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Questioning the Author: Making Sense of Social Studies

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This instructional approach enhances reading comprehension by teaching students to actively build understanding as they read.



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In a study we conducted in the early 1990s, we asked elementary school students who had completed at least one unit of study on the American Revolution to tell us what the Revolution was about. Here are two responses:

I thought it was the north and the south, or is that the Civil War?

They wanted different rules and stuff like that, like one part of the world they wanted to be free and other parts wanted to like take over and tell people what to do.

Unfortunately, our studies suggest that such confused student responses are common. Even when the comments come closer to the mark, students clearly have difficulty making sense of their social studies textbooks—little wonder, for these textbooks often lack explanations and connections among ideas and events (Beck, McKeown, & Gromoll, 1989; Beck, McKeown, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1991; McKeown & Beck, 1990; McKeown, Beck, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1992).

Because textbooks often present obstacles to student understanding, we developed a strategy called *Questioning the Author*. This instructional approach to comprehension focuses students' attention on building understanding of text ideas, in contrast to the older notion of comprehension as learning facts and extracting information from a text.

Building Understanding

The literature on reading has discussed the concept of building understanding for at least 30 years. *Questioning the Author*, however, builds understanding in a new way. In the traditional approach to comprehension, students wait until they finish reading to deal with the text's ideas. *Questioning the Author* teaches students to grapple with ideas while they read, to dig in and make sense of ideas as they initially encounter them in the text. Students use three sources to build understanding: texts, queries, and discussion.

Students learn to view texts as "just someone's ideas written down"—ideas that may not always be clear or complete. When students become aware that an author might be fallible in trying to communicate ideas, texts seem less intimidating. The responsibility for understanding no longer rests solely with a reader's ability to understand, but also with an author's ability to create an understandable text. This shift encourages young readers to perceive the process of understanding as an interesting challenge rather than a threatening chore.

Questioning the Author prompts student response to text through such queries as, "What is the author trying to say?" or "What did the author say to make you think that?" As students read a text, the teacher intervenes at selected points and poses queries to prompt students to consider information in the text. Queries drive discussion and keep it focused on meaning.

In discussion, students and the teacher work collaboratively, interacting to grapple with ideas and build meaning. Students respond to queries by contributing ideas that other students and the teacher may build on, refine, or challenge. When the class has identified the important concepts in one text segment, it proceeds to the next text segment.

Planning for Understanding

During the past decade, as we have trained teachers in implementing Questioning the Author, we have identified the key role of establishing goals for understanding as the initial planning step. The understandings that teachers want students to develop provide a framework for planning and conducting each lesson. This mindset guides teachers' decisions about where to stop in the course of reading, what to ask, how to follow up students' initial responses, and which responses to emphasize.

One teacher we worked with told us that she defined text understandings as what students might ideally say at the dinner table if asked what they had read in school about a certain topic. We find this down-to-earth approach particularly valuable; it helps us keep in mind that the understandings should be stated from the students' perspective.

The following examples illustrate the relationship between the Questioning the Author strategy and the goal of understanding.

Focusing on Understanding

A Geography Example

Elementary geography includes the study of regions—both specific regions of the world and such geographic types as mountain or desert regions. The larger goal of studying a region is to develop a sense of the ways in which that region's geographic features create a distinct environment that affects life in the region. A teacher planning a Questioning the Author lesson for a given type of region, such as a desert, needs to ask: What do students need to take away from the text in order to understand the implications of the geographic features of deserts?

Consider one 4th grade textbook's 28-page unit on desert regions, which focuses on the Sahara. The first chapter introduces general features of deserts and identifies the Sahara as the world's largest desert. The second chapter, "Change in the Sahara," describes how the region changed long ago from grassland to desert. Although the text discusses climate changes as the major force, it mentions people as partly responsible because they "worked the land too much" and "use[d] the land for too much grazing." (Macmillan, 1985, p. 131). The section ends with the following text:

Many people became nomads. Nomads are people who move from place to place to find grazing land for their animals. The nomads of the Sahara began to move about the desert. They had to find food for their sheep, goats, and camels. (p. 131)

What role does this information serve? An immediate and conventional response might be that it's intended to teach students the meaning of *nomad*; indeed, the term *nomad* appears as an item in the end-of-chapter review (p. 136). But what understanding do students actually construct when they learn that nomads are people who move around to find new places for their animals to graze? This simple fact does not help students understand how the desert conditions of the Sahara have influenced life there.

This typical social studies text does not make any attempt to explicitly connect the facts that it presents about desert conditions and nomads. In fact, because the nomad segment follows sentences about people's overuse of the land, the text may give students the false impression that nomads, by moving their animals around to graze in different places, were responsible for changes instead of victims of them.

We want students to grasp a larger and more accurate idea: that desert conditions made it difficult for people to find enough food for their animals, so they were forced to move from place to place to find sufficient grazing opportunities. Essentially, we want students to understand that a nomadic lifestyle evolved from desert conditions.

To help students develop this understanding, we must take them beyond "What are nomads?" and even beyond "Why did people become nomads?" Rather, students need to consider how living by moving from place to place connects to the Sahara becoming a desert. In Questioning the Author, we would probably stop after reading the nomad section and insert a query, such as, "How does that information fit in with what the author is telling us about the Sahara?" and follow-ups, such as, "What does the text mean when it says that they began to move about the desert?"

A History Example

A 5th grade social studies book includes a chapter about events leading up to the Revolutionary War (Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, 1993). Suppose that after previewing the four-page section titled "Rebellion in Virginia," we can see that the text might not help students connect the facts presented and the big picture.

For example, although the text describes how Virginia's Governor Berkeley took away the colonists' voice in government through such actions as disallowing elections for the House of Burgesses and restricting voting rights to landowners, it presents these events more as a local struggle between Berkeley and some of the people of Virginia than as a struggle between Great Britain and the colonists. The text says that Berkeley "did not like the idea of common people having a voice in government" (p. 163). But the larger understanding is that this view represented a clash between Britain and the colonists, not merely an idiosyncrasy of Governor Berkeley's. The text introduces Berkeley as "the king's chosen governor," but it does not make it clear that he was an extension of the British government. In our experience, young students have difficulty sorting out the British-colonial relationship; they may become confused by text that talks about the government of Virginia—which they know to be part of America—as adversarial to colonial interests.

In planning for a Questioning the Author lesson on this section of text, we begin by thinking about our goal for student understanding. We want to help students see how the British-colonial conflict is inherent in the details of the local conflict in Virginia and then guide students to understand the causal chain of events leading to the American Revolution. Figure 1 shows how the lesson could begin to build this understanding. The first query prompts students to establish that the governor represents the British government. The rest of the queries for the two segments prompt students to consider the conflict between the governor's actions and the colonists' position on self-government. As they discuss these ideas, students build their understanding of how the British ignited reaction in the colonists that led to revolution.

Figure 1. A Sample Questioning the Author Plan for "Rebellion in Virginia"

Textbook Section	Queries
<p>William Berkeley, the king's chosen governor, kept a firm grip on the government of Virginia. He hand-picked his advisors. . . . He personally chose people to run the courts. . . .</p>	<p>What is the author telling us about Governor Berkeley?</p> <p>Follow-up queries if needed:</p> <p>What does the author mean by saying that he was "the king's chosen governor"? How does the king get to choose the governor?</p> <p>"He personally chose people to run the courts"—what is that all about? How does that fit into what we've learned about the colonists?</p>
<p>Berkeley even talked the House [of Burgesses] into changing the voting laws so that men without land could not vote. . . . Berkeley did not trust poor people who did not own land. He thought they might stand up to him and cause trouble, so he took their vote away.</p>	<p>What do you think the author means by saying that Berkeley took their vote away? What would it mean for the people to stand up to him?</p> <p>Follow-up query if needed:</p> <p>What does that tell us about the colonists?</p>

Expanding Understanding

As these examples illustrate, Questioning the Author begins by taking stock of what we want students to learn from a text and noticing what might interfere with that understanding. In content areas such as social studies, readers can easily get distracted by facts, because content areas are factual. But learning the facts does not equal understanding. We must be careful not to assume that implied ideas, which are clear to us as adult readers, are equally obvious to students. We need to consider how text presentations will probably strike students, given their level of background knowledge and the associations that they may make.

Effective use of Questioning the Author not only helps students comprehend specific content-area texts, but also teaches them to view reading as an active process of constructing meaning rather than a passive process of extracting information and answering questions. The habit of building meaning as

they engage in reading will support students' growth as readers and learners far beyond any specific lesson.

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