**How to Achieve Deep Understanding of a Complex Text**

**By Joanna Hawkins**

The classrooms of successful teachers have a particular energy present. There’s a quiet buzz that pervades the room—the soft bustle of pages being turned, pencils scratching busily across paper, student voices exchanging ideas. Desks are covered with materials, books full of margin notes, and highlighting applied to the text. The teacher moves around the classroom, stopping to speak to student groups for a few moments at a time, answering questions and sometimes asking them. Pausing at critical junctures to pose a question to the whole class, the teacher will ask students to produce evidence to support their point of view or provide a deeper explanation. Other times, the teacher will guide them to certain key passages, positioning them to recognize important ideas and nuances, always pushing them to articulate their thinking out loud and on the page. The image that forms when looking at the classrooms of these masters of their craft is one of carefully orchestrated learning.

The goal of successful teaching is not teaching—it’s learning—and successful teachers, therefore, carefully design a learning plan beforehand to maximize the learning experiences of their students. Successful teachers intentionally devise classroom activities to help students make deep meaning from the text they are reading and show it in writing. They do so by embodying the intent of the exemplars gathered here—planning backwards for the understanding of the text they want their students to have and systematically unfolding a series of questions and tasks that lead to deep learning on the part of their students. In selecting a rich and complex text to read, successful teachers are eager to articulate what students should emerge having learned after multiple reads and thoughtful discussion. They work hard at envisioning the kinds of text-dependent questions that would lead students to uncover evidence they could use in writing about the text. And most of all, by the end of the design process, they can answer the all-important question of why students should read this particular text.

What is little appreciated is how hard this is—how difficult it is to design a classroom experience that will lead to authentic learning by students. Successful teachers are not savants—what defines them is their willingness to work hard and focus intently on the challenge learning poses. By engaging in a design process that forces them to articulate where students should end up, successful teachers figure out how to get them there. They are not afraid to articulate their initial puzzlement at how best to go at a text. They are willing to talk out their ideas with colleagues and “test drive” questions and tasks with mentors or even on themselves. They think critically about how much of the text should be read out loud, how much to have students re-read, and the passages on which to concentrate. They are attuned to the presence of academic vocabulary and how to help their students absorb its meaning, while remaining cognizant of challenging sentence and text structures that require extra attention when explaining the text. Successful teachers include multiple discussion activities that challenge students to pick out evidence from the text. They remain flexible when framing the levels of understanding that they want to achieve over the course of a lesson: sometimes what’s needed is just a basic comprehension of plot; other times, they build on that to achieve a high degree of precision about what students understand or pose questions with a wide scope in order to encourage individual use of evidence in developing interpretations of the text. These goals will not be driven by what interests them in the text, but by a host of student-centered factors: the time of year, the type of text, the goals of the unit, and most of all, the needs of the class. In short, successful teachers engage in a planning process that carefully maps out all of the work that students will do to get them to the deep understanding the teacher wants them to achieve from the text.

By engaging in backwards design and creating structured classroom experiences that follow the principles embodied in the exemplars found here, successful teachers make it difficult for students to fail. In these classrooms, students emerge having in their mind’s eye a model of what authentic, thoughtful thinking and writing about a text can look like—a model that they themselves own, understand, and can call upon when they read and write about another complex text. When teachers plan for student understanding of complex text, they are far more likely to help students actually achieve that deep understanding and to be able to communicate that understanding in writing.