



The Reader

The Journal of the Arkansas Reading Association

Volume 30, Issue 1

Spring 2006

ARKANSAS READING
ASSOCIATION
AN AFFILIATE OF
THE
INTERNATIONAL
READING
ASSOCIATION

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A Closer Look at Meaning in Reading Comprehension Linda Dorn, PhD.

'That's the most important piece of evidence we've heard yet,' said the King, rubbing his hands; 'so now let the jury--' 'If any one of them can explain it,' said Alice. 'I'll give him six-pence. I don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it.'

The jury all wrote down on their slates, 'She doesn't believe there's an atom of meaning in it,' but none of them attempted to explain the paper.

'If there's no meaning in it,' said the King, 'that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any. And yet I don't know,' he went on, spreading out the verses on his knee, and looking at them with one eye; 'I seem to see some meaning in them, after all. "--

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*.

In the classic book, *Alice in Wonderland*, the King and Alice looked over the poem and puzzled about its meaning. "There's not an atom of meaning in it," Alice exclaimed, perplexed over the words, yet determined to make sense of them. Spreading the verses out on his knee, the king searched the author's message until he discovered "some meaning in them after all." The human desire to make meaning is the ultimate goal of every reading event, that is, if the reader understands that comprehension is the reason for reading.

Meaning is the difference between chaos and order. Chaos exists when we are puzzled, confused, or disorganized. With-

out meaning, people would be in a continual state of bewilderment, wandering around the world with no sense of direction. During reading, confusion can occur if a reader lacks the background knowledge to build connections and infer relationships. The heartbeat of reading comprehension resides in the mind's ability to notice associations between multiple sources of information.

In this article, I will discuss three important concepts that can influence how a reader comprehends a message: meaning-making, perception, and integration. I will emphasize the relationship between the text message and the reader's mind in constructing meaning.

Meaning-Making and Comprehension

The general process of comprehending is not unique to the reading event. From a cognitive point of view, whatever influences our general thinking (or our problem-solving) also influences our reading comprehension. Comprehending is the mind's ability to make sense of life-- a human survival mechanism that allows us to function without chaos. We are constantly comprehending and monitoring the signals in our environment. Otherwise, we would be rambling around with no sense of direction or purpose. The strategies we use for comprehending life in general are comparable to those we use when we seek to comprehend

written text.

A reader's comprehension is influenced by a range of internal factors (in the head processes), including perceptions, beliefs, problem-solving strategies, and the motivation to keep thinking about the particular event. Our background knowledge is critical: if we lack the background experience to interpret the reading event, the message--no matter how beautifully written or how well we have taught it--can be nonsense to the reader. Comprehension results from the mind's ability to make links and ask questions regarding the particular reading event. If the mind cannot formulate questions about the reading, then true comprehension is impossible.

With that said, we might describe comprehension as a reflection of the inner workings of the mind: the result of our thinking--how we understand something. Using meaning as a guide, good readers make deliberate choices, including decisions about particular strategies for solving words and the amount of time to spend on particular aspects of the comprehending process. To understand a message, the mind must integrate multiple pieces of information and self-correct any problems that interfere with meaning. This is deliberate and reflective thinking. Without meaning, the goal of reading becomes a senseless act.

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Linda Dorn, PhD.

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"Comprehending is the mind's ability to make sense of life—a human survival mechanism that allows us to function without chaos."



Mrs. Jerrielynn Mapp builds meaning with the book introduction during guided reading.

A Closer Look at Meaning in Reading Comprehension (continued from page 1)

Integration Process

The processing of information occurs at three levels: input, integration, and output. The eyes and ears are the tools for inputting the information, yet the mind is the place where interpretation will occur. Integration is the mind's instrument for constructing meaning. In other words, what is already in the mind will influence what the eyes will see and what the ears will hear. The relationship of meaning to perception and integration is reciprocal. To illustrate, let's take a look at Leo Lionni's tale of *Fish is Fish*. The story begins with the minnow and tadpole living together in a common world that creates a context for shared understanding. Yet, when the tadpole grows into a frog, he leaves his friend the fish behind and expands his worldly experiences to include new knowledge. Leo Lionni illustrates the misconceptions that can occur when the frog attempts to describe these new images to the fish. "People", he says, "they stand up straight and walk on legs"; however, the fish can only visualize people through his own background experiences. The message here is that meaning is reconstructed through the integration of old and new information, which can lead to a personalized interpretation of a message.

If integration is related to comprehension, how can teachers select books that promote the integration process? When the book is too hard or poorly written, the process of integration is inhibited and meaning cannot do its job. This implies that a book must hold the reader's attention to ensure that problem-solving attempts are successfully consolidated with meaning. With appropriate texts, meaning can provide the reader with feedback

(confirming) and feed-forward (anticipating) information for resolving conflict and keeping comprehension on track.

Text Meanings

Layers of meaning are embedded in everything we do. We might consider meaning as the glue that holds our thoughts together and maintains our attention. Books can provide readers with vicarious experiences, allowing them to acquire new knowledge through literacy. In other words, a reader can learn new concepts through books, as long as the text concepts can be related to something familiar. Say, for example, a reader has never been to the zoo, but the concept of a zoo can be an easy one for a child who has seen wild animals on television, even cartoons, or has heard stories about wild animals. Actually, most new learning in life is acquired through vicarious experiences, thus the goal for the teacher is to build the connections for the reader and fill in the gaps that complete the meaning-making experience.

With that in mind, we can place the difficulty of text concepts on a continuum that represents easier to harder concepts. If the text concepts are too difficult, the integration process can be impaired and comprehension will suffer; thus, the goal of reading can become a meaningless activity. In promoting integration with beginning readers, teachers might select texts with concrete concepts that are common to everyday life. When readers acquire better integration strategies, teachers might select texts with easy and generalizable concepts that contain meaningful associations that teachers can build upon. In contrast, if texts contain unknown and abstract concepts that require specialized or scientific knowledge, the reader

might have difficulty with integration, thus impairing meaning-making. In these situations, prior to text reading, the teacher might provide students with opportunities (e.g., shared reading, read-aloud, science experiments) for building the necessary background to promote integration when reading occurs.

Word Meanings

A reader's comprehension of a word can range from somewhat familiar to deep knowledge. The reader can understand the larger meaning within a text without knowing the specific meanings for all the words. Consider, for instance, a patterned text with a repetitive line *Clever little car*. How much does the reader need to know about the word *clever* to understand its function in communicating a specific text message? In this example, the reader should be able to gather enough information from the text to infer that *clever* is just another word to describe the smart little car. Word meanings are acquired through associations with other words and refined by using them in multiple contexts. Some years ago, Michael Graves (1985, p. 8) described four types of words that I have found useful for thinking about how word knowledge influences reading comprehension.

Sight words: Words that are in the students' oral vocabulary, but they cannot yet read.

New words: Words that are in neither students' oral nor their reading vocabularies of students, but for which a concept is available (in known words) or for which one can be built fairly easily.

New concepts: Words that are in neither the students' oral nor their reading vocabularies, for which they don't have a

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A Closer Look at Meaning in Reading Comprehension (continued from page 2)

concept, and for which a concept is not easily built.

New meaning: Words which are already in the students' reading vocabularies with one or more meanings, but for which additional meanings need to be learned.

A Decision-Making Process

Thus far, I have tried to illustrate that comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, and the desire to make meaning is the driving force behind every reading act.

The very act of comprehension is a systematic process that is regulated by the mind's desire to make meaning. These cognitive sequences are actually motor functions, for example, consider how a planning action requires the mind to assemble background information from one part of the brain, align it with other information, integrate the various sources, and utilize this knowledge for initiating a plan to solve a reading problem. Good readers make deliberate choices, including decisions about particular strategies for solving words and the amount of time to spend on particular aspects of the comprehending process. This implies that meaning-making is not a random act, but rather a

thoughtful, well-organized process for trying to make sense out of a given situation. Simply put, our ability to make good decisions is regulated by our meaningful and relevant goals.

The yearning to understand why things happen is a basic instinct of the human mind. As intellectual beings, we question, we ponder, we seek, and although some things might not have clear answers, the human desire to create meaning is the very foundation on which knowledge is built.

Words, Text, and Mind

The reader's comprehension is directly influenced by the precision of the author's words. Words are simply the tools people use to express ideas—clearly defined words that are sequenced in a logical order—yet words harmonize together to create a global message for communicating a precise message. The mind does not remember in single words; instead the words are clustered to represent larger chunks of meaning. The writer's responsibility is to find the right combination of words and place them in the right places within the sentence, so that the reader will process them as ideas rather than individual words. Good writers will use figurative lan-

guage to build layers of meaning for a particular concept, stimulating the mind of the reader. A good reader will go beyond the author's surface language and infer deeper meanings through inferred relationships. In other words, meaning results from the integration of words, text, and mind—working together in synchrony to create knowledge.

Closing Thoughts

"I seem to find some meaning in it, after all," the King had said to Alice. For without meaning, there is no reason to pursue the task or no reason to read the book. John Dewey (1933) explained it well. *To understand it is to grasp meaning. Until we understand, we are, if we have curiosity, troubled, baffled, and hence moved to inquire. After we understand, we are, comparatively at least, intellectually at home* (p. 132).

***About the author:** Linda Dorn is a Professor of Reading at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She is the co-author of numerous publications, including her most recent book, *Teaching for Deep Comprehension: A Reading Workshop Approach*.



Students in Mrs. Belinda Golden's fourth grade class meet for a literature discussion group.

“The very act of comprehension is a systematic process that is regulated by the mind's desire to make meaning.”



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