

Questioning the Author: Helping Students Engage Deeply with Text

Our approach to comprehension instruction, *Questioning the Author*, focuses on the importance of students' active efforts to build meaning from what they read and the need for students to grapple with ideas in a text.

The work we have done in comprehension, as well as that in decoding and vocabulary, has kept us close to schools. We have visited classrooms, worked with teachers, and interacted with students. One of the rewards of being close to classrooms is that we have heard students say so many precious things. Many of them can be classified as “Out of the mouths of babes. . . .” Our favorite comes from a fifth grader, but first, some context:

Al Shanker, late president of the American Federation of Teachers, used to describe passive students by suggesting that if folks from Mars visited our planet, they would report to their superiors that among the peculiar Earth behaviors they observed was that five days out of seven adults help children get ready to go to a building where they sit and watch adults work.

Now let's imagine those Martians were hovering in their spaceship outside Gail Friedman's fifth-grade class, which had been implementing Questioning the Author during the year. Ms. Friedman had just asked the class to jot down what they liked and didn't like about QtA. One student wrote:

What I like about QtA is that people let other people know what they're thinking. What I dislike is that it makes us work too hard! When we're done, it makes us feels like we're dead!

On reading that, those Martians at least would have been compelled to add a footnote to their report, for clearly, the students had done the work of building meaning from text. Ms. Friedman had become expert at helping her students to take on the responsibility of figuring out what they were reading.

Some History of QtA

The findings from our initial implementations of QtA, which took place in the classrooms of five teachers with about 120 fourth- and fifth-grade students in two different school districts, pointed to dramatic changes in classroom discourse. They came from comparing reading and social studies lessons that were taught by our collaborating teachers before and after they implemented Questioning the Author. (For a full discussion of these results see Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1996; McKeown, Beck, & Sandora, 1996.) The changes in discourse included the following:

- Teachers asked questions that focused on considering and extending meaning rather than retrieving information.
- Teachers responded to students in ways that extended the conversation rather than in ways that merely evaluated or repeated the responses.
- Students did about twice as much talking during QtA discussions than they did in traditional lessons.
- Students frequently initiated their own questions and comments, in contrast to rarely doing so in traditional lessons.
- Students responded by talking about the meaning of what they read and by integrating ideas rather than by retrieving text information.
- Student-to-student interactions during discussions developed.

A later study found that QtA was also effective with older students, and in contrast to another discussion technique. In a study that compared QtA with Junior Great Books, an approach in which discussion occurs after the reading of whole-text selections, sixth- and seventh-grade students in the QtA classroom both recalled more from the selections they read and were better able to provide high-quality responses to interpretation questions after reading (Sandora, Beck, & McKeown, 1999).

We have spent close to 15 years developing, reflecting on, and revising QtA. This book marks the second generation of our work with QtA, following two earlier books: *Questioning the Author: An Approach for Enhancing Student Engagement with Text*, which was published by the International Reading Association in 1997, and *Questioning the Author: Accessibles*, published by the Wright Group in 1999. Since their publication, we have continued to implement QtA in classrooms. At the time of the writing of this book, we had been involved in the training—either personally or once removed—of about 2,000 teachers.

In our work with QtA, we have talked extensively with teachers and students about their experiences. We learned that as teachers began implementation of QtA, they were often concerned about the impact it would have on control and classroom management. As the year progressed, they found that not only was it possible to, as one teacher said, “share control of the discussion with students and not lose acceptable classroom decorum in the process,” but that the involvement of students in ideas became an exciting and extremely satisfying aspect of classroom lessons. Teachers eventually found that classroom management was actually less of a concern during QtA lessons, because the students became so involved in the discussion.

The teachers also told us that their expectations of their students changed as they observed them dealing with ideas and expressing themselves in QtA discussions. One teacher commented that she now expected her students to “think and learn and explain rather than memorize, dictate, and forget.”

We learned that students’ views about reading and learning were affected. We saw evidence of these changes in responses students gave when we interviewed them at the end of the school year about their reading and social studies classes. One student talked about the need for the kind of thinking and questioning that the class did:

Sometimes when the author is not being real clear, it's kind of hard because then in the way back of the story is a sentence that

you need to figure out and put the clues together, but you don't have all the clues.

She then described what happened as a result of working to figure out the ideas:

So we understand what the author's really telling us instead of just reading the story and saying we're done.

Another student described her view of reading in QtA as follows:

It's more creative than just asking regular questions or just plain reading, you know, like if you don't think about what you're reading and you just read, that's not reading. You're just looking at scribbles on a piece of paper.

Our continued work with QtA allows us to expand on what we have written about the approach. Our history with QtA has also provided us with innumerable new examples of students' and teachers' interactions with text. Thus, we have replaced all the examples from the earlier book and provided an assortment of new ones that reflect our updated thinking.

The book is divided into two sections. Section 1 includes the topics that were covered in the original *Questioning the Author* book: theoretical and empirical background; Queries; planning; discussion; and implementation. In Chapter 1, we have augmented the discussion of the theoretical background by focusing on the contributions of the concepts of coherence and attention to current thinking on comprehension. We also provide a more extensive discussion of the three decades of our work that underlie this book. In Chapters 2 through 5, in addition to expanding and updating our discussion of the topics and providing new examples, we have added "frequently asked questions" and our responses.

Section 2 is derived from our *Accessibles* book, which can be viewed as a collection of 25 cases based on our observations in teachers' classrooms. The cases include classroom examples of issues that arose as teachers implemented QtA, ways that teachers handled the issues, and our commentary on the issues and solutions.

From our decade and a half's worth of experiences with QtA, we have gained an enhanced understanding of what it takes to support teachers and students as they learn to make the process of building understanding a habit of reading. In writing this book, we have incorporated what we have learned in ways that we hope will bring about an enriched perspective of QtA for our readers.

Texts and the Way Students Understand Them

Texts can get tricky for young students, even in places where we may not expect it, as shown in the excerpt below from a fourth-grade class discussion of a text about the “great mix of people” who populated the Hawaiian Islands, including Chinese, Filipinos, and Puerto Ricans. Here is the sentence that tripped up students: “About one seventh of the people are the offspring of Polynesians—the first people of the islands.”

MS. S: So, what is this all about? What do you think, Antoine?

ANTOINE: I think that when the first people came, they're Polynesian and they just kept on having children and they stayed there.

MS. S: Okay, so they kept having children. Is that what the author meant by offspring?

- HEATHER: I think offspring is the people from different countries that came to the Hawaiian Islands.
- MS. S: We all agree that people from all these countries live in the Hawaiian Islands. Offspring of these people are their children. And their children's children. And their children's children's children.
- DARLA: I wanted to say, my cousin's grandma, she's Filipino and she has a son, and my dad, my dad's father's brother, married her and I think they had offspring children.
- MS. S: Okay, I think maybe we're a little bit confused about what this word *offspring* means. Antoine, tell Darla who she's an offspring of.
- ANTOINE: She's an offspring of a Polynesian.
- MS. S: No! Oh, my goodness! Wait a minute! Alex. Alex, tell Darla whom she's an offspring of.
- ALEX: You're an offspring of your mom and dad. And your dad is an offspring of his mom and dad.
- MS. S: Everybody in this room is an offspring. That's a tricky word. How many of you think the author could have picked another word?
- ALEX: Not me. I think it was a perfect word.
- CHARLENE: Oh, sure, now you say that, after we all figured it out.

As this example shows, a single word can impede comprehension. Texts are of course made up of hundreds of words, and thus, there are hundreds of opportunities for readers to become confused. As writing instructors often say: Readers are like sheep that an author is trying to herd in a particular direction. If there is a hole in a fence, the sheep are sure to find it and go astray. In a sense, all our research—and the QtA approach we developed in response to our findings—is dedicated to preventing our student readers from going through those holes. A little later in the book we'll elaborate on the value of helping students see that it is indeed often the text, and not the student, that is “at fault” when comprehension wanders. But for now, we want to share the research that led to this insight.

Our Research on Texts and Comprehension

Helping students deal effectively with text arose as a focus for us some decades ago. In our attempts to understand how students comprehend text and to develop ways to support students' comprehension, we considered and studied three sources: the textbooks that students read, the text-based lessons intended to guide students' reading, and the students themselves. All these sources were investigated against a backdrop of theory of and research on reading.

Our eventual purpose was to develop effective comprehension instruction; however, we reasoned that we should begin by understanding current instruction and analyzing its potential effectiveness. Our foray into text-based comprehension research started in the early 1980s with an analysis of the suggested comprehension questions from the teachers' editions of basal readers (Beck & McKeown, 1981). The prevalent instructional practice in the basals was to design questions that represented levels of comprehension from simple to complex based on taxonomies of comprehension. As an example, Barrett's (1967) taxonomy, probably the most frequently referenced taxonomy in the reading instruction literature, contained the following major categories: 1. literal comprehension, 2. reorganization, 3. inferential comprehension, 4. evaluation, 5. appreciation.

A number of studies have used taxonomies of comprehension such as Barrett's to assess questions that appear in basal readers and classroom reading activities. Most often the studies conclude that comprehension would be enhanced if more attention were given to higher levels of comprehension through questions that elicit inferences, evaluation, and appreciation. (See, for example, Bartolome, 1968; Cooke, 1970; Guszak, 1967; Rosecky, 1976.) Although that intuitively makes sense, it also points to a limitation of a taxonomic approach to developing questions. Questions developed from taxonomies do not take into account that information within a text is not always "ripe for the picking"; a question that *seems* to prompt students to pluck information from a higher branch on the taxonomic tree may in fact require lower-level thinking to answer and vice versa.

Consider two hypothetical questions for the story "The Three Little Pigs": "What did the third little pig use to build his house?" and "How many bricks did

the third little pig use?” The two questions would be equal in terms of taxonomy, since both query literal information from the story. Yet the question of the number of bricks is trivial while the question of the building material used is of central importance to the story. Similarly, posing questions from higher taxonomic levels does not necessarily lead to greater comprehension. For example, less processing of ideas from the text would be required to answer an appreciation-level question such as “How would you have felt if you had been the wolf?” than to give a summary or synthesis of story events. Yet appreciation is on a higher level in the taxonomy than synthesis or reorganization.

Another problem with a taxonomic approach to developing questions is that taxonomies are not intended to address the relationship *among* the questions for a particular text. And yet for effective teaching that promotes comprehension, that relationship is critical. The questions need to be carefully sequenced to help students consider the overall concept of the story. Questions developed and sequenced according to their taxonomic levels will likely only tap isolated pieces of information without following the logic of story events, which doesn't help readers build a coherent representation of the story. In fact, a taxonomic sequence of questions may disrupt the flow of story ideas rather than facilitate it.

The Story Map

Faced with these issues, we developed the notion of a “Story Map” (Beck & McKeown, 1981). A Story Map is a unified representation of a story based on a logical organization of events and ideas of central importance to the story and their interrelationships. To create one, a teacher begins by determining the story's major events and ideas and then develops a series of questions that elicit students' understandings of their progression. Creating even the most basic Story Map requires students to make inferences and recall explicit events.

We conducted a study to test our ideas of how well questions that were based on a Story Map versus those based on a taxonomy contributed to students' comprehension. We compared two third-grade basal story lessons whose question sequences were taxonomic to lessons for the same stories that we had revised using Story Map questions (Beck, Omanson, & McKeown, 1982). Children who received the revised lessons recalled more of the stories and correctly answered more questions than children receiving the original basal lesson. We also revised

the background knowledge that children in the Story Map group received before the lesson. Thus, we cannot tell the extent to which each of the components—activation of background knowledge and Story Map questions—contributed to the superior outcome for the experimental group.

Examining the During-Reading Experience

Later we developed a processing description of the way in which components of the basal and revised lessons had influenced the children's comprehension (Omanson, Beck, Voss, & McKeown, 1984). The processing description suggested that both providing students with background knowledge and presenting them with a logical sequence of questions contributed to enhanced comprehension. Our conclusion from this work was that an account of what children do *during* a reading lesson gave us more insight into how to design reading lessons than a description of what children do *after* the lesson. Such insight gained from the processes in which readers engage in the course of reading has been a major influence on our thinking.

We also studied the role of providing background knowledge before reading with fifth-grade students reading passages on the American Revolution (McKeown, Beck, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1992). We found that providing background knowledge enhanced comprehension if the text to be read was itself coherent (that is, the information was clear and logically organized, and the ideas were connected). In that study, all students were provided with a carefully developed background-knowledge module that dealt with issues and events that paved the colonists' route to revolution. Then they read one of two versions of four short textbook passages about events leading to the American Revolution. One version of the four passages was taken directly from a social studies textbook. The other version was one that we had revised to make the passages more coherent.

We had previously studied more and less coherent passages (Beck, McKeown, Sinatra, and Loxterman, 1991) to determine the extent to which more-coherent text enhanced comprehension. There was a strong finding that it did. But a particularly interesting finding here was that those students who read the coherent text were able to use what they had learned from the background-knowledge module to focus on and remember the most important information from the text. The students who read the unrevised textbook version, although they received

the same background information, were less able to exploit the advantage provided by that information (McKeown et al., 1992).

The studies that we have discussed here, as well as other studies we participated in (see, for example, Loxterman, Beck, & McKeown, 1994; Sinatra, Beck, & McKeown, 1993) show that students' comprehension can be improved through carefully crafted lessons and text that takes into account what we know about influences on comprehension. That is, lesson features such as the following have a positive influence on comprehension:

- **coherent texts** (because readers need to build coherence for understanding to take place)
- **relevant background knowledge** (because such knowledge is needed to fuel comprehension)
- **a logical sequence of questions** (because comprehension requires an organizing framework)

It is important, however, to keep in mind that although students who received the upgraded texts or lessons did better than students who did not, these students rarely approached optimal or ideal comprehension. In general, we observed that although some students developed coherent representations of what they had read, many developed only a superficial understanding by simply gathering words from the text, and a disheartening number did not seem to approach even a cursory understanding of what they had read. In the material that follows we provide examples that illustrate the kinds of responses we got when we asked students to tell us about what they had read.

In all our studies, we engaged with students on a one-to-one basis. We asked them to read a given text and then tell us about what they had read. All the sessions were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Following is a short social studies text that students responded to in several of our studies.

BOSTON TEA PARTY

George III, the king of England, said that there had to be a tax on something to prove that the British had the right to tax. So there was still a small tax on tea. The colonists remained firm. They would not pay any tax passed by Parliament. Colonial women refused to buy or serve tea.

British merchants were not selling much tea. So Parliament passed a law that greatly lowered its price. Boatloads of tea were sent to America. Since it was cheaper than ever, the British thought that surely the colonists would buy tea now!

They were wrong. Tea was burned. Tea was left to rot. Ships loaded with it were not allowed in ports. In Boston the Sons of Liberty dressed up as Indians. Late at night they went to Boston Harbor and threw more than 300 chests of tea into the water. This action was called the Boston Tea Party.

(Silver Burdett, 1984)

The two “recalls” below are quintessential examples of students “reading” a text and simply not getting it. It should be noted that both students were considered average readers.

Tina’s Recall:

It’s about the Boston Tea Party, and it’s about a whole bunch of, like, they were bringing loads over and it was rotten, and all that, so they went back and got more loads and dumped all the tea into the water.

Darryl’s Recall:

The Boston Tea Party, um, they threw more than three hundred bags of tea and some of it was left to rot and, um, some threw it in the water, and, um, the action, what they were doing, was called the Boston Tea Party, ’cause nobody was buying their tea so they just threw it away and let it rot.

It's clear from their responses that Tina and Darryl simply did not understand what they had read. They neither knew what was important nor did they connect ideas to develop a coherent representation of the events and ideas. Tina seemed to have retrieved the label for the major event, "Boston Tea Party." Beyond that she simply relayed some detached snippets of other events, such as that loads of tea were brought over, but she did not seem to know from or to where, or by whom. She knew that they were left to rot—but again, she didn't understand by whom or why. She did not even communicate any sense of understanding that a conflict between two parties was being described. Darryl gave more information about what the tea party was—throwing tea into the water. But he, like Tina, did not seem to understand that it was a conflict between two parties. It seems instead he thought that the tea sellers were disgruntled and were throwing out their own tea. This kind of confused recall was more typical of students' responses to social studies texts, whereas superficial recall was more typical of narrative text. Consider the following excerpt from *Ralph S. Mouse* by Beverly Cleary, and two students' recalls of the text.

RALPH S. MOUSE

Ralph thought of the old hotel with its shabby lobby warmed by a crackling fire. He missed the reassuring tick of the rasping old clock. He even missed—sort of—his brothers, sisters, and cousins. He wondered what they would say if he went home with Ryan without his motorcycle. . . .

The scoffing of his relatives was something Ralph could not face. Never. And as he walked slowly back to the book bag in the library, he heard a dog bark in the distance and was reminded of the coyotes that howled in the night in the song about the lonely man trying to hitch a ride on the highway. What a sad world he lived in. (Cleary, 1983)

Adam's Recall:

Ralph was thinking about the hotel where he lived. He misses the tick of the clock, and he even sort of misses his relatives. He's sad about the world he lives in. He didn't go home with Ryan without his motorcycle.

Adam's recall suggests that he identified some major points: Ralph missed his home and maybe even his relatives and that he is without his motorcycle. But Adam doesn't put those points together in a way that indicates he understands *why* Ralph doesn't want to go home without his motorcycle. Below we provide Brittany's recall of the same excerpt. She was one of the few students who provided a coherent representation of the important aspects of the text.

Brittany's Recall:

Ralph misses his home at the hotel, but he can't go home because he's afraid his relatives will tease him because he lost his motorcycle. He keeps getting sadder, like when a dog barks, he thinks about coyotes in a sad song he heard about a lonely guy.

Note that Brittany selected the same story points as Adam, but she presented them in a way that indicates understanding: "He can't go home because he's afraid his relatives will tease him because he lost his motorcycle."

Theoretical Orientation: Attention and Coherence

Brittany's recall demonstrates that her attention was focused on what was important in the text and that she was able to connect those ideas in a coherent manner.

The concepts of attention and coherence gained currency among comprehension researchers in the early 1980s, when we were beginning our work in the area. This theoretical orientation is a cognitive-processing perspective that views comprehension as an active process of attending to information in text, making decisions about what is important, holding that information in memory as other information is encountered, and making connections to new relevant information—all toward building a coherent representation of what a text is trying to communicate. Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) were the most prominent among the many researchers explicating aspects of this perspective and its implications.

(See, for example, Fletcher, van den Broek, & Arthur, 1996; Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994; van den Broek, 1994; van den Broek, Young, Tzeng, & Linderholm, 1998.)

The cognitive-processing perspective highlighted aspects of reading that had not been emphasized in earlier theory—namely, that reading is an active mental process, not a passive one of simply receiving information. Readers must engage with ideas and make sense of information. Further, text itself is not a perfectly created, complete message but a source of information designed to be interacted with by the reader. Thus, for comprehension to occur, the reader must connect and integrate information as she or he proceeds through a text. During reading, a reader attempts to make sense of information contained in the sentence being read. Making sense requires the reader to select relevant information to attend to and then connect it to one of two possible sources—either information from preceding sentences or relevant background knowledge. The reader can connect two pieces of information, such as an idea in the sentence being read and information from a prior sentence, only if she or he attends to both of them at the same time. Yet human capacity for attention is limited; one can hold only so many ideas at a time. Successful comprehension depends on *choosing* the most relevant pieces of information to attend to, which the reader can then carry over in memory to the next sentence to be read. Skilled readers are better able to choose information that is likely to be relevant to subsequent information.

Connecting information throughout the course of reading enables the reader to build a coherent representation. Thus, another key to successful comprehension is being able to recognize or construct logical relationships among ideas. Good readers are better at putting together text information and background knowledge to draw inferences that keep the flow of the text ideas building smoothly. Poor and novice readers are more likely to fail to generate needed inferences and are also more likely to jump to conclusions beyond those justified by the text.

Taking Theory Into Practice

Given the kind of text recalls we were seeing in our studies and the text-processing perspective on comprehension that prevailed, we began to formulate what was needed to assist students' understanding of text. Clearly, the answer lay in helping students in the course of reading the text. That is, we needed to intervene in what they were doing when they were casting their eyes on text and require them to consider—attend to, focus on—what the text offered, and use that to make sense for themselves. In our first attempts to intervene in students' processing, we used a Think Aloud procedure to figure out what students were thinking as they went through a text. We gave students a text to read and stopped them after each sentence to ask them to talk about what they had read. As we proceeded, we began to alter the questions we asked to see if we could get more language and more thoughtful articulations. It was in that round of exploration that we discovered that when we asked open questions, especially those that referenced the author (i.e., “What do you think the author is trying to say?”) we were more likely to get useful information or to get the students to take a further look at the text content.

How Revising Text Gave Us a Young Reader's Perspective

As we developed our approach to comprehension instruction, we also drew on the research we'd done on revising texts to make them more comprehensible for students (Beck, McKeown, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1991). Our major question in these studies was: To what extent can students' comprehension be improved by having them read texts that have been revised to be more coherent?

To develop coherent text passages, we read passages from textbooks, trying to understand what the author's goal was for the passage and what each idea was supposed to contribute to the goal. We then formed our understandings into coherent, clear text statements. As we worked through texts in this way, we realized that our efforts to make connections and grapple with ideas were exactly the efforts we would want young readers to make as they constructed meaning from their texts. So it occurred to us that we might encourage an orientation toward building coherence in their reading by giving students a “reviser's eye.” It is a

reviser's task to make text understandable, and what we wanted students to do was to make text understandable to themselves. If they could be shown that reading is a roll-up-your-sleeves-and-dig-in kind of task, it might promote the kind of active engagement with text that is needed for learning to take place.

Taking Active Engagement Into Instruction

Active engagement in reading has received much attention in recent years from reading researchers and educators. This attention has been reflected in the development of several instructional approaches. One encourages students to respond actively to what they read through collaborative discussion. A number of different methods of fostering collaborative discussion have been developed, such as the Reflective Thinking Project (Anderson et al., 1992), the Book Club Project (McMahon, Raphael, Goately, Boyd, & Pardo, 1992), the Conversational Discussion Groups Project (O'Flahavan & Stein, 1992), Instructional Conversations (Goldenberg, 1992), and the Junior Great Books reading and discussion program (Denis & Moldof, 1983).

A related body of work on discussion-based approaches to comprehension comes from the field of English-language-arts education (for example, Langer, 1986, 1990; Nystrand, 1997). The foundation of this work involves the examination of social processes in classrooms and the context they create for the development of cognitive and linguistic tools for comprehension (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003).

A major difference between QtA and the approaches cited, from both the fields of reading and English-language arts, is that with the latter, discussions take place after reading, and the ongoing process of building meaning that takes place during reading is not addressed.

A second approach toward encouraging readers to assume more active roles has focused on the teaching, modeling, and practicing of strategies that mature readers use as they read, such as predicting, inferring, and summarizing. A number of different strategies as well as a number of different teaching methods have been proposed, such as Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), Informed Strategies for Learning (Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1984), Direct Explanation (Duffy et al., 1987), Transactional Strategies Instruction (Pressley et al., 1992), and Cognitive Process Instruction (Gaskins, Anderson, Pressley, Cunicelli, & Satlow,

1993). Promoting the use of reading strategies attempts to focus on the ongoing process of reading. A potential drawback of strategy-based instruction, however, is that both teachers' and students' attention may be drawn too easily to the surface features of the strategies themselves rather than to the meaning of what is being read. In fact, some researchers have questioned the necessity of emphasizing specific strategies if the goal of reading as an active search for meaning was upmost in a reader's mind (see, for example, Carver, 1987; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Pearson & Fielding, 1991).

A third approach to activating readers' engagement is based on promoting an active search for meaning. Students are directed to explain the information presented in their textbooks to themselves as they read. Chi and her colleagues have found that self-explanations can be elicited from students, and that when they are, students are better able to learn the material (Chi, Bassok, Lewis, Reimann, & Glaser, 1989; Chi, de Leeuw, Chiu, & LaVancher, 1994).

QtA shares features with these other approaches. However, it's unique in that it combines teacher-student collaboration with during-reading explanatory responses and emphasizes the fallibility of the author, a notion that we will consider shortly.

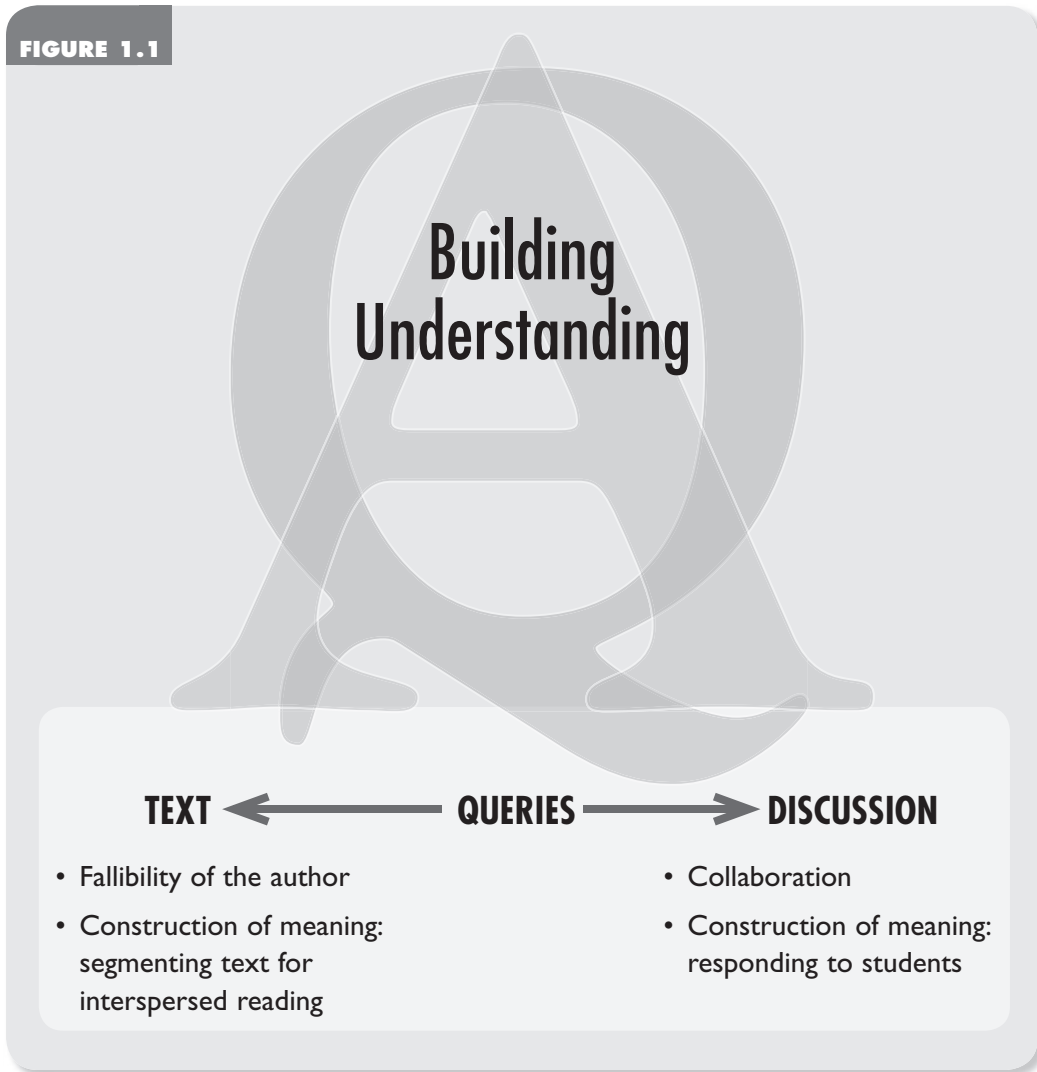
Defining QtA

As illustrated in Figure 1.1, Questioning the Author is an approach for text-based instruction that was designed to facilitate building understanding of text ideas. The goal of building understanding is supported through the use of Queries and Discussion. Before we consider the specific aspects of Questioning the Author, we first provide a snapshot of this approach in action.

In the discussion, from a fourth-grade class (see page 26), we can see the kinds of reactions students had to the text, how the teacher posed Queries and used student responses to keep the discussion flowing productively, and how the students worked together to build understanding of some key ideas.

In the story, *Sound of Sunshine—Sound of Rain*, by Florence Parry Heide, a brother and sister respond to the world very differently. As the plot unfolds, we learn that the children are African American and are living in a racially prejudiced community. The girl has responded to her environment with anger and wariness.

FIGURE 1.1



Her brother, who is blind and younger, is unaware of the racial environment. The climax of the story occurs when a shopkeeper refers to the sister as “this colored lady” needing to “go back where she belongs.”

In the discussion segment, the students, most of whom are African American, have just read this climactic scene. Notice that some of the children are immediately confused by what’s meant by “this colored lady,” seeing it as an anachronistic term, but they do reach the understanding that racial prejudice is involved.

- MS.W: What did the author tell us in that section? Charlene, you have a really confused look on your face. What's going on?
- CHARLENE: What she mean by *colored lady*? It says, "Better wait on this here colored lady..."
- MS.W: "Better wait on this here colored lady first." What does that mean?
- CARLOS: (*Pointing to and rubbing his skin*) This part.
- LAMONT: She means wait on a black person.
- MS.W: What do you think about that? Kristen?
- KARA: Um, I have a question. How long ago was this?
- DENICE: I think it was back then.
- MS.W: What do you mean how long ago was this?
- DENICE: Because the terms they're using.
- KARA: Because you know how it says, "Better wait on this here colored lady first." I thought they only said that early—1800s, 1900s—calling all black, ah, African Americans colored people.
- MS.W: What do you think, Wilmer?
- WILMER: Well, I think this lady's talking about racism. This lady's being racist.
- ROSETTA: To a child.
- MS.W: Yes. Lamont said the same thing. Let's see what happens and maybe we'll figure more things out.

In the next segment, as the sister and brother leave the store, the sister expresses anger and her brother brings up a remark from a conversation about the colors of balloons with Abram, a man he knew, saying, "Abram says color don't mean a thing." The text segment ends with the sister declaring, "I wish everyone in the whole world was blind."

MS.W: Oh, my! I want to start with that very last sentence:
“I wish everyone in the whole world was blind.”
What’s that all about?

BRENDA: It’s so nobody’s talking about what color you are.

DANISHA: They won’t know because they won’t be able to
see you.

MONTY: And they won’t be complaining.

WILMER: Color wouldn’t matter?

MS.W: Did we hear that before? That color doesn’t really matter.

MARYANNE: Yeah, we heard it from Abram.

SHIKARA: When Abram was describing color, it sounded like he
was describing people.

MS.W: What do you mean it sounded like he was describing
people?

Notice in this next section that Shikara refers to Abram’s initial description of the features of colors (e.g., some colors are soft, some loud, some tender).

SHIKARA: ‘Cause people are loud sometimes and sometimes
their voice is soft and some are big, some are little,
and some are short, like, real tall, and some are tender,
like a little bit chubby or something like that.

CARLOS: He said [colors were] covers for things

MS.W: He said it was covers for things.

DANISHA: Because everyone is the same in the inside. Because,
like you said, like, the colors is just a cover, like, every-
one is the same inside, but they might be like they have
a different color, or complexion, or something outside.

MS.W: Oh, so you’ve connected it back to Abram and his
discussion about the color of the balloons.

With the transcript of the classroom discussion as a backdrop, let's briefly consider each aspect of Questioning the Author as illustrated in Figure 1.1. We begin with the more global aspects that appear on or above the arrowed line.

Building Understanding

Building understanding, the goal of QtA, is what a reader needs to do to read successfully. As indicated earlier, building understanding is not the same as extracting information from the page, which was an older view of reading. Rather, building understanding involves actively figuring out what information we need to pay attention to and connecting that to other information (see, for example, Anderson, 1977; Beck, 1989; Beck & Carpenter, 1986; Kieras, 1985; Palincsar & Brown, 1989; Rumelhart, 1980; Schank & Abelson, 1977; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). In the classroom snapshot (pp. 26-27), we saw the way in which students paid attention to Abram's view of color and inferred from it his attitude toward people.

This current view of reading has significant implications for teaching, of course. A student can't learn by simply "getting" information from a source, nor can a teacher simply deliver it to a student. A more expert reader must reveal to a young reader how to crack open a text's meaning by engaging with it until it makes sense. QtA is an approach that gives teachers the tools to do this.

Text

QtA has been successfully used with both expository and narrative texts. This includes social studies textbooks, science textbooks, basal reading selections of both fiction and nonfiction, novels, narrative nonfiction, informational books, short stories, and poems. When students read a text in a QtA lesson, they are taught to address text ideas immediately, while they are reading. That is, they are taught to consider meaning, to grapple with the ideas on the page that are right at the end of their noses. This is different from asking students to answer questions about a text after they have finished reading it.

Discussion

The teacher and students build meaning as they read through discussion. (Although QtA was designed as a whole-class approach, it is also effective in small groups and other configurations, as we discuss in Chapter 5.) Classroom discussion is certainly not a new idea. But the purpose of discussion in QtA, and the kind of interactions students engage in during a QtA discussion, depart from many of the conventions of classroom discussions. For example, classroom discussions are typically characterized by students sharing ideas *after* they have already read a text and formulated their own thoughts and opinions about what the text says and means. The goal of a QtA discussion is to assist students with the process of developing meaning. Therefore, the discussion takes place *in the course of reading the text for the first time* so students can share in the experience of learning how to build meaning from a text.

Although discussion is a key aspect of a QtA lesson, it's not the focus. Rather, it's a means toward achieving a goal, and that goal is always the same: to understand the text. Discussions that survey students' ideas about a text or have them argue their opinions serve a different purpose; QtA discussion looks at text through a tighter lens, as a means to ensure that students are indeed comprehending what they read.

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand the distinction is to remember that unlike many kinds of discussions, in a QtA discussion, the teacher is actively involved. The teacher is right in there the whole time, as a facilitator, guide, initiator, and responder.

Queries

In a QtA lesson, students are prompted to interact with the text and converse about it through Queries. These general probes are phrased in such a way that they encourage young readers to take notice of a text—to consider meaning and develop ideas, not just passively receive and then retrieve information. Queries tend to be open-ended, and they place the responsibility for building meaning on students. Some examples of Queries are “So, what is the author trying to tell us?” or “Why is the author telling us that now?” We will talk a great deal more about Queries in the next chapter, but for now it is important to know that Queries are a key instructional tool in QtA discussions.

Let's consider for a moment how QtA plays out in a classroom. As a class reads a text, the teacher intervenes at selected points and poses Queries to prompt students to consider information. "What's the author telling us in that last paragraph?" the teacher may say. Students respond by contributing ideas: "I think the family is suspecting that someone was in their house when they were away." Students' responses may then be built upon, refined, or challenged by other students, or the teacher may prompt the student to elaborate. For example: "They suspect someone has been in their house." "What makes you say that?" Students and the teacher work collaboratively, interacting to grapple with ideas and build understanding. "Because the box wasn't where they left it." "The box was their secret." "Now they are afraid someone has figured out their secret."

Given the importance of building meaning as one reads, how do you get students to do it? How do you get students to become actively involved as they read, to dive into even difficult information and exert real mental energy to make sense of it? To answer this, let's look again at the diagram in Figure 1.1 on page 25. We already described QtA as an approach that is designed to assist students with building understanding of the ideas in a text through the use of Queries and Discussion. The features below the arrowed line in the diagram begin to explain how QtA prompts students to react to the text in a different way.

Fallibility of the Author

Four-color covers, elegant typefaces, hundred-plus pages of words—whether a dog-eared paperback novel or a hefty social studies textbook, any published work carries authority in a reader's eyes. To young readers, the unimpeachable authority of an author is not always a positive thing. We believe it can negatively influence the way students attend to and deal with information in the text.

Textbooks may carry the greatest authority, and thus be the most problematic, by virtue of their central role in the curriculum. They are often viewed as above criticism by both students and teachers. So when students have difficulty understanding what is in their textbooks, they tend to attribute the problem to their own inadequacies as readers. To avoid blaming themselves, they may disengage from the reading process—merely skim over what they read, apply the least effort possible—because not to try is not to fail.

An important mechanism for helping students engage with text in QtA is to "depose" the authority of the text. As a starting point, a teacher lets students

know that what's in a book is simply someone's ideas written down, and that this person may not have always said things in the clearest or easiest way for us to understand. This can be big news for students, and it often has a positive, liberating effect on them as readers. Texts become less impersonal, less authoritative, and more comprehensible.

In our research, we have found that over time students see that sometimes it's an author's failure to communicate ideas clearly that is a problem rather than their lack of ability to comprehend the ideas. As a result of this shift, students tend to feel more confident in working at understanding text and more willing to wrestle with ideas as they read. So QtA, by deliberately placing responsibility on students for wrestling with meaning, aims to teach students that they can become skilled at thinking through what an author might have meant to say at various points in the text.

Interspersed Reading

We teach students that readers should “take on” a text little by little, idea by idea, and try to understand, while they are reading, what ideas are there and how they might connect or relate those ideas to one another. We do this to simulate what a competent reader does in the course of reading. The competent reader is continually expending effort as she reads to make sense as she goes along, even though it may seem like one smooth, seamless process. She does not withhold understanding from herself until a section of text is completed.

Now let's consider what teachers often do when they teach from a text. It is fairly typical practice to assign students material to be read and then to pose questions to evaluate their comprehension. This is basically an “after-the-fact” procedure—students are left on their own until reading is complete. This may not lead to productive reading for several reasons. First, students may have questions in their minds as they read, or they may finish a text knowing only that they are lost but not sure why. Moreover, there is no way for teachers to know whether some students have constructed misconceptions about the passage but think they have understood. Second, even though students hear “right” answers in after-reading questioning, they may never understand what makes them right. In QtA the goal is to help students understand what a portion of text is about as they read it for the first time. The emphasis is on articulating a clear understanding of “just” that portion before tackling the next portion, to tease out what an author

is intending to say right there. This orientation disciplines both teachers and students to build their understandings in small doses. No one gets lost in a vast sea of text. Or put another way, the local understanding gets settled sufficiently so that global understandings are founded on solid ground.

Building meaning in the course of reading means going back and forth between reading relatively small segments of text and discussing the ideas encountered. This back-and-forth process requires decisions about where to stop reading and begin discussion. It is the task of a QtA teacher to analyze and identify the important concepts of a text ahead of the students and make decisions about how much of the text needs to be read at once and why. Later, when we address planning, we will discuss in greater detail how to make decisions about where to segment a text and how to introduce the concept of author fallibility to students. For now, we are introducing these concepts to provide a sense of the “big picture” of QtA.

Collaboration

Remember that the point of QtA is to get students to consider an author’s ideas and, if necessary, to challenge an author’s words or organization of ideas in an effort to deduce the intended meaning. To accomplish this, we teachers have to shift some responsibility from ourselves to our students; too often, we do the thinking and the talking. We need to hear student voices, encourage their contributions, and urge them to be unafraid to test their ideas in front of others. We need to model for them how to collaborate with their peers and us to construct meaning.

Considering text as a group gives students a powerful opportunity to hear from one another and to consider alternative possibilities, but it can be intimidating for them at first. The beauty of QtA discussion is that it puts the author in the hot seat—everyone understands that the author, not the teacher, has presented the class with this challenge. Students and teacher are suddenly on the same team. Everyone is in play, grappling, running with ideas—everyone is engaged in this fun, rigorous game of working out a text’s meaning. The chance for misconceptions to accumulate diminishes, and the opportunity for authentic, meaningful discussion about important ideas increases.

Responding to Students

QtA creates an extremely interactive role for the teacher. The teacher has the important task of responding to student responses in ways that highlight those aspects that contribute to meaning making. That helps students both recognize and build on those aspects. To accomplish this, teachers need to be particularly attentive to what students say and then consider how to use their contributions to move the discussion productively.

Ending Notes

Here are a few key points to keep in mind as we wrap up our discussion of texts and how students understand them:

- Studies of students reading school texts show that they often do not adequately comprehend what they read.
- Although comprehension can be improved by designing lessons that include a logical sequence of questions, provide relevant background knowledge, and offer more coherent text, students' comprehension is still often sparse.
- Successful comprehension is an active process in which readers attend to information as they encounter it in text, hold relevant pieces in memory, and then connect those pieces to subsequent text information with the goal of building an overall representation of the ideas presented in the text.
- Questioning the Author is an instructional approach based on supporting students' engagement with text by mimicking the way competent readers build meaning from text.
- Questioning the Author operates by having a teacher pose Queries, open-ended prompts to consider text context, during the initial reading. As students respond, the teacher follows up in ways that encourage students to elaborate, connect, and collaborate toward building meaning from what they are reading.