

**In the Loop Newsletter: Pearson Education Canada  
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### **Considering Instructional Trajectory**

Numerous educational publications of late, including my last two books, have described in arduous detail the characteristics or components of effective reading comprehension lessons. These descriptions have included lists of resources, including children's literature and other texts, lessons plans, instructional approaches, and even suggestions for assessment techniques to assure students are understanding what they are reading. However, one aspect of these comprehension lessons seems to have gone unnoticed; what these lessons should do for novice readers in the future, after the lesson is over. As classroom teachers and literacy educators, we need to consider the residual effects or the consequences of our reading comprehension lessons. It is this residual effect that I am calling "Instructional Trajectory."

Instructional trajectory is a concept that looks at the effects of a lesson to consider what range, depth and support these lessons provide. Let me explain in more detail what I mean by Instructional Trajectory, and then I will provide some brief examples for further clarification.

Instructional Trajectory is a consideration of the lasting effects a lesson may have, and the types of supports the lesson may offer. Instructional Trajectory has several components. First, the **range** of a comprehension lesson considers in how many future contexts individual lessons will support readers.

Effective lessons in comprehension should work in a variety of contexts, enabling novice readers to comprehend a variety of texts, for a variety of purposes. I don't mean to imply that these lessons are "universal strategies" that readers simply apply every time they encounter a text. What I mean is that the focus of our lessons should its future uses with texts yet to be encountered, only those texts being read at one particular moment. For example, the lesson I have entitled "Approaching a Text" has an extensive range because it can be used with virtually any text a reader selects, for a variety of purposes. A lesson that focuses on how to read a single Haiku poem may be effective, but it certainly has a limited range for most readers.

Second, lessons should be examined for their **authenticity or relevance**. By this I mean, lessons should prepare novice readers to use strategies that will help them in reading events they will encounter in the world, not just in school. Some lessons seem to prepare readers for solely school-based literacy events, not those that occur in the world outside school. Learning how to build a diorama or construct a mobile based on a book character may help students garner approval in some classrooms, but I strongly doubt it will help them effectively perform in any literate events once outside the school grounds. Our lessons have to be relevant to the literacies of our lives.

Lessons should also be examined for their ability to help students generate interpretations before, during, and after reading, or what I would call the lessons *Interpretive Focus*. In other words, this might be considered the **depth** of

a particular lesson. The goal of comprehension lessons should be comprehending texts. This may sound redundant, but I have seen some lessons that stop short of the goal of comprehending. We need to keep our “eye on the prize” so to speak. In this case, the prize is making sense of what we read. An example I have used in some recent workshops speaks about a classroom where the focus of the lessons was on learning how to predict. Although, I would agree that prediction may help in comprehending some texts, in some particular contexts, the goal is not to get good at predicting. The goal is to get good at *using* predicting to make sense of texts. Our lessons need to keep the focus on generating interpretations, not the isolated use of the strategy itself.

Another example is the creation of classroom charts or artifacts during some comprehension lessons. In many, if not all of the lessons that I have written about describing effective teaching, I have included the creation of charts to support the focus of the lessons being taught. These charts serve as an “audit trail” of where the lessons have been and allow teachers to build upon these foundation in subsequent lessons. But the goal is not to create beautiful charts. The goal is to *use* charts to extend thinking and discussion. These charts are just a thinking device used “in service of meaning, “ not the primary focus of the lesson.

The fourth, and certainly the most important component of Instructional Trajectory, is whether our lessons help change and improve the way teachers and students think, talk about, comprehend, and respond to what they are

reading. The primary goal of the Reading Workshop instructional framework that I have been developing over the past decade is to help novice readers and teachers see texts in new ways, talk about texts in more meaningful ways, and comprehend what they read from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Although this is not easy to define, assess or predict, it is the primary consequence for our lessons and should be used to judge the quality of the lessons we provide.

At this point, you might be asking, “Where does one can find evidence that any of these things are occurring?” I believe that we may find evidence of the residual effects of our lessons in the writing our students do in their reader response logs, the discussions of texts we have in whole class settings and literature study groups, the strategies our readers employ when reading independently, and the growth we observe during our comprehension strategy groups. Our lessons should help students manage the challenges they encounter as the texts they read become more complex, and the knowledge base required to understand becomes more substantial.

It is not enough to say that one has taught a certain strategy. It is more important to consider whether that strategy is effective in developing the types of readers we want to support, and whether there is evidence that our lessons are being taken up by the readers in our classes. Our lessons should be coherent demonstrations of the types of literate behaviors we want our students to develop in their reading lives. This is the essence of Instructional Trajectory.