Aspiring Teachers Becoming Strategic Readers: 
*Instructional Scaffolds and Social Supports*

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What is strategic reading?

• Strategic reading is *active* reading.

• Strategic readers probe, synthesize, question and analyze what they read (Caverly, Nicholson, & Radcliffe, 2004).

• Strategic readers analyze written content in relation to prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. (Reed & Peirce, 2004).
Why is it important for teacher candidates to read strategically?

• They need to know about and use active meaning making strategies if they are to be able to teach such strategies to their future students. The Common Core Standards emphasize strategic reading of informational texts, and “…higher-order, cognitively demanding tasks … such as the ability to synthesize, analyze, and apply information” (Sawchuck, 2012, Cognitive Demand section, para. 4).

• They will enter a complex workplace in which they will encounter an extensive array of mandated assessments, standards, curricula, and data and evaluation systems.

• They will enter a labyrinthine policy environment in which numerous individuals and organizations, with a variety of political and financial interests, will hold sway behind the scenes over decisions about what teachers are expected to do and how and when they are expected to do it.

• They must construct a well-rounded understanding of the issues and interests that so extensively impact their work lives if they are to become informed, aware practitioners. In order to do so, they must be able to read strategically so that such key dimensions of texts as author’s purpose, motivation, and message are attended to and understood (Conley, 2007) and understanding is deep enough to inform the development of a personal stance.
What do we know about teachers’ reading?

• Many of those involved in delivering professional development related to the implementation of the Common Core Standards have found that, often, teachers do not themselves know about or use the reading strategies they are expected to teach to their students (Sawchuck, 2012).

• In his study of how teachers read research, Zeuli found that, in many cases, “... their relationship to the text begins and ends with the question, What should I do? The questions, What is the author saying? and Why should I believe this? are not raised and pursued meaningfully in reference to the text” (1994, p.18).

• In his analysis of 89 syllabi from social foundations of education courses across the United States, Butin found that readings from textbooks predominated and that, “... prospective teachers seem to be exposed primarily to pre-digested perspectives and pre-packaged secondary sources that cannot adequately convey the critical conversations, intractable dilemmas, and potential effectiveness of American education” (2004, p.7).

• In my study of community college teacher education students’ transfer to a four-year college, I found that students “... struggled with the four-year college’s expectation that ... they would construct interpretations of and personally respond to assigned readings, and integrate references to peer-reviewed research into their writing” (Kates, 2010, p.26).
What was the assignment?

• Two other faculty members and myself conducted biweekly seminars in our introductory Foundations of Education course, using readings from periodicals with clear links to classroom practice but also discussion of theories of pedagogy and child development as well as references to contemporary educational reforms and policies.

• Each reading was distributed in class about two weeks before the class was to discuss it. Affixed to the cover was a sheet with questions that students were to answer, in note form, in advance of the class discussion (see next slide for an example). The questions were designed to scaffold the students’ reading of each article specifically, but also to draw attention to the comprehension strategies that good readers bring to reading of persuasive and expository texts generally.

• Social interaction in connection with the articles was a key feature of the assignment. Before the whole class discussions, students spent 10-15 minutes discussing each reading in pairs or in groups of four to six. The class would then talk about the articles altogether, first probing the authors’ intents and purposes, then sharing personal responses and opinions. Faculty’s role was comprised primarily of encouraging students to refer back to the text to support their assertions, helping the class to move from one question to the next in a timely manner, providing useful background information and flagging instances in which students were utilizing strategies in especially effective ways.
Example of a Note-Taking sheet:

Name ________________________________ Date ___________

*Developmentally Appropriate Practice in the Age of Testing* by David McKay Wilson

Please answer the questions below and bring this article, this sheet and your responses to class on ______________________________ (attach a separate piece of paper if you need more space). As you read this article, please underline, highlight, and write questions and notes in the margins, in order to help yourself understand what you are reading.

1. Where and when did this article appear?

2. What do you think are the 5 most important points that the author is making? (Use your own words. Do not simply write quotes down.)

1. Why do you think the author wrote this article? (In other words, what was the author’s purpose?)

2. What questions does this article raise for you?

3. What information is provided about who the author is?

4. On a separate sheet of paper, list at least four words or phrases you did not know the meaning of. Find the meaning of each and write it next to the word or phrase.

5. On the back of this paper please discuss your personal response to this article. Which of the author’s points do you agree or disagree with and why?
Data Sources:

- Students’ responses to a questionnaire about their experience of the assignment that was distributed at the end of the semester (see next slide)
- Students’ answers to the questions on their note-taking sheets
- Observational notes taken during the seminars by faculty
- Interviews I conducted with the two participating instructors
- Reflective journals all three of us kept about students’ responses to the readings, their interactions with one another, the tone and content of class discussions, and our observations of growth and change over time
Questionnaire About Your Seminaring Experience this Semester

Name (optional): ___________________

This semester, we had five seminars in class. During these seminars we discussed articles you’d read and taken notes on beforehand.

The articles were:

- *Playing to Learn* by Susan Engel
- *N is for Nonsensical* by Susan B. Neuman
- *Twelve Characteristics of Effective Early Childhood Teachers* by Laura J. Colker
- *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in the Age of Testing* by David McKay Wilson
- *Eileen Wasow on the Bank Street Approach* by Eileen Wasow

I would like to know what you think about these seminars. Please answer the following questions as fully as possible:

1. Do you think these seminars have helped you to be a better reader? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
2. Do you approach reading differently now than you did at the beginning of the semester? If so, how so?
3. Did you learn anything new about yourself as a reader this semester? If so, what did you learn?
4. Which of the readings was of *most* interest to you as a learner and why?
5. Which of the readings was of *least* interest to you as a learner and why?
6. Each seminar involved reading on your own, taking notes on what you read and discussing what you read with classmates. Which aspects of the seminars (reading on your own, writing about the reading, talking about the reading,) were most or least helpful to you and why?
7. Do you think it’s important for early childhood and elementary school teachers to read well and read often? If so, did this course help you to do that in any way? Please explain.
8. Is there anything else you’d like me to know?
# Coding Form for Note-taking Sheets:

**Date:** _______________  
**Reader:** ____________________________  
**Student ID #:** ______________________

- ✓ = evidence of utilizing strategy  
- X = evidence of not utilizing strategy  
- If no evidence either way, box is left blank

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**Other reader comments:**
Findings:

• Students’ comments on their questionnaires present a largely positive picture of a consistent trajectory of growth and change over time.

• Analysis of the note-taking sheets offers a murkier picture of meaning-making strategies being applied inconsistently: quite extensively to some readings but only minimally to others.

• Strategies were rarely applied efficiently or effectively in the case of readings that had unfamiliar text structures and/or references to research, reforms, legislation, and policies outside the scope of students’ lived experiences. This was especially true of three, key, highly interdependent strategies: inferring, discerning author’s purpose, and discerning important from unimportant information.
Reflections on Being a Reader: Responses from the Questionnaires:

Of the 73 participants that submitted questionnaires, 62 reported that the seminars had had a positive effect on their reading habits and strategies:

• *I think that the seminars have helped me to do better with regards to what I consider as I read, and how I think as I read. I did not read as well as I thought I did. I now underline, highlight, and consider main points whereas I was not taught to do so in my former education.*

• *These seminars helped me to be a better reader and understand what I read. I was able to answer questions and think deeply about the article’s main points. I am shy and because English is not my first language I don’t feel confident talking or giving my ideas, but the way of having the opportunity to talk about it in small groups really encouraged me.*

• *I enjoy speaking about what I have read with other people to see if we all absorbed the same from it. Talking about what we read in small groups was most helpful, because at times someone else picked up on something I did not or vice versa. Interaction is great when reading, communication is the key to literacy.*

• *It’s one thing to read the textbook and the information from it. But there is another thing when we see the theories in action, meaning the readings from the articles.*

• *The readings really helped me see beyond my sheltered view of education.*

• *The seminars have helped me greatly. The seminars opened my mind to see points in the readings I may have not seen before. I now understand what things to look for as specifics and how to use what I am reading in the world today.*
Meaning-making and the Role of Prior Knowledge:
The Example of Responses to “Playing to Learn”:

• Most students demonstrated literal comprehension, but could not infer in order to fully grasp Engel’s **overriding points and purposes**. In response to the question: “What do you think are the four most important points in the article?” most focused upon Engels’ concrete recommendations for practice, while overlooking the references to federal policy and to developmental theory that were so central to her argument. For example:

*I think that the four most important points the author is making are to take time with the children, reading to them and giving them each a chance to read and share what they think about what they read, help them if they need help. Giving them a chance to express their feelings in writing, it will give them a chance to think more clearly. Also to give them practice in math each day for a short period of time and not force them to waste time trying to memorize formulas. They learn more when play is involved, it makes it more fun to learn.*

• This student, like most, successfully hones in on Engel’s key recommendations for practice, but ignores the points Engel is making about what federal education policy ought to be and what developmental theory tells us about how children out to be taught. She overlooks Engel’s reasoning about the rationale offered by developmental scientists about the value of play, too, stating instead, as did so many of her peers, that such learning is more desirable simply because it is “more fun.”
Meaning-making and the Role of Prior Knowledge: The Example of Responses to “Playing to Learn”:

• Students’ limited understanding of the most important points limited their understanding of the author’s purposes, too. Larger issues of governmental policymaking, and the testing environment, which are key factor factors in obstructing the development and implementation of the sort of curriculum Engel is advocating for, were overlooked. Instead most saw the purpose primarily as offering recommendations to practitioners and to parents. For example:

*I think that the author wrote this article to inform parents and teachers that there are certain ways to help educate children better.*

*To advise students like us what we should be doing. It’s not just fun and games.*

*To help enlighten school administrators about how to enrich the teaching/learning experiences.*

• The fact that most students did not naturally connect the opening sentences of the piece to the discussion that follows seems to be an example of the way in which their lack of prior knowledge about text structures may have limited their comprehension. Those familiar with the structure and organization of editorials automatically know that the opening lines flag for the reader something essential about what the overriding purpose of the article is going to be. Only about a quarter of the students in this sample knew that. Engel does not explicitly state what the link is between the reference to the Obama administration's policies and the recommendations for practice that follow, and most students were not able to infer that connection on their own.
Implications:

• Faculty need to be aware of students’ prior world knowledge and textual knowledge in choosing which readings to assign and which scaffolds to offer to support the readings.

• Readings should be assigned in a variety of genres, so that students who need to do so can develop their schema about the organization and conventions of multiple text types as a part of their professional preparation.

• Limiting assigned reading to textbooks constricts the kinds of reading that students can learn to do as a part of their training. Assigning readings from a variety of sources, such as newspapers, blogs, journals, and reports from think tanks and task forces, offers timelier material and a greater diversity of perspectives and formats, and will raise students’ awareness of the sorts of periodicals and publications that professionals read.

• Requiring informal written responses provides a useful means of accountability, while avoiding the undue burden that assigning a more formal written product would place on faculty and students’ time and attention.

• Providing abundant social opportunities for students to collectively construct interpretations of and responses to texts allows them to observe the strategies others use to make sense of text, gives them insight into the ways in which individual’s beliefs and experiences shape how they understand and interpret what they read and makes clear that having a community of peers to talk about texts with is a useful and engaging means of expanding one’s personal and professional knowledge.
References


