

Reading For Fun and Profit

by **William S. McCarter**

from *Inquiry*, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 2005, 41-45

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Abstract

McCarter shares the value of using humor and everyday documents in the teaching of reading analysis and inferences in the developmental English classroom.

In 1988, I taught a remedial, senior English class at a rural high school. None of the students intended to go to college. Instead, they all planned to be homemakers, farmers, or watermen. On the second day of class, I assigned a short story from our cumbersome literature book. The classroom was quiet for a moment, and then one of the boys spoke up. "I don't want to read any stupid story," he said. "I'm gonna drive a tractor. What's that got to do with made-up people in a made-up story?" I remember his words so clearly because it was such a defining question, and I have spent much of the last 16 years working on the answer.

I now teach developmental reading and writing at a community college, but a similar problem still exists: many of my students do not read for pleasure and, even more significantly, do not see any tangible link between reading literature and living their lives. So one sensible requirement of my classroom is to make that connection and continue to answer that young man's enduring question.

Classroom practices are often a matter of personalities and style, so I generally dislike educational articles that resemble how-to recipes. But in this particular situation, the basic concept is better illustrated by what I do, rather than a discussion of the cognitive theories behind those practices. Also, the idea is so simple that it would only fill a bumper sticker: "Keep It Real."

Making the Point with Humor

I begin most classes with either a cartoon or a short, written joke. The cartoons serve multiple functions and can be either editorial or whimsical. We read the cartoons by carefully and systematically examining both the pictorial and the language clues. We divide the answers to the clues into two categories: story and message. Then we stop and reexamine what we have done and dissect the process of thinking, looking, fitting, and rethinking. I repeatedly point out (ad nauseam?) that this jigsaw-puzzle process is the essence of reading.

I emphasize this analogy because one of the most problematic hurdles for many readers, particularly struggling readers, is their tendency to skip over words, sentences, and/or whole paragraphs that they do not understand. Quite simply, they have not acquired the essential habit of thinking and rethinking, or even the more mundane practice of actually stopping to look up a mysterious word. The cartoon becomes an exaggerated model of the reading process and provides a tangible, pictorial example of what students should do when encountering problematic language. And each day as we go through this brief process, I remind the students that our purpose, much like that of the cartoon itself, is to caricature the reading process – to look at its parts, to create the habit of thoughtful analysis and reflection, and to break the habit of speeding up through the very places where we need to slow down.

The cartoons also highlight the problem or opportunity of cultural literacy. We discuss the messy core of information (literature, history, current events, etc.) on which the cartoons and most communication are dependent. I compare this eclectic mix to the shared information that facilitates communication between friends and family. The lesson becomes very simple. Reading sophistication depends, in part, on the ability to decode the reference. Creating that pool of core reference information is not some kind of trick or technique; it simply requires students to

read and pay attention. It is a cumulative process, maybe even exponential: the more they read and pay attention, the better they get at reading and paying attention.

I also use written jokes, which serve a different purpose. Most of my students resist the idea of inferential understanding or “reading between the lines,” which they think is an English-teacher trick and a useless word game played with boring stories and even more boring poetry. The joke is an excellent cure. A good example and one of my favorites is the Parrot Joke. It involves a man who has become the owner of a talking, evil-tempered parrot. The parrot is so abusive and ugly that the man, in a sudden fit of anger, throws the bird in his freezer. He quickly feels guilty and opens the door. Out walks a somber, reformed parrot who says, “I’m sorry for my behavior. May I ask what the chicken did?”

The students laugh. I play dumb and ask, “What is so funny? What happened?” Of course, the students (now teachers) want to explain and go into rather elaborate descriptions of the parrot encountering the frozen carcass of a plucked, gutted, headless chicken. I can then ask their source for all these colorful details, and suddenly “reading between the lines” is not quite so academic, boring, or irrelevant. It is an excellent way to start a reading class, as it takes only a few minutes and helps to remove one barrier while providing a tightly focused beginning to the messy, sometimes unfocused process of reading instruction.

Teaching with Real Documents

In addition to jokes and cartoons, I also incorporate two real-world documents as part of my required reading. The first of these non-traditional texts is a copy of my auto insurance policy. I began this practice many years ago when my garage burned down and a careful reading of my homeowners’ policy saved me thousands of dollars. At the beginning of the semester, I tell this story to my students. The money gets their attention. Then I give each student a copy of an auto insurance policy. (I use the auto policy because many of my students are not homeowners, but most of them do own cars.) I also pass out a copy of Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess.”

First, we discuss the poem and figure out that the psychotically jealous Duke has had his smiling wife murdered and is now shopping for a new one. We are able to unravel her sad fate by pausing and carefully examining the meaning of difficult words, phrases and sentences – exactly like we do with a cartoon. After that, we turn to the insurance policy.

I ask a few scenario questions involving some accident or loss, and then I get the students to look through the policy for an answer. Initially, they rarely succeed because insurance policies are suspiciously difficult and probably intentionally inaccessible. (Like some literature?) So I help them. We answer these practical questions by deciphering the meaning of difficult words, phrases and sentences. Most importantly, we do this in the same way that we unraveled the mystery of the evil Duke. At some point, I hold up a copy of the insurance policy and a copy of the poem, and we talk about how the process of understanding either is exactly the same. Although a simple gesture, it can be a giant leap (of small steps?) for my students.

Throughout the semester, we repeat this process, at random intervals, in conjunction with our traditional literary readings. In this way, hopefully, the idea of reading as a life-skill becomes more real and more clearly useful. If we can read Robert Browning, then we can read an insurance policy, a rental agreement, or anything else. I beat this drum loudly and often. I also ask the following question: “When I went to see my insurance adjuster and had carefully read my policy, who had the power?”

Like a dutiful Greek chorus, they answer in unison, “You did.”

Then I ask, “If I had not read or understood the policy, who had the power?” -- and they knowingly answer, “The insurance man.”

It’s a great lesson. So, for the rest of the semester, whenever we are word-wrestling with a more typical text, I pull out the insurance policy, write the dollar amount of my settlement on the board, and we ground ourselves with a dose of reading reality.

My second transactional text is an employment questionnaire that was used by a large retail department store to screen applicants for interview selection. It contains 90 deceptively simple statements that have to be marked true or false. For example, the first statement is “You usually try to work hard and fast to get done with a job.” Initially, most of the students do not read very carefully and quickly mark “true.” However, if I question and push just a little,

somebody will usually note the phrase “to get done with” and suggest that those particular words may not indicate the best attitude or the best way to approach a task. Usually, a thoughtful language discussion can then be provoked.

The second statement is “When you make a mistake, it’s natural for you to try to cover it up.” Again, the hasty response is “true,” but generally a few students are already catching on, and someone will point out that it might be natural for a person to be embarrassed by a mistake, but “to try to cover it up” would not be desirable in a potential employee. The application contains dozens of similar statements. They become a stealthy, practical tool for teaching the careful examination and contemplation of language in the same way we examine the language in a work of literature.

At this point, we stop and talk about how it is important to answer the questions truthfully, but to do that, it is first essential to understand them. I tell the students that some of the questions are designed to detect if applicants are intentionally slanting their responses. I point out statement number 13: “You have absolutely no fear of speaking in front of a large group.” The human resources person who originally gave me the questionnaire suggested that everyone has some concern or nervousness about speaking in front of a large audience. Accepting her premise, we examine the question for language clues. Usually it takes less than a minute for one of my wily readers to suggest that the words “absolutely no” are important and probably make it difficult for anyone to truthfully mark “true.” Then we go off in search of other such language.

After we have discussed the first 10 or 15 statements and have begun to understand the document, I’ll send the students home with the following assignment: I ask them to identify any trends or thematic grouping of the statements. We start the next class meeting by returning to “My Last Duchess” and asking if there were any recurring elements that showed up in the poem. Usually, students will point out the Duchess’s smiling happy nature and the Duke’s pathological jealousy. We discuss how their importance, to some degree, is indicated by their repetition. Then we shift our focus back to the questionnaire and our assignment to identify any clear trends there.

Initially, the students are tentative and uncertain in their judgments. So I help things along by pointing out statement number 23, which reads, “When driving in a 30 m.p.h. zone, it is a good idea to go just under 30 to be on the safe side.” We discuss the implications of this statement and can generally agree that it stresses safety and caution. So I send them off again to look for statements that stress safety and caution.

There are many, and we usually have an animated discussion during the following class about the statements they have selected and about the obvious implication that this employer has an interest in identifying cautious and safe applicants. With this expertise in our pockets, the students are more able to identify the other two clear themes in the questionnaire: an interest in an applicant’s history of emotional stability and his or her tendencies toward bigotry or racism, both of which become a rich source of discussion about the company’s motivations and about how an attentive, reading-savvy applicant might use this information.

Of course, the larger lessons are that reading a poem or applying for a job requires the same practical reading skills and that a literature anthology is no less useful than a phone book.

Making the Academic Real

It is important to stress that the above practices are merely ancillary to the primary texts and only require a small part of our instructional time. However, they are excellent tools for warming up cold brains or for employing the last few minutes of what might otherwise be underutilized class time. But most importantly these activities help connect the academic, sometimes esoteric concerns inside the classroom to the practical business outside in what my students like to call “the real world.”

My credentials as an educational researcher may be suspect, but I do ask the students to complete my own evaluation with specific questions about course content and practices. They are also required to take a standardized placement test at the end of the semester. Both assessments indicate that the above practices are reasonably effective. But, as of this writing, I have no quantitative method in place to delineate and measure specific connections.

Of course, I recognize that no educational tool or technique is a rosy panacea of unqualified success, but my own anecdotal observations suggests that the simple things I have described work pretty well to link, among other things, literature-reading and tractor-driving.

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Note: Documents similar to the ones I use can be easily acquired by checking your own file cabinet or by asking local businesses (or, better still, by having your students ask). Also, I would be glad to share copies of mine. You may contact me at wmccarter@es.vccs.edu .

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