A Constructivist Framework for the Read-Aloud in a Secondary Classroom

The Read-Aloud Is Not Just For Elementary Students !!!

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Integrating theory and practice is always a challenging task. The worlds of theory and practice are often miles apart with apparently no means of communication. The effect of this chasm is that good theory frequently goes unapplied and practitioners are often unaware of the theoretical base underlying successful classroom activities.

In addition, both theory and practice seem to be differentially applied, That is, theories and practices regularly find a home in either elementary schools or secondary schools, but not both. One such differentiated activity is the read-aloud. The read-aloud activity seems to be very well received in the elementary school community and virtually ignored in the secondary school community.

Is the read-aloud fundamentally flawed as a secondary classroom activity? Do secondary students not enjoy activities that involve being read to in class? Is the read-aloud not challenging enough, cognitively, for older students? Is there a theoretical deficiency in reading to·secondary students? According to Carter and Abrahamson (1991), secondary students enjoy the read-aloud activity. Richardson and Cantrell (1996) concluded that read-aloud activities could be effectively used to teach high school students poetry. Finally, Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson (1985) state, "The single most important activity for

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building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children ... It is a practice that should continue throughout the grades" (p. 23, 51).

The secondary classroom is an ideal environment for a read-aloud activity. Adolescents are heavily involved in exploring their own morality, beliefs, preferences, sexuality, and identity; these are all excellent topics for a read-aloud activity. Combining the read-aloud activity with a theoretical framework of constructivism provides for an effective and efficient learning environment that involves both individualized learning and social interaction.

> *" . . . [the read aloud] may involve all four language arts – reading, speaking, listening, and writing."*

The Read-Aloud

The read-aloud activity is essentially that, reading aloud (Trelease, 1979, 1995). However, it would be a mistake to conclude that a read-aloud activity involves nothing but reading aloud (Hart-Hewins & Wells, 1992; Hennings, 1992). While the read-aloud activity is focused around the teacher reading some portion of a relevant and exciting text, the activity itself may involve all four language arts -- reading, speaking, listening, and writing. A well-constructed read aloud involves three essential elements -- prereading activities, during reading activities, and post-reading activities.

Pre-reading activities may involve something as simple as discussing the title of a work to be read, or something a bit more complex such as constructing a graphic organizer relating students' prior knowledge to the main idea of the story. In addition, students could be asked a series of questions or asked to generate their own questions to help focus their ideas and thoughts.

For example, secondary students preparing to read Arthur Gordon's (1974) short story, *Freedom is a Two-edged Sword*, could be asked to discuss what is meant by the metaphor "two-edged sword." Also, students might write their own thoughts on the meaning of freedom (these thoughts to be later challenged after the reading). The concept of freedom is a sufficiently challenging concept for secondary students, and it is a concept that could be integrated into almost any class.

During-reading activities may be as varied as the pre-reading activities. The teacher may pause at opportune times during the reading of a story to (a) ask the students to respond, either orally or in written form, to the current concept being discussed in the story, (b) ask for opinions as to the meaning of a passage, (c) ask for examples from students' lives that reflect the current story, (d) ask students to relate the passage being read to other concepts being covered in their curriculum, or (e) allow students to debate a particular issue being addressed in the passage.

> *" . . . allowing students to critique and evaluate a passage provides a powerful avenue for exercising a students' own personal democracy and self-worth."*

For example, after reading the following passage, from Gordon's (1974) *Freedom is a Two-edged Sword*, the teacher may ask students to discuss in large group or small groups (a) Why is freedom the most dangerous gift? (b) How does one learn to use freedom?, or (c) What does the speaker mean when he says "They only had to fight for freedom. We have to live with it!"

> "Why don't you tell them that freedom is the most dangerous gift anyone can receive?" he said. "Why don't you tell them that it's a two-edged sword that will destroy us unless we learn how to use it, and soon? Why don't you make them see that we face a greater challenge than our ancestors ever did? They only had to fight for freedom. We have to live with it?" (p. 166)

In addition, allowing students to critique and evaluate a passage provides a powerful avenue for exercising a students' own personal democracy and self-worth. After reading "Ever since our country won its independence, something in us has been deeply suspicious of authority. 'Give us more freedom!' has been our constant cry." (Gordon, 1974, p. 167), students could be asked to evaluate the question, "Can one have too much freedom?"

The post-reading activities can be equally engaging. Post-reading activities may include (a) creating graphic organizers, (b) writing free-response passages, (c) small group discussions designed to answer in-depth questions, (d) generating questions that were raised by the story, but not answered, (e) writing personal reflections related to the passage, (f) discussing how this passage relates to other concepts discussed in class. Gordon's (1974) story ends with the following paragraph:

If personal freedom of choice is our goal and our ideal as a nation, then our first fundamental choice must be not to abuse that freedom. This is what independence really means: self-discipline. And this we would do well to remember when we see the flag we love blazing against the sky on Independence Day. (p. 168).

" . . . limited only by the teacher's imagination."

What does the author mean by "self-discipline?" Is our culture based on personal freedom? Should personal freedom be an ideal? Has it always been a personal ideal? Do other cultures value personal freedom as we do? The higher-order thinking questions and activities are endless.

As can be seen, the pre-, during-, and post-reading activities that can be used to engage secondary students in meaningful mental and social dialogue are limited only by the teacher's imagination. This flexibility allows the teacher to design a vast array of challenging exercises and experiences for the students. Given that the read-aloud is an excellent activity for secondary students, can this activity be reconciled with the current theoretical zeitgeist of constructivism? Yes.

Constructivism and the Read-Aloud

The notion that learning involves an active process of generating understanding based upon one's experience and social interaction is central to the psychological and philosophical position of constructivism. Educational psychologists no longer believe that teaching is presenting and learning is receiving; rather, teaching involves creating learning environments in which students actively construct meaning based upon prior knowledge and social interaction. The exact nature of this constructivist psychology/philosophy is not yet well defined; however, a general consensus (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Bruning, Scharaw, & Ronning, 1995; Eggen & Kauchak, 1997; Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989) seems to be coalescing around four characteristics of constructivism, (a) learners actively construct their own meaning/understanding, (b) one's prior knowledge is essential to this knowledge construction process, (c) learning is enhanced through social interaction, and (d) authentic learning environments enhance meaningful knowledge construction.

In addition, constructivism relies upon three constructs, representational constructivism, processorial constructivism, and environmental constructivism. Representational constructivism assumes that the end result of learning is the creation or modification of some type of mental structure or model (Gell-Mann, 1995; Nickerson, 1988). Within an information processing framework, production sets and schemas would be classified as mental structures (Anderson, 1983, 1993) and according to Holland, Holyoak, Nisbett, & Thagard (1986) these production sets coalesce to form models of the world: not that mental models are merely schemas or productions, but rather a complex integration of schemas, productions, images, and facts.

The read-aloud may allow the students to construct mental structures or models that relate to both the reading process and the content. Through repeated read-aloud activities the students may construct models of how intonation, pitch, and pacing affect comprehension, how one may problem solve using text, and how social interaction may lead to better group understanding and cohesion. In addition, the students will have the opportunity to interact within the content area. Students will be able to build mental structures integrating the text with their own prior knowledge as well as the prior knowledge of others.

" . . . create an environment in which students may experience life and ideas . . ."

While representational constructivism refers to *what* is learned, processorial constructivism refers to how the mental structures or models are learned; that is, the construction processes themselves take environmental experiences and prior knowledge and create or modify these mental structures or models. While the exact nature of these constructive processes is elusive, induction seems to be a major process (Anderson, 1993; Holland, et al., 1986). Inductive learning involves discriminating the rules and structure of a particular domain, situation, or event without direct instruction (Anderson, 1995). Induction involves combining information from the environment with one's prior knowledge, in the form of inferences, to reach conclusions that are predictive.

Stimulating the students with a read-aloud allows the students the opportunity to use and improve their induction and metacognitive skills. The read-aloud provides the teacher with a unique opportunity to model thought

processes related to induction, strategy development, problem solving, and abstraction. Since induction, metacognition, and abstraction are all skills or processes, the old adages of "Use it or lose it" and "Practice make perfect" readily apply.

Finally, environmental constructivism involves the experiences that one encounters. These experiences are the raw materials used in the construction of these mental structures and models. In life, these experiences tend to be highly complex and dynamic; although, in schools these experiences are often simplified and static. It should be noted, however, that regardless of the nature of the experience (complex vs. simple), the student will construct something.

The read-aloud can be used to create a complex environment within which students may experience. Concepts such as freedom, religion, human rights, prejudice, and self-concept are all extremely complex and may be addressed through a read-aloud. In addition, the read-aloud itself, with its social interaction and thought-provoking nature is itself complex.

As can be seen, the read-aloud and constructivism are quite compatible in the secondary classroom. The read-aloud can be used to create an environment in which students may experience life and ideas, and through social interaction and personal introspection may come to a new understanding of their world. The read-aloud is indeed not just for little children.

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When I Grow Up

When I grow up, I want to be a nurse. Do you know why? Well, I want to be a nurse because I like to help people. Like if someone falls, I would help them up and that's kind of like being a nurse. And I would like to go to France and be a nurse. But I'd have to leave my family and that would be sad. On the other hand, I think I will work in Louisiana. I would miss my pets and relatives, too. Well let's get back to the nurse stuff. Have you ever seen Rescue 911? Well, 911 is this show that I watch almost every night on T.V. It has nurses in it. In fact, I might even ride in the back of an emergency ambulance just like on television. And hold people's hands when their afraid. When we arrive at the hospital, I would tell them don't worry. We will take care of you. When they get out of the hospital, they would be happy and so would I.

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