# Teaching Practice: A Perspective on Inter-text and Prior Knowledge

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The use of teaching practices that involve intertextual relationship discovery in today's elementary classrooms is increasingly essential to the success of young learners of reading. Teachers must constantly strive to expand their perspective of how to incorporate the dialogue included in prior knowledge assessment. Teachers must also consider how the use of fiction and non-fiction text relate to each other when building young learner reader comprehension skills. This paper first briefly examines the premise of a universal approach to including prior knowledge as intertext. It then provides a case example of how prior knowledge is integral to an intertextual teaching practice.

## Introduction

Teachers have a great deal of information to consider when developing units of learning that cope with the issue of literacy and teaching students who are learning to read. Understanding the process of learning necessarily involves knowing the roots of developed knowledge in young students' minds. Prior knowledge information is relevant for the development of new knowledge. Many educators converse about the possibility of a universal method of teaching becoming a reality and have decided that the possibility does not exist. The diversity of a contemporary student population varies, but not the fact that each and every student has a brain that functions similarly. There are several tangible attributes that vary among students: gender, socioeconomic, at-risk status, and other special needs students. The brain and its place in the considerations given to learning; therefore, is indeed universal. A broad approach to using teaching materials includes an information narrowing assumption; the probability that a universal teaching method is subject to an ongoing analytical debate goes beyond the scope of real world solutions, i.e. practical application in the classroom.

This informational paper covers several pieces of evidence that may be taken at face value or potentially rearranged to suit the purpose of conveying urgent importance to intertextual practices of teaching reading. Also, the positive effects of combining informational and fictional texts are to create a rich environment for any learning reader while integrating effective models for learning including assessing prior knowledge as text.

## Building the Bridge for Intertextual Teaching Practices

There are numerous qualities that an effective teacher must have. According to Blair, Nichols, & William (2007) there is a set of common features associated with effective teaching (p.433) and are as follows:

1. Assessing students' strengths and weaknesses.
2. Structuring reading activities around an explicit instructional format.
3. Providing students opportunities to learn and apply skills and strategies in authentic reading tasks.
4. Ensuring that students attend to the learning tasks.
5. Believing in ones teaching abilities and expecting students to be successful.

It is apparent that building units of instruction to meet the relevant criteria of authentic learning units are strengthened by incorporating multiple levels of text, including prior knowledge as text, and fiction during non-fiction components of texts. As listed above, quality number 1 directly implies the need for differentiated instructional methods coupled with explicit instruction. In order to be effective, teachers of reading must come closer to the realization of the necessity of implementing well rounded assessment practices essential to measuring strengths and weaknesses. However, it is crucial to the success of teaching and learning that teachers understand the importance of the differences between fiction and non-fiction texts and their relationship to prior knowledge.

To explain, fictional text is primarily imaginative literature that may or may not be based on actual events or characters. Much of this kind of text uses literary devices to embellish meaning. One example is the multitude of Cinderella and other traditional, popular fairy/folk tale stories. These type of stories vary in intended subconscious meanings from the possibility of a fairly tale that comes true or the more adult perspective of exposing other academic issues, e.g. gender in children's literature books, stereotypes, racial and ethnic patterns of behavior. It is useful to have such a broad range of analysis of carefully chosen appropriate text. Appropriate texts allows reading teachers to continue the process of developing content comprehension as the student progresses toward applying fictional representations to non-fiction situations in his/her own life. Therefore, intertextual relationships become authentic relationships.

Non-fictional text, on the other hand, can come from more than one venue. Informational text that simply conveys a process of executing a particular task (recipe book) or explains an observed truth and how a specific fact is derived, e.g. a science or math text book, is one of the main forms that a non-fiction text can yield. Another form that non- fiction text can be represented by is the factual autobiographical texts that shares real life experiences with the reader.

**Case Example**

The following narrative is an excellent, detailed example of how assessing prior knowledge was missing from a small group second grade reading lesson. As a result, this omission of textual exchange negatively impacted the outcome of the lesson. In addition, this example will sufficiently clarify how prior knowledge is related directly to text and an important block of text that should not be omitted before any lessons are taught in diverse public school classrooms, especially reading lessons involving at risk children.

Mr. K was behind in his instruction. As in many cases of teaching a second grade class, the distracters that created this lapse in his timing of teaching a reading lesson prompted Mr. K to proceed with his planned reading lesson without considering assessing the students' prior knowledge. It is obvious that the intertextual relationship that students were expected to acquire was greatly effected in a negative manner. The exercise was to go through a picture walk through of the children's fiction book titled The car washing street written by Denise Lewis Patrick. He thought to himself, "I need to get caught up" so Mr. K proceeded with the lesson.

He told the students that "this is a delightful story about an urban family who live in a town house in large city." Mr. K emphasizes the main points of the story by describing how "it was a bright and beautiful Saturday morning. A father came out of his town home, hooked up a water hose and filled a bucket with water and soap." Mr. K continued the story, "then, as the neighbors looked out their windows and saw this event, little by little, all of the neighbors came out and had a wonderful time hooking up their hoses and washing their cars." It seemed to Mr. K that the story was easy to follow, but, to his dismay, he was surprised that the students did not grasp several of the informational elements, i.e. the water hose, the water faucet, and washing a car by hand. The only way the students had seen cars washed was by an automated machine at the local car wash. Mr. K was shocked that every student in this group had no understanding of how people washed their cars before automated car washes. The children had never seen the simple process of someone watering a garden with a water hose. At that point Mr. K, who had daily been consistent assessing prior knowledge, suddenly realized the socio-economic gap, related to text, between him and the students. This is often the case in many classrooms.

While reading the book, the students were stumbling over the well-known words in the book. Mr. K observed that their reading was disjointed, bumpy, and students were making multiple mistakes. This did not follow the pattern of classroom performance of previous textual exercises. Mr. K skipped his pre-reading strategy and realized he had made a big mistake. The students were confused and unable to make the intertextual relationship between the pictures and the text, connecting to individual prior knowledge. "Primary school teachers pedagogical content knowledge" (PCK) (2011) is a contributing factor to the consistent analysis of prior knowledge reactions concerning new in class material used for intertextual exercises. (Rohaan et al pg. 293)

## Facilitating Comprehension

It is of the utmost importance to facilitate the development of comprehension for young learners of reading. Early exposure to as many elements of reading strategies and skills is crucial for building life long motivation and proficient ability for reading any level of text. The National Reading Panel (NRP) established by the Congress of the United States government found that scientific evidence-based research revealed five areas of reading instruction which can be observed to meter learning improvement where reading comprehension is concerned (Cassidy, 2010, p. 644).

Two of these five areas from the NRP study are vocabulary and comprehension. They relate directly to supporting the conclusion asserted in this essay that intertextual reading instruction requires a beginning approach to a universal process of teaching and learning. There are several specific areas of information that must be included to assert this position. Pattee (2008) asserts that during the stages of development, "children's cognitive growth and development affects how young people conceive of information and of their own information needs" (p. 30). Background (prior knowledge) information for students remains a universally innate component of any students' set of learning abilities. The way to ensure that prior knowledge remains a vital part of the larger scope of how to facilitate comprehension must necessarily include the growth of knowledge, based on the variety of definitions that vocabulary may sometimes have relative to the context of text in which it is used.

Soalt (2005) proposes that many research projects have shown "that comprehension improves when students have appropriate background knowledge that they can connect to the text they are reading" (p. 680). Often, teachers can be hard pressed to motivate students to activate the knowledge students already have in their individual backgrounds to better understand

the text. The ultimate goal is to get young students more familiar with activating their own prior knowledge. By accomplishing this task, existing knowledge that each student has, relevant for comprehension of read text, is no longer hidden. The connection of prior knowledge becomes an interwoven part of the new and emerging textual interaction between old and new knowledge. In order for the student to retrieve the knowledge or at minimum remove it from the dormant position, it appears that finding the correct motivation for the student who is struggling with relating background knowledge to text may depend on intertextual exposure. Soalt believes "it is important for teachers to think about not only how to activate students' background knowledge prior to reading new texts but also how to supply knowledge for students who may be unfamiliar with a topic discussed in a particular text" (2005, p. 680). In support of this part of the process of teaching reading, it makes a great deal of sense to assess prior knowledge as informational text in preparation for reading and discerning text written from the standpoint of fiction.

## Conclusion

The term intertextuality was coined in 1984 by the renowned literary theorist Kristeva. To adhere to a strict definition of this sort may seem a bit too abstract, but, for educators, may help broaden the perspective of how the practices are used at many different content levels of learning ability not just young learners. P. Harris, et al, explicates the beginning definition as:

> a notion that is used to signify the multiple ways in which a literary text echoes or is linked to other texts, whether by open or covert citations and allusions, or by the assimilation of the formal and substantive features of an earlier text [prior knowledge], or simply by the participation in a common stock of literary and linguistic procedures and

conventions. (Harris & Trezise, 1997, p. 33)

Harris and Trezise's (1997) definition is not the most practical way to define the kind of intertextual content needed for K-6. However, the context of using multiple texts, including prior knowledge, comes from different ends of the reading spectrum, i.e. fiction and non-fiction, used to assist students with reading comprehension. The original definition does smack philosophical and leans more toward concept identification. Still, the basic tenets are derived properly from this abstract representation of defining the intertextual process of learning. It is safe to assume that while attempting a meta-analysis of relationships between fiction and non-fiction text, it may be easy to lose sight of the basic tenets of being an effective teacher. By using appropriate texts and including prior knowledge assessments results, facilitating and teaching reading comprehension is reinforced. The writers of this article are at the threshold of realizing how to mediate knowledge and how to gain a focus on inserting newly learned and guided knowledge about the pedagogy of teaching reading literacy. The information contained in this essay is by no means exhaustive, but the authors believe it may be an effective place to start with building a more universal approach, through expanding the importance and understanding of intertextual connections in the practice of teaching reading skills.

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