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CHAPTER 1

The Building Blocks of Questioning the Author

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Helping students deal effectively with text arose as a focus for us some decades ago. Our purpose was to develop effective comprehension instruction. Both our research work and our development of comprehension instruction were grounded in a cognitive processing perspective. An important message on comprehension today is that that view still holds. It is still the dominant explanation for how comprehension occurs (see, e.g., Byrnes & Wasik, 2019; Kim et al., 2016). So we thought it useful to start with a short description of that orientation.

As our earlier book (2006) explained, a cognitive processing view of comprehension provided the framework for Questioning the Author (QtA). That perspective views comprehension as a reader's active process of attending to information in text, making decisions about what information is important, holding that information in memory as further information is encountered, and making connections to new relevant information—all driven by the goal of making sense of the text, or in more cognitive terms, building a coherent representation of what a text is trying to communicate.

The goal of making sense of information in a text requires drawing connections between pieces of text information using two possible sources—information from preceding sentences in the text or relevant background knowledge. This perspective is mainly attributed to the work of Kintsch and van Dijk (1978), with many other researchers also explicating aspects of the theory and its implications (see, e.g., 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 made clear several aspects of reading not emphasized in earlier descriptions of the reading process. First, reading requires that the reader be engaged in an active mental process of dealing with information rather than being a mere recipient of a text's message. Second, as readers read they need to connect and integrate information rather than simply accumulating it (Linderholm, Virtue, Tzeng, & van den Broek, 2004; van den Broek & Kendeou, 2008).

The following is an illustration of how the process plays out on a simple text.

Text	A reader's take	Relation to process
Mia, a 6-year old girl, wanted a puppy.	Girl wants puppy; possibly anticipating that parents don't want one.	Selection of key ideas and relating to knowledge of similar situations.
Her parents said that they would be happy to add a dog to the family.	Possible hurdle to getting a dog not at issue.	Revise anticipated conflict.
Her older brother, Mike, wanted a big dog he could run with.	New character has a desire—alert to possible problem.	Add new text info and anticipate how it may affect the story.
But Mia wanted a fluffy little dog that she could cuddle.	Root of problem is presented. Mia and Mike want different things; possible conflict likely.	Connect new information and anticipate how it may affect the story.

QtA's approach to text embodies the cognitive processing orientation through its focus on the importance of students' active efforts to build meaning from what they read and the need for students to work at figuring out and grappling with ideas in a text. Next we provide a short overview of how we got started and brief descriptions of the features of QtA.

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How We Got Started

The work we have done in comprehension, as well as that in decoding and vocabulary, has kept us close to the schools. We have visited classrooms, worked with teachers, and interacted with students. Given this background, the road to developing QtA began with our observations that often young readers "went through" a text without understanding it. In our attempts to understand how students comprehend text and eventually develop ways to support students' comprehension, we conducted a number of studies to try out ideas with individual students as well as with borrowed classrooms. We developed many of the ideas we tried out based on an analysis we had conducted on the texts and lessons within the then-current basal readers, in particular the questions teachers' editions suggested asking students about the materials that they read (Beck, McKeown, McCaslin, & Burkes, 1979).

We often found questions in the basals to be inadequate in terms of their sequences and the content that was queried. In consideration of these issues we developed the construct of a "Story Map" (Beck & McKeown, 1981)—subsequently changed to a text map as it was intended to apply to both fiction and nonfiction. Our construct of a text map was that questions be developed based on a logical organization of events and ideas of central importance to the text and the interrelationships of these events and

ideas—and most importantly that questions can't be evaluated in isolation. Rather, the value of a question depends on the text content that the question queried.

We then conducted several studies in which we redesigned lesson components and lesson texts in ways we believed would be effective for student understanding. We began by studying whether text map questions improved comprehension by comparing such questions to those in the basals and found that they did (Beck, Omanson, & McKeown, 1982). We also revised texts to make them more coherent and compared students' comprehension of the revised versions to basal texts. Again, there was improvement in students' comprehension (Beck, McKeown, Omanson, & Pople, 1984). We also studied adding a component of background knowledge to lessons (McKeown, Beck, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1992) and again found benefits for students. But even though comprehension improved in those studies, it was far from optimal.

Given our results, we began to formulate what was needed to assist students' understanding of text. Our answer lay in helping in the course of reading the text. That is, intervening in what students were doing when they were casting their eyes on text and requiring them to consider—attend to, focus on—what the text offered and use that to make sense for themselves. Our first attempts to intervene in students' processing involved trying to figure out what students were thinking as they went through a text, by using a think-aloud procedure. 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 probes we asked the students to see if we could prompt students to be more reflective about the text and to reveal more of what they were thinking. It was in that round of exploration that we discovered that when we asked open questions, especially those that referenced the author, such as "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.

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Other Approaches to Influencing Comprehension

As we completed our work on investigating and working to enhance student comprehension, we were aware that many colleagues in the reading field were also engaged in developing approaches to affect comprehension. One line of work sought to find the strategies that mature readers use as they read and then develop approaches for teaching, modeling, and practicing these strategies. A number of different strategies as well as a number of different approaches to teaching them to students were 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).

In our experience, strategy instruction has an inherent potential drawback, in that the attention of teachers and students can too easily be drawn to the mechanics of the strategies themselves rather than to the content of what is being read. Indeed,

other researchers have questioned the necessity of employing specific strategies if the goal of reading as an active search for meaning could be kept in mind (see, e.g., Carver, 1987; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Pearson & Fielding, 1991; McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009).

In the 1990s, another line of work with the goal of getting students actively involved in reading emerged from observations that discussion plays an important role. A number of different approaches to fostering collaborative discussion were 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 (Dennis & Moldof, 1983). A major difference between discussion under these approaches and QtA is that those discussions take place after reading. Thus the ongoing process of building meaning that takes place during reading, or mentally "online," is not addressed.

A third direction of work on activating readers' engagement relates to the notion of promoting an active search for meaning. This work involves directing students 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 presented to them (Chi, Bassok, Lewis, Reimann, & Glaser, 1989; Chi, de Leeuw, Chiu, & LaVancher, 1994).

Questioning the Author shares features with these other approaches to learning from text. However, its uniqueness lies in combining collaboration with during-reading, explanatory responses.

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Building Understanding: An Overview of QtA

Building understanding, the goal of QtA, is what a reader needs to do to read successfully. Building understanding involves figuring out what text information we need to pay attention to and connecting that to other information. According to this view, learning can't happen by simply "getting" information from a source, nor can it simply be delivered to a learner. Rather a learner must actively deal with the information in a text in order to make sense of it. Such interactions with text are at the heart of the cognitive perspective that frames QtA.

An excellent example of the difference between "getting information" and understanding information was the incident in a fourth-grade class that several of us witnessed, when a student responded to a teacher's question with virtually the same words as were in the text. The teacher responded, "That's what the author said, but what did the author mean?" 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 develop and grapple with the ideas on a page that are at the ends

of their noses. This is quite different from asking students to answer questions about a text after they have finished reading it. At that point, comprehension already has or has not occurred.

Given the importance of building meaning as one reads, how do you get students to do that? How do you get students to become actively involved as they read, to dive into even difficult information and grapple to make sense of it? Toward dealing with those questions, below we consider features of QtA.

Text

QtA was initially designed to help students understand social studies textbooks, which at the time were notorious for less than coherent texts (Beck, McKeown, & Gromoll, 1989). But as we began to introduce the approach to teachers, we quickly recognized that QtA could be useful with other genres. Thus we made minor adjustments for various genres, and QtA has been successfully used with both expository and narrative texts. This includes social studies textbooks, science textbooks, basal reading selections, both fiction and nonfiction, novels, short stories, trade books, plays, and poems. We cannot think of a genre in which QtA, with minimal adjustment, would not work. In fact one of our former colleagues, Ms. O., a public school teacher who, for a while, was on special assignment from her district to our Working Group at the university, was a Sunday school teacher who adapted QtA. In the study of the Gospels, she asked such queries as "What did Luke mean when he said . . . ?" and even "What was God trying to say?" One of our colleagues, Dr. L., whose research included learning in museum environments, often suggested asking, "What do you think the artist wanted to communicate in this painting/sculpture/installation?"

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Interspersed Reading

We teach students that readers "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. We do this to simulate what a competent reader does in the course of reading. While you are reading you are making sense of it as you go along, even though it may seem like one smooth, seamless process. You do not put comprehension on hold until you have completed a text, or even a section of text.

In contrast, it is a fairly typical teaching practice to assign material to be read and then to pose questions to evaluate student comprehension. This is basically an "after-the-fact" procedure. Because 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 simply finish a text knowing only that they are lost but not sure why. Moreover, there is no way for teachers to know if some students have constructed misconceptions about the passage but think they have understood it. And even though students hear "right" answers in after-reading questioning, they may never understand what makes them right. But in QtA the goal is to assist students in

understanding what a portion of text is about at the point of reading that portion for the first time, as well as to support them to see how ideas in previous text fit with current text.

Interspersed Discussion

Building meaning in the course of reading means going back and forth between reading segments of text—be they a paragraph or two or a chapter in a novel—and giving voice to the ideas encountered in the segment. In fact, occasionally stopping after a sentence of great importance or a particularly difficult sentence is appropriate. There are several options for who reads the text and how it is read. A student or the teacher may read the text segment orally and the students follow along, or the teacher assigns the students to read a text segment silently. Thus the activity structure used for developing meaning intersperses reading with discussing what is read. The purpose for engaging students in these interspersed interactions in QtA departs from what is conventionally viewed as classroom discussion. Classroom discussions are typically characterized by students sharing opinions and ideas after they have already read a text and formulated their own thoughts and views about the text.

In QtA, the intention of interspered discussion is to assist students in the process of developing meaning from a text. Therefore, the discussion takes place in the course of reading a text for the first time as students share in the experience of learning how to build meaning from a text. Perhaps one of the ways to best understand the distinction is to remember that unlike in many kinds of discussions, the QtA teacher is actively involved as a facilitator, guide, initiator, and responder. This is different from, for example, Collaborative Reasoning (Reznitskaya, Kuo, Glina, & Anderson, 2009), in which a teacher sets a discussion in motion by providing a question or topical issue, and the students explore the issue with little teacher involvement.

Queries

In a QtA lesson the interaction of text and discussion is accomplished through Queries. Queries are general probes the teacher uses to initiate and develop discussion. Queries *are* questions, but to emphasize their distinctive features and not get confused with other labels for types of questions in the field (e.g., literal, interpretive), we initiated the term *Queries*. We have seen that teachers adopt the term and refer to *Queries* when talking about QtA and use the term *questions* for non-QtA conversations.

The goal of Queries is to prompt students to consider meaning and develop ideas rather than to retrieve information and state facts. Queries are text based and open. By "open," we mean that a Query does not provide much directive information about what a correct response should be. As an example, two of us were observing a lesson in a middle school with a text called "The Tiger's Heart," in which a lion terrorizes a village at night. The story starts with two paragraphs: the first describes the jungle in the day, emphasizing how comfortable and familiar it is to the village inhabitants,

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and the second paragraph describes the jungle at night, and how the darkness makes it feel alien and forbidding. The teacher's question was "How does the author compare and contrast the jungle in the day and the night?"

The problem is that the question does too much work. The point of the two paragraphs is to portray the difference in the look and sound of the jungle in the night and the day, but the teacher's question already served up that information. In contrast, questions such as "What's going on in the first two paragraphs?" or "What has the author set up in the first two paragraphs?" would have encouraged students to develop that point themselves.

As noted earlier, Queries are frequently author oriented, and they place the responsibility for thinking and building meaning on students. Some examples of Queries are "So what is the author trying to tell us?"; "What have we learned in this section?"; and "What has the author told us here that connects with something we read earlier?" We will talk more about Queries in a subsequent chapter, but for now it is important to know that Queries are a key instructional tool in QtA discussions that assists students in building understanding from text.

Collaboration

The point of QtA is to get students to grapple with an author's ideas and, if necessary, to challenge an author's intended meaning in an effort to build understanding. To accomplish this we need to hear student voices, encourage their contributions, and urge them to wrestle with ideas. Students need to learn the power of collaborating with their peers and teacher in constructing meaning.

Public grappling with text gives students the opportunity to hear from each other, to question and consider alternative possibilities, and to test their own ideas in a safe environment. Everyone is grappling, everyone is engaged in building meaning, and everyone understands that the author, not the teacher, has presented them with this challenge. The chance for cumulative misconceptions diminishes, and the opportunity for some authentic wrestling with ideas and meaningful discussion increases.

A Snapshot of How QtA Plays Out

As text is read, the teacher intervenes at selected points and poses Queries to prompt students to consider information just read: "What's the author telling us here?" 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: "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."

This back-and-forth process requires decisions about where to stop reading a text

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and begin discussion of ideas. 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. In subsequent chapters, we will discuss in detail how to make decisions about where to segment a text.

A Student Gets the Final Word

A QtA lesson requires students to be active. They need to work at figuring out and grappling with ideas in a text. A classroom anecdote from Gail Friedman's fifth-grade suggests that the students in Ms. Friedman's class worked. During the last week of school Ms. Friedman assigned the students to write about QtA. She told them that besides saying what QtA was, if they liked it they needed to say why, and similarly, if they didn't like it they needed to say why. Below is what one of Ms. Friedman's students 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 feel like we're dead!*

Short of being dead, we can't be more pleased that QtA makes students work hard.

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ENDING NOTES

- A cognitive processing view of comprehension provided the framework for our original QtA book, 15 years ago, and given that it is still the dominant explanation for how comprehension occurs, it remains the underlying theoretical orientation for the current work.
- The goal of comprehension is to make sense of text, or in more cognitive terms, build a coherent representation of what a text is trying to communicate.
- A cognitive processing perspective views comprehension as an active process in which a reader attends to information in text, decides what information is important, holds that information in memory as further information is encountered, and makes connections to new relevant information.
- For many years and continuing to the writing of this book, studies of students reading school texts show that they often do not develop adequate comprehension of what they read.
- Although studies in which we engaged as well as other studies show that comprehension can be improved by designing lessons that include a logical sequence

of questions and provide relevant background knowledge and more coherent text, students' comprehension is still often sparse, or at least not good enough.

- QtA is an instructional approach based on supporting students' engagement with text in a way that mimics a successful comprehension process of building meaning from text.
- QtA operates by having a teacher pose Queries—open prompts to consider text context—as text is initially read. As students respond, the teacher follows up to encourage students to elaborate, connect, and collaborate toward building meaning from what they are reading.

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