Julie Gorlewski, Editor

Research for the Classroom

Trying on Reciprocal Teaching: A Novice's Struggle Becomes a Veteran's Success

Shannon S. Moon
Hayward High School
Hayward, California
smoon@mills.edu

Struggling with Reciprocal Teaching

As a new teacher in 1998, I was introduced to a research-based reading strategy called reciprocal teaching in a one-day professional development workshop coordinated by the reading specialist at my school. Developed by Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar and Ann L. Brown, reciprocal teaching is a structured reading comprehension support process wherein two students share in the reading of a text, stopping at predetermined points to summarize, clarify, question, and make predictions about what they have just read. Desperate for a tested strategy to help ninth graders comprehend the difficult texts we were reading, which included *Lord of the Flies* and *Bless Me, Ultima,* I latched on to reciprocal teaching as a panacea for all my students' comprehension woes. I tried it again and again, adjusting my explanations of the steps, providing different forms for the students to fill out as they worked, jigsawing key passages, and generally beating my head against the wall as each of my attempts to teach this strategy failed. And failed miserably. Frustrated, I cast this experience as another clueless attempt by researchers to tell me how to run my classroom.

Flash forward to August 2001, as I'm entering my second year at a new school. I sought support from one of my mentors, who suggested the book *Reading for Understanding* (Schoenbach et al.). Ruth Schoenbach and her colleagues emphasize the importance of teaching students to use the skills in their Reading Toolbox, a toolbox stocked with strategies such as summary, clarification, questioning, and prediction. I immediately remembered reciprocal teaching. Facing another year teaching students who struggle with reading comprehension motivated me to reconsider reciprocal teaching; I knew I had to do something to help my students truly understand what we were reading in class.

Reflecting on Reciprocal Teaching

My first step was to reexamine what had gone wrong with my initial application of reciprocal teaching. After some consideration, it seemed clear: inexperience coupled with lack of reflection. Admitting that I did not stop to take my students' prior knowledge into account before I foisted reciprocal teaching onto them is a bit embarrassing. Isn't the importance of prior knowledge one of the most important lessons I had learned in my credential program? It had been, but my students were ninth graders and, at the time, I did not feel like it was unreasonable to assume that they already knew how to summarize, clarify, question, and predict. Yet, they did not know how to do what I was asking them to do. As I recall those earnest young people, I believe that they were trying their best, but they seemed mightily confused by the concept of chunking a larger text into smaller pieces—much less summarizing those smaller chunks or making predictions about what might happen in the next chunk. My students were inhibited by my clumsy attempts to scaffold a complex process that efficient readers, such as myself, do so automatically that it is essentially an afterthought. Reflection made it clear that if I wanted to try reciprocal teaching again, I would need to do some serious schema-building to ensure that students knew exactly how to work the myriad moving parts of the process.

Revising the Process

Going into the 2001–02 school year, I was fairly certain most ninth graders would not know how to summarize, clarify, question, or predict as they read, skills essential for reciprocal teaching. To enable me to develop a clear picture of their status with respect to these reading comprehension strategies, they spent the first two weeks of school performing a variety of formal and informal assessments. As I had suspected, they had a general impression of these four skills, but they were not consistently effective in their application. Therefore, I set about teaching these four skills, each in isolation. We began with summarizing.

For an entire month, my students summarized everything they read in a variety of configurations: they did so as a class, in groups, in pairs, and individually. Students considered models of summaries, both exemplary and deficient, and worked together to revise weak examples. Since we had begun the year reading short essays related to the importance of reading, including "The Achievement of Desire" by Richard Rodriguez and "Learning to Read" by Malcolm X, students used these texts to practice their summarizing skills. We read the essays and, as a whole class, brainstormed the most pertinent information. I then guided students through an I-Do, We-Do, You-Do learning sequence grounded in P. D. Pearson's gradual release of responsibility theory. First, using students' brainstorms, I modeled how to write an effective 50-word summary. As a class, we then condensed this summary, from 50 words to 30. Next, we

read another essay and students completed the whole process again, this time in pairs, writing their summaries on overhead transparencies that were then shared and evaluated by the class. Eventually, students read an essay and wrote a summary on their own and volunteers shared their summaries for revision feedback.

When all the students were able to summarize the key points in a text, we moved on to clarification, one of the four skills needed for reciprocal teaching. I taught this skill using level one of Arthur L. Costa's question levels; level one is literal, on-the-surface questions. Guided by *Reading for Understanding* (Schoenbach et al.), I used think-alouds. I displayed an overhead transparency of the text and modeled clarification think-alouds for students. They then did the same in pairs, sharing out key clarification queries so the class could evaluate whether or not they could be categorized as level one. This practice gave me the chance to discuss appropriate resources for managing clarification questions that were not adequately answered within the context of the text, something I had done in passing before but that seemed more relevant to my students now. We practiced clarification in a variety of iterations for a month until everyone understood how to apply clarification for more than just unknown vocabulary words. Finally, we combined summary and clarification together as we read, both in whole-class and group activities as well as for homework.

Once all the students were demonstrating proficiency, we moved on to questioning, which is

the next skill in reciprocal teaching. I taught questioning through levels two and three of Costa's question levels; level two is analytic questions and level three is synthesis or evaluative questions. This higher-order thinking skill was more challenging for students, but we focused on it for an entire month, using whole-class work, group work, pair work, individual work, models, and revisions—practicing again and again. I found using editorial cartoons and short poems to be most effective because we could read them quickly and generate a whole host of questions. As before, I modeled creating level two and level three questions with an editorial cartoon on the overhead transparency and we then transitioned to students generating the questions while I scribed. We then moved to pair work, sharing out questions, evaluating them as a class, and revising them as necessary. Finally, students worked individually and we discussed strategies for pursuing answers to their questions. Then, questioning was combined with summarizing and clarifying and we practiced using these skills in concert.

Finally, we considered prediction, the last step in reciprocal teaching. Surprisingly, this skill was the most difficult for students to grasp, for two reasons. First, prediction requires evidence, and second, good readers predict on many levels, from basic plot line to the writer's rhetorical moves. Because of its complexity, we spent about six weeks on this skill. I modeled prediction with a variety of texts, from news articles to *To Kill a Mockingbird,* using the think-aloud format and we then

practiced as a whole class, taking turns through "popcorn reading" the text aloud and writing prediction suggestions on the overhead, evaluating and revising each one as necessary. Students then moved into pair work, reading a short chunk from *To Kill a Mockingbird,* creating their predictions, sharing out, and evaluating them as a class. Students struggled most in justifying that their predictions were logical, grounded explicitly in the careful reading of the text. Eventually, students began to grasp the subtleties of prediction and they moved toward making predictions on their own.

Putting It All Together

Once students were proficient in applying these four skills, I introduced reciprocal teaching as a means of strengthening students' overall reading comprehension ability. This time, I was prepared. Not only was I confident that students could summarize, clarify, question, and predict, I knew that I was going to have to devote some significant class time to teaching students how to use these concepts in the context of reciprocal teaching. I provided students with an explanation of the process so they could practice their note-taking skills and then I called on two volunteers to help me model the process. With the two volunteers sitting up front, the students directed their actions. Together, we made decisions about chunking the text. Together, we set up our paper for the reciprocal teaching notes. Together, we watched the volunteers complete a cycle of reciprocal teaching, with me scribing their notes on the overhead. Together, we listened to the volunteers reflect on their process and then the class as a whole reflected on the process as well as their deeper understanding of the selected excerpt from the novel. Then, and only then, did I pair students so that they, too, could complete a reciprocal teaching of a key portion of *All Quiet on the Western Front,* the text we were reading at the time. Though it was more successful than my first year teaching, there were still some kinks. Most significantly, students struggled to manage all the moving parts. The chunks they chose were not always logical. They were confused about how to take notes. Some of them were not clear that, yes, they really did have to take turns reading chunks aloud to one another. And a few were also puzzled about the role of prediction in enhancing comprehension.

In the years since, I have come to value reciprocal teaching as a critical strategy for helping students deepen their reading comprehension. It can be successful if it is thoughtfully implemented and has become a cornerstone of my reading comprehension curriculum. I still introduce ninth graders to each of the key concepts in isolation, and we build on them until the students are ready to use them in concert. We spend more time with prediction, a skill that is far more complicated than it appears. I am also much more aware that students need help learning how to identify logical chunks within a larger text, so I teach that skill as well. I also created a handout for students to easily track their notes from the reciprocal teaching session.

In recent years, I have begun to use reciprocal teaching with eleventh- and twelfth-grade students—even with AP students—because I have learned that despite having access to adequate Reading Toolboxes, students often need explicit help in applying them to difficult texts such as Plato's *Republic* or Machiavelli's *The Prince.* Finally, I have made additions to the process. If we are learning about specific figurative language devices, I require students to identify them and quote the appropriate line in the text. For example, if we are learning about ethos, pathos, and logos, students identify key quotes and explain how they reflect the writer's use of ethos, pathos, or logos. I have learned that I can extend reciprocal teaching by requiring students to address specific writing strategies a writer is using in the text. Reciprocal teaching, coupled with these extensions of the process, has helped students make meaning from challenging texts; it has given them the ability to become active readers who are no longer intimidated by complex texts.

Twelve years ago, I was a novice teacher with good intentions but not enough experience to adequately support students' reading comprehension, much less scaffold a complex reading comprehension strategy such as reciprocal teaching. I have since learned that one unsuccessful encounter does not invalidate the importance of research-based practice. Reflection, mentorship, and professional development can help teachers evolve from overwhelmed novices into confident veterans who can transform theory into practice. 🄴🄹

Works Cited

Costa, Arthur L. *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD. 1985. Print.

Palincsar, Annemarie Sullivan, and Ann L. Brown. "Reciprocal Teaching of Comprehension-Fostering and Comprehension-Monitoring Activities." *Cognition and Instruction* 1.2 (1984): 117–75. Print.

Pearson, P. D. "The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model of Instruction." *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 8 (1983): 317–44. Print.

Schoenbach, Ruth, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko, and Lori Hurwitz. *Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999. Print.

Shannon S. Moon has taught high school English for more than eleven years, nine of them at Hayward High School in Hayward, California. She recently earned her doctorate in education at Mills College, where she also supervises student teachers and guest teaches in credential courses.

Assessment

Ninety-five percent of those who read this poem
will experience a sense of wonder. The other
five percent are wondering how to arrive
at this statistic. For evidence is what is needed.

Otherwise the poem will never gain accreditation,
and no one will want to attend. We could ask
for a show of hands, but some of the readers are related
to the poet, and nothing surprises them anymore.

If the poem is read aloud, carefully trained monitors
could be placed in the audience to count
the number of mouths agape in stupefaction
or in slumber. How many persons are leaning

forward, eager for the next word? This is an angle
our monitors can quietly measure, pulling
from their back pockets a gathering hush
of collapsible wooden protractors.

If all else fails, electrodes may be placed
on the correct lobes of the brain—
or for certain lines, on the genitals.
The results will be graphed on a table of outcomes

in the report that forever after must be stapled
to the body of this poem. Perhaps you have seen
a great blue heron lumbering down a pond for takeoff,
its feet entwined in dripping skeins of lily pads.

The morning sun illuminates the strain of the wings,
the encumbrance of roots and petals
dragging their weight across the dark brown of the water.
The bird never rises. No wonder.

—Paul Willis
©2011 Paul Willis.

Paul Willis's work has been selected by Adrienne Rich for *The Best American Poetry* series, chosen by Jane Hirshfield in the Small Poetry Press chapbook contest, and read by Garrison Keillor on *The Writer's Almanac.* His most recent collections are *Rosing from the Dead* (WordFarm, 2009) and *Visiting Home* (Pecan Grove Press, 2008). Email him at willis@westmont.edu.