

This issue of *COMMENTS FROM CRISS* deals with a new reading strategy called “Questioning the Author.” I am excited to share this strategy with you, because it includes several of the key elements in the CRISS philosophy—active involvement in learning, discussion, metacognition, and the author’s craft. The information comes from the book *Questioning the Author, An Approach for Enhancing Student Engagement with Text* by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, Rebecca L. Hamilton, and Linda Kucan. I learned about this book (the IRA May book club selection) from “textbook guru” Bonnie Armbruster who enthusiastically recommended it at the IRA convention in Atlanta last year.

QUESTIONING THE AUTHOR

By Dr. Carol Santa

During the many years that I taught Earth Science to 9th graders, I remained frustrated at the students low level of comprehension from the text. Although I worked on creating students who were “active” readers and aware of the author’s craft, they still read their texts for the sole purpose of picking out and recording a set of facts or details. As a result, they usually didn’t have too much trouble answering factual questions in class or on an assessment, but they had a terrible time making connections, seeing patterns, and applying the knowledge and procedures they “learned”. To help my students deepen their understanding, I became less dependent on text materials (not altogether a bad idea!) and spent more time on labs, field trips, writing, and discussing. Science reading, however, is a necessary skill, and it has to be more than pulling out factual information, memorizing formulas, and learning definitions. How do we get our students to go beyond the facts and build understanding?—by *Questioning the Author*.

Questioning the Author (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997), a reading comprehension and discussion strategy, fits nicely with the CRISS philosophy. Through a special type of teacher-generated questions called “Queries,” teachers facilitate learning discussions. They ask the Queries at pre-selected places in the reading selection, so the students construct meaning *as they read* for the first time, not *after* completing the selection as was the case in my earth science classes. My students read assignments at home or quietly in class. Our discussions always took place after

reading.

Questioning the Author (QtA) takes into account the fact that authors are human and have the potential to be fallible. When using the QtA process with students it is important for them to know that the problems they have with comprehension may actually be the author’s inability to communicate the information clearly. One earth science textbook I used was so difficult that many students wouldn’t even try to read an assignment since they knew they would fail. With QtA, students are allowed to shift the blame from themselves to the author. In this less risky situation the students are more likely to attempt reading and understanding. They take on the role of a “revisor”, and in that role their job is to make the text understandable to them. The students act as a team building on each others ideas while constantly referring back to the text. The teacher acts as the facilitator as well as a member of the team - prompting the students forward to greater understanding with open-ended queries.

Getting Started

As with all CRISS instruction, the first step for the teacher using QtA is to carefully read the narrative or expository selection and determine the major understandings that students are to construct. The next step for the teacher is to identify the stumbling blocks the students may encounter, such as lack of elaboration or clarity and density of information which can impede comprehension. This careful study of the material prior to the QtA lesson is critical and yet not necessarily the usual practice for teachers. I always reread earth science

selections before assigning them to my students, but only to become familiar with which topics were covered and determine where I would have to provide additional information or explanations. The teacher using QtA, in most cases, does not provide the information and explanations, but rather prompts the students to add their own elaboration, extensions, and connections.

Segmenting Text

Once the teacher has determined the major understandings from the selection, they will be used to determine where to segment or stop reading and initiate a discussion. There is no magic rule for segmenting. A reading segment can be any length from one sentence, if it contains key information, to several paragraphs if they contain the same type of information or if they have no important information. Segments may start and stop in the middle of paragraphs.

In the following excerpt, "How Pennsylvania Was formed," a section from a social studies textbook (Silver Burdette & Ginn, 1990, p.18) the main understanding the teacher wanted the students to grasp was that glaciers are huge ice sheets that are largely responsible for forming the shape of the land in North America. Stars have been placed where the teacher would segment the text.

*The shape of the land in North America has changed over millions of years. * About a million years ago, the earth got cooler. The winters were longer. A large amount of snow fell. Because the temperatures stayed cold, the snow did not melt. It got deeper and deeper. Slowly the snow grew into thick sheets of ice. These sheets are called glaciers. Some were over 2 miles (3 km) thick. Because of their great weight, the glaciers began to push south from the area around the North Pole. Some came as far south as Pennsylvania. **

Glaciers move about 300 feet (91 m.) a year. They push earth in front of them like giant

*bulldozers. The land was changed as the glaciers passed over it. * A mixture of sand, earth, rock, and stones was carried by the glaciers. This mixture is known as drift. In some places the drift formed long strips of raised land called ridges. A ridge made by drift is called a moraine. * But only some of the ridges on the land were pushed up out of the earth. * Some of the ridges were worn down by rain and wind. **

The first stopping point is after the first sentence since it presents an important part of the main concept "The shape of the land in North America has changed over millions of years." With all the information in that paragraph that important idea might be overlooked by the student, so the teacher stopped to give emphasis to the point. The second segment is the remainder of the first paragraph since all these sentences relate to the concept of glaciers. The next segment contains the sentences, "Glaciers move", "They push earth", and "The land was changed" These sentences reinforce the idea that by moving over the earth, glaciers can change its shape. The fourth segment contains three glacial terms and explains their relationship. Because knowing the names for the glacial features was not the teacher's goal these ideas were grouped together to place less emphasis on them. The last two sentences of the selection deal with ridges each became a segment as the teacher felt the students might get confused if they were read together.

Once the teacher has decided where to stop in the selection it is time to develop Queries.

Queries

Effective Queries are the key component of Questioning the Author. They connect text and discussion, and they help students construct meaning from text. The following chart illustrates the differences between traditional questions and QtA Queries.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SOME TRADITIONAL QUESTIONS & QtA QUERIES

Questions

1. assess student comprehension of text information after reading
2. evaluate individual student responses to teacher's questions and prompt teacher-to-student interactions
3. are used before or after reading

Queries

1. assist students in grappling with text ideas to construct meaning
 2. facilitate group discussion about an author's ideas and prompt student-to-student interactions
 3. are used during initial reading
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As you can see, the major difference between traditional questions and Queries is that questions tend to be used for assessment while Queries are used to help students gain understanding of text ideas.

According to the QtA authors, “When teachers use Queries, students are more likely to get the message that reading and trying to determine the author’s intended meaning are aspects of the same process. The thinking elicited by Queries is part of the reading experience, not something that is separate from that experience. Queries supplement the text, helping students deal with what is there as well as with what is not there. The focus of Queries is on building understanding not on checking understanding.”

Questioning the Author Queries always deal with what the author says or means. Some sample Queries are:

- What is the author trying to say here?
- What is the author’s message?
- Did the author explain this clearly
- Does this make sense with what the author told us before?
- How does this connect with what the author has told us?

Just for narrative:

- How do things look for this character now?
- How has the author let you know that something has changed?
- Given what the author has already told us about this character, what do you think he’s up to?

A social studies teacher developed the following Queries for the selection, “How Pennsylvania Was Formed”. Refer back to the selection to see how the Queries relate to the segments and the major understanding. After the first text segment the teacher wanted to know what her students understood about the shape of the land. Her Query: “What do you think the author is telling us?” She hoped the students would mention that land forms like mountains and plains were not always like they are today. If the students did not give that response, she would follow-up with the Query: “What did the author tell us in the first chapter

about the kind of shapes land can have?” The second segment was about glaciers. To help the students understand the glaciers’ role in changing the shape of the land she asked, “What is the author telling us about snow, ice, and glaciers?” She hoped that the students would recognize that because of the huge size and thickness of the glacial ice sheets the weight caused the ice at the bottom to flow. If the students didn’t make the connection, she was ready with “So these sheets of ice started moving—does that make sense?” After the third segment (more information about glaciers) the teacher asked, “So *now* what does the author

want us to know about glaciers?” To help the students connect this information to changing the shape of the land, the teacher asked, “How does that connect to what the author already told us?” The next segment contained all the underlined vocabulary words. To de-emphasize their importance the teacher’s Query was, “Oh, boy, we’ve got some terms piling up here—drift, ridges, moraine—what’s that all about?” The teacher developed Queries on the last two sentences dealing with ridges which she hoped would help the students grapple with the confusing ideas. The fifth segment Query was, “This is really getting confusing. *Now* what has the author said?” And for the final segment, “Now what is the author telling us can happen?”

Notice how all the Queries involve the author and none of the expected responses are recalling information or facts from the text. The Queries are designed to help the students *think* about the information presented and *think* about their own thinking.

Conclusion

As you look back to see how the text, teacher goals for learning, and Queries fit

Reference

Beck, Isabel L., Margaret G. McKeown, Rebecca L. Hamilton, and Linda Kucan, (1997). [Questioning the Author, An Approach for Enhancing Student Engagement with Text](#), Newark, Delaware, International Reading Association.

together, I think you can see that this is a wonderful strategy for helping students construct meaning from text. The Queries are a great way to stimulate instructional conversations among students which CRISS advocates as a key ingredient to learning. By adding the “author” as a participant in the conversations, students gain greater understanding of text, text structure, and the process of reading.

Too often, we use our texts and class materials merely as sets of facts and skills that the students have to master in order to apply or use *later*. Using the Questioning the Author technique, we can help our students gain a new understanding of reading. They discover that authors are fallible and that readers often have to question and discuss the ideas to make sense out of them. They learn that making meaning of the text requires thinking *during* the process of reading—an idea that would have been revolutionary to my earth science students!

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