challenge. I hope to have some common language established for describing various strategies by the end of the month.

6. Students are beginning to see me as only one voice in our literature discussions, not the voice. I want students to feel comfortable telling each other what they
think. My favorites are just that, mine. My students must find their own favorites for themselves.

7. I have been able to share my own reading life with my students, and they have begun to share their reading lives with me. In becoming a community of readers, we have to share what we read, why we read, where we read, and when we find time to read. Inviting students to read and experience literature is a noble gesture, but it’s the acceptance of those invitations that makes the reading workshop successful.

Ideas for Further Reflection

By the time we get literature study and comprehension strategy groups up and running, we tend to focus on what students are doing, not just what we are teaching. I recommend tape-recording a literature study or comprehension strategy group every once in a while, maybe one day a month, to listen to your role in these groups. I take these tapes home and listen to them, jotting down a few notes for myself about what I notice about my participation in the group.

Closing Thoughts

It is important to keep in mind that literature study and comprehension strategy groups are simply two components in the reading workshop. They may be important components, ones that we spend a great deal of time working on, but they are only two of the many components in a reading workshop. Their success depends on the foundation and procedures that have been established in October and September. The more we support readers’ interpretations and sharing of ideas in our whole-group discussions and read-alouds, the more of these behaviors will trickle down into independent reading and small-group discussions.
Exploring Postmodern Picture Books

Introduction

In November, I wanted students to investigate a selection of picture books that contained postmodern or metafictive elements. Postmodern picture books, with nonlinear structures, surrealistic images, and self-referential text, challenge readers to interact with the written text, illustrations, and elements of design and ask readers to play an active role in the construction of meaning during the reading process.

Focus

In this six-week unit, I introduced students to twenty picture books that contained postmodern or metafictive elements. Postmodern picture books:
❖ expand the conventional boundaries of picture book formats
❖ contain nonlinear structures and story lines
❖ contain new or unfamiliar structures
❖ offer multiple perspectives or realities to the reader
❖ contain elements of ambiguity or irony
❖ contain surrealistic images

Goals and Objectives

❖ attend to textual and visual elements to construct meaning
❖ negotiate meaning within a social context
❖ introduce students to a variety of reading strategies to enhance their comprehension of postmodern texts
❖ learn to navigate postmodern texts

Opening Ceremonies

The amount of time needed for reading and discussion of these books was greater than in other units; therefore, we briefly shared what was happening in our lives, adding to the expedition wall, and immediately began reading the series of postmodern picture books.

For this unit we relied heavily on a walking journal, providing students with opportunities to respond to literature and one another’s ideas. We called it the “weird book walking journal.” To launch the walking journal, I recorded my thoughts on Voices in the Park (Browne 2001) and passed it along. Each student was then required to make an entry at least once a week. I read the journal each night and then shared ideas with the students during the next day’s discussion. I used the journal as an impetus for reading lessons, an assessment tool, and a place for students to negotiate ideas and interpretations.
Cornerstone Text
The cornerstone text for this unit was *Voices in the Park*, by Anthony Browne. It is a picture book telling the story of an outing to a park from four perspectives. Anthony Browne tells this story through four distinct voices: a mother and her son and a father and his daughter. The voices are presented separately, yet they are intricately connected to tell the story of how class, prejudice, control, hope, and friendship determine the perspectives of four different people. Anthony Browne uses detailed illustrations to not only support the story structure but extend it as well. *Voices in the Park* contains a nonlinear text structure, multiple perspectives, ambiguity, a sarcastic tone, surrealistic imagery, unique treatment of time, hidden images, symbolism, antiauthoritarian language, and a juxtaposition of unrelated visual images.

Launching the Unit of Study
To launch this unit, I began by thinking aloud to introduce students to the idea of navigating through postmodern or nonlinear texts. Students were familiar with some of the titles, yet they weren’t used to attending closely to both visual and textual clues to make meaning. Before I presented the first book to the class, I read and responded to the text on my own. I paid close attention to how I navigated through the text so I could call students’ attention to features and structures within the text.

Next, I conducted a think-aloud with *Voices in the Park* in front of the class. I described how I was attending to various features of the text and the interplay between the text and the illustrations. In addition, students offered ideas while I read. After I read the text aloud, we discussed the book at length. We created an ICW chart and continued our discussion about *Voices in the Park*. During their independent reading, students read some of the postmodern picture books I had provided.

On the second day, we read *Voices in the Park* again. This time, I used different-color markers to highlight the progression of my students’ thoughts. The day before, some students investigated the hidden and unrelated images in the book and had ideas to share. After reading it aloud, we passed the book around and shared our observations of the illustrations with each other. We added these ideas to the ICW chart.

On the third day, I introduced students to an invested discussion strategy called disrupting the text. The purpose of the strategy is to separate the text from the illustrations to investigate each in turn. Students were attending to the illustrations more than the textual features during our discussions. Because Browne uses his illustrations to expand the story, I wanted to provide an opportunity to investigate the illustrations by themselves.

First, I made a colored copy of each illustration from the book, removing the text. Then I placed the color copies of the illustrations up on a board in storyboard fashion. I asked students to make observations in their literature response logs. This was a full-hour activity; students worked in pairs and rotated around the illustrations. As students discussed the illustrations, I made notes on the conversations that were taking place and the kinds of strategies students were using to make sense of the illustrations. I eventually discussed my observations with the students.
On the fourth day, students attended to the text only. I typed the text on a couple of sheets of paper and made copies for every student. I had students pair up and I gave them time to investigate how the textual features added to their interpretations.

The next day we read the book in a readers’ theatre performance, using four student volunteers who had taken the text home to practice their voices. They used their voices and intonation to represent their interpretations of the text. Students read their parts as if they were the characters speaking.

Each day’s discussion was different. By attending to the complete book, then just the illustrations, then the text alone, I invited students to interpret the book from a variety of perspectives. By disrupting the text, students attended to various components of the book to varying degrees.

Explicit Instruction

After reading the cornerstone text, I read a new postmodern picture book each day for the next four weeks, completing ICW charts and making connections across various titles. I began by reading and responding to each of the postmodern picture books myself prior to reading it aloud to students. I made notes and considered what would be an appropriate selection to continue and extend the discussion from the previous day. With each new book, I determined what would be an appropriate strategy or comprehension lesson to present. I have included two examples in the following sections.

Attending to the Front Matter Authors and illustrators of postmodern picture books use every part of the book to convey meaning. As I became familiar with these books myself, I realized how much information the authors and illustrators presented in the front matter, for example, the book jacket, the dedication, the title page, and the end pages. During my read-alouds, I noticed I was not attending to all of these features and that most of my students were skipping over the front matter as well. My own understanding of these texts was greatly enhanced once I began attending to these peritextual features.

When I noticed this in my own reading, I had already read eight of the twenty books aloud with my students. So, we divided into eight groups and students went back and looked at all the front-matter features in the books we had read, and then we shared any new information or ideas generated from this investigation. Students made connections between David Macaulay and David Wiesner based on their dedications, and we used the front matter to help us understand the book *Black and White* (Macaulay 1990) a little better. Attending to the front matter became an important reading strategy for all of us. I began to observe students attending to these features in many other kinds of texts even after the unit had concluded.

Inferring It became apparent that teaching the strategy of inferring would be very important, as postmodern picture book authors and illustrators leave many gaps for the reader to fill in, requiring readers to infer meaning from the text and their experiences.
I used this opportunity to discuss, model, and practice with students inferential thinking as a reading strategy. I used the ICW charts of many of the texts we’d previously read and had students discuss how they had already used the strategy in many places. We discussed how we came to various ideas and the differences between literal recall and inferential thinking.

I modeled how a reader fills in the gaps with background knowledge, with information from the text, and with ideas about the world around her. In their reading response logs I asked students to make special note of each time they inferred meaning. I also asked them to analyze what knowledge they used to fill in the gaps and to substantiate their inferences with evidence from the text or personal experiences.

Many of the reading lessons I presented were spontaneously created, relating directly to what the students were attempting to do with these texts. I met with small groups and individuals as they worked their way through these texts so I could scaffold their reading practices.

**Workshop Experiences**

During workshop time, students were invited to reread any book that I had read aloud, research information about any text, author, or illustrator, record ideas in the walking journal, or read and discuss a different postmodern picture book independently, in pairs, or in small groups.

Many students formed their own groups to investigate particular authors, illustrators, and texts. For example, one group spent four days with the book *Bright and Early Thursday Evening*, by Audrey Wood (1996), even looking through her website for further clues to the text. Some students investigated how Anthony Browne created symmetrical designs in many of his illustrations. Other groups became intrigued with various illustrations and researched how to use visual clues to interpret picture books. Students soon realized that their understanding was enhanced by these connections to the authors, and thus more students began to investigate as well. Students researched, responded in their reading response logs and then shared with the group at the end or beginning of each reading workshop. These groups were organized by students based on their interests and interpretive repertoires.

To tie the unit together we decided to create a comparison chart. We began by discussing possible categories to compare across titles. The categories we selected were ambiguity, sarcastic tone, treatment of time, hidden images, surrealistic imagery, multiple perspectives, characters, setting, language, and symbolism. Once the chart was created, students formed small groups and proposed five books they would be interested in comparing and then explained why they chose those books. Students completed their comparison charts and shared their interpretations and understandings of postmodern elements with their classmates, their families, and our principal.
As students researched particular authors and books, they discovered tips on how to write their own postmodern picture books. For example, Audrey Wood provided tips on her website about how to create a tangled tale. Students requested to write their own postmodern pieces as a culminating project. Students worked alone or in pairs and chose one of the books in the unit to be their mentor piece. Students created tangled tales like Audrey and Don Wood’s, circular stories like David Macaulay’s, and multiple-perspective pieces like Anthony Browne’s. Students realized how difficult it was to create these stories and came to a greater appreciation for the authors and their work.

This unit was exciting and challenging for all of us. Many students enjoyed the texts, while others found them weird and too difficult to interpret. The textual and visual features of these picture books required readers to interact with these texts in ways that students were unaccustomed to. I found myself learning about how to read and interpret these texts along with my students. We investigated the nuances of postmodern texts and developed a passion for them. We developed a greater appreciation for the writing and artistic talents of these authors and illustrators as we took an in-depth look at the techniques and elements employed in creating postmodern picture books.
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