

Doing Literature: Using the Cognitive Learning Strategy of Elaborating to Help Students Interpret Texts

One of the courses I most look forward to teaching is “Introduction to Literature,” a general education course intended to (re)familiarize students with such foundational literary elements as character, plot, and theme by exploring written texts in the genres of drama, fiction, and poetry. Over the years, I have been delighted by the depth of understanding displayed by students who aspire to a career in designing buildings, or mapping land formations, or saving lives, rather than interpreting the written word.

And yet, at the beginning of most semesters, I am always disheartened to hear from a good number of these students that they cannot “do literature.” Based on their prior experiences in English courses, they believe that, although they are capable of understanding non-fiction—after all, they can read the textbooks for their other courses—they are, for the most part, incapable of “understanding literature” because doing so requires skills possessed solely by self-professed “book geeks.”

Trying to convince these students that they have been “doing literature” their entire lives, however, has proven futile. I have reminded them that, from the time they were born, people around them have been reading texts to them, and they have understood the meaning of these texts. I have also reminded them that, from the time they could speak, they have been conveying what is happening to them and what is happening around them, all the while emphasizing the importance of these events. Despite these reminders, I cannot seem to persuade them that these activities from their pasts have any relevance to their present lives as students of literature.

So, early in my teaching of this course, I decided to turn from my background in English to my other background, in educational psychology, to try to change their minds. I drew upon my understanding of cognitive theories of learning, which explain the development of knowledge in an individual’s mind, as well as of the specific cognitive learning strategy of elaborating to provide my students with experiences designed to demonstrate that they can, indeed, “do literature.”

Cognitive Theories of Learning: Knowledge Development in the Individual Mind

Cognitive theories of learning focus on the processes occurring within an individual’s mind to explain the way that knowledge develops or learning occurs. Two relevant explanations, offered by psychological constructivist theorists and information processing theorists, account for both the creation and the processing of knowledge in the mind.

According to psychological constructivist theories, which are grounded in the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, an individual’s knowledge base consists of an accumulation of mental structures, known as schema, that are built (constructed) as the individual interacts with the environment. Each structure includes pieces of information that reflect an individual’s idiosyncratic personal history, such that the same pieces of information will differ slightly from one individual to the next. When an individual encounters a new idea or engages in a novel experience, the structure relevant to this idea or experience is altered. Therefore, the mental structures comprising an individual’s knowledge are continually modified as the individual interacts with an ever-changing environment.

Additionally, according to information processing theories, such as those offered by the team of American psychologists Richard Atkinson and Richard Shiffrin, along with those of British psychologist Alan Baddeley, the memory system in an individual’s mind consists of three components: sensory memory, working memory, and long-term memory. Sensory memory is activated when information from the environment is initially encountered. An individual must first perceive this information and then deem it important before this information can be attended to and represented, or encoded, in a mental form. Next, working memory is activated with the appearance of this mental representation. The mental representation created by the individual is stored and processed in working memory, which has capacity and durational limits. Finally, long-term memory is activated when either the mental representation has been processed and is ready to be stored in a more permanent manner, or the mental representation needs to be processed with a previously stored representation in order to be fully comprehensible.

The Cognitive Learning Strategy of Elaborating

Cognitive strategies for learning can assist in the development of knowledge within an individual mind when they are integrated into educational activities. These strategies can help to construct a schema that accurately represents the information that comprises a particular idea. Also, they can help to encode information in working memory and enhance the meaningfulness of information during its encoding.

One particularly useful cognitive learning strategy is that of elaborating. According to the team of Scottish psychologist Fergus Craik and Australian psychologist Robert Lockhart, elaborating involves making connections between new and old pieces of information about a specific topic. First, an individual must recognize what is already known about an idea by bringing into working memory any related schema. Then, the individual must identify the additional pieces of

information about the idea that need to be understood, which requires this new information to be clearly and appropriately delineated. Last, the individual must determine the relationship(s) between what is already known and what needs to be understood about the idea. Once a comparison of the known and the unknown leads to the identification of relevant similarities and/or differences, the process of elaborating is complete.

Elaborating in the Classroom: Students “Doing Literature”

Before I could bring anything into my classroom, I needed to review the learning outcomes for my course because I wanted to pair the strategy of elaborating with a goal I had already identified for my students. In doing so, I recognized that two of these outcomes were appropriate: (1) to understand the “language of literature,” the formal elements that comprise literary texts, so they could know and be able to use such terms as “setting” and “voice” to explain the components of a text; and (2) to strengthen their identity as readers of literature, so they could continue to think of themselves as individuals who are gaining additional knowledge about and experience in understanding literary texts. Therefore, I realized that using elaborating would be an appropriate way to begin achieving this goal.

Next, I needed to determine the most appropriate place, within the overall design of the course, to present the strategy of elaborating, along with my rationale for its use. I decided that I needed to introduce this strategy as early in the semester as possible in order to have sufficient time to engage my students in experiences that demonstrate its usefulness to them. I also decided that I needed to present this strategy in as explicit a manner as possible, not only to highlight its connection to research about cognitive approaches to learning, but also to increase their intrinsic motivation to engage with it. Therefore, I planned to spend a class period during the first week of the semester familiarizing students with this strategy.

In preparing for this class period, I realized that I needed to spend a minimal amount of time providing students with background information about elaborating. After all, unless they were psychology majors, they were unlikely to find its basis in research as fascinating as I did. Instead, I needed to focus their attention on how to use this strategy by verbally walking them through the way that I, as a reader, would do so. More importantly, if I were going to begin convincing them about their literary abilities, I needed them to use this strategy with texts they already knew. So I chose, for that class period’s reading assignment, a well-known short story, “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.”

As the students were settling into their seats, I could hear them whispering to each other about the reading for the day. So, I began the class period by asking them why they thought I had assigned a text that was more commonly read by toddlers than college students. After entertaining a few responses, all variations on “you’ve lost your marbles,” I launched into my mini-lecture about the cognitive learning strategy of elaborating. Following the mini-lecture, I had the students form small groups to discuss the day’s reading, by first reviewing with them a common technique of prewriting—the 5 Ws and H (who, what, where, when, why, and how)—and

then asking them to find the information associated with each of these elements in the story. Once they had completed this task, we discussed their responses as a full group, analyzing the six elements as individual components and as a combined whole. Throughout the entire discussion, I was careful to ask the students exactly where in the text they had found their particular answers. Having finished this, I pronounced to my students that they had just “done literature.”

When some students looked perplexed and others voiced their disagreement, I explained to them what they had just done. In reading the fairy tale, they had read “literature,” because the boundaries of that domain, in the current century, were quite elastic. In identifying the 5 Ws and H of the tale, they had pointed out the foundational elements of this short story, from characters to plot to theme. In putting these elements together, using words and phrases from the tale itself as support, they had constructed interpretive readings of the text. All of this, I offered, was the essence of “doing literature.”

Conclusion

Over the semesters that I have taught “Introduction to Literature,” a small group of students has scoffed at this activity. These students usually approach me immediately after this class period, informing me that they do not wish to spend their entire semester focusing on children’s stories because they want to study literature that a college graduate can expect to know. I respond by assuring them that, for the remainder of the semester, they will be reading texts that I believe will challenge them, in any number of ways, and inwardly I smile.

The majority of students who have participated in this activity, however, seem to have appreciated it. They have told me that this single class period helped to improve their attitude toward taking this course, and that they no longer dread approaching assigned course readings. They also have revealed that, when the reading of a particular text feels almost like slogging through a pool of quicksand, they return to identifying the 5 Ws and H, believing that if they can find these pieces of information, they will have taken an initial step toward understanding the reading. Perhaps most importantly, however, they have shown me week after week through their persistent engagement with assigned readings and their insightful interpretation of these readings, that they are indeed quite capable of “doing literature.”

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