

Guided Reading: Constructivism in Action

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Abstract

Guided Reading is currently considered one of the most important components of balanced literacy instruction. It provides developing readers with the support they need to develop their skills and understanding of the reading process. Understanding how the structures and expectations of Guided Reading align with constructivist theory and practice reveals how and why it provides such a powerful environment for learning.

Introduction

According to the International Reading Association (Braunger & Lewis, 1998), reading is a complex process. The National Association for the Education of Young Children agrees, stating that “learning to read and write is a complex and multifaceted process that requires a wide variety of instructional practices” (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000, p.14). While reading has a variety of definitions and there is some debate about the focus of instruction, the ultimate goal of reading is “the construction of meaning from text. It is a cognitive and affective process where readers “actively engage with the text and build their own understanding” (Braunger & Lewis, 1998, p. 28). In essence, children learn to read best through instruction that provides them with appropriate guidance and support.

Guided Reading

One of the most effective ways to do this is through Guided Reading. According to Fountas & Pinnelle (1996),

The ultimate goal of guided reading is to help children learn how to use independent strategies successfully. Teachers, based on their knowledge of children, possible texts, and the process involved in reading and learning to read, make a series of complex decisions that influence and mediate literacy for the young children in the group. Guided reading also involves ongoing observation and assessment that informs the teacher's interactions with individuals in the group and helps the teacher select appropriate texts. (p. 2)

Guided Reading includes both direct explicit instruction and opportunities for the readers to explore and investigate to come to conclusions about meaning, phonics rules, fix-up strategies, etc. Guided Reading is just part of a balanced literacy program that includes reading and writing opportunities. In a balanced literacy program students are instructed in whole groups, small groups, or individually depending on the demands of the task and the needs of the child. Whole group activities include read-aloud, shared reading, write-aloud, and shared writing. Small group activities are based on developmental levels so that children are grouped according to abilities and include Guided Reading and guided writing. Individual groups include interventions in reading and writing, as well as independent reading and writing activities. Each of these has specific formats and materials. Guided Reading groups students together with similar strengths and weaknesses. It is based on text that is considered to be at their instructional level and in their "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1962).

Guided Reading demonstrates many of the important tenants of constructivist education. Brian Cambourne (1988) identified and defined eight "Conditions of Learning". He lists them as immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectation, responsibility, approximation, use, and response. All of these are integrated into Guided Reading. All of these are "conditions" of constructivist teaching. *Immersion*

requires that the learners be immersed in an environment that will introduce and envelop them. It provides models and examples without instruction or demand. *Demonstration* provides the learner with experts who model how that activity is done or used. Learning is enhanced when the learner is engaged. *Engagement* is enhanced when the learners believe that they are capable of what is being demonstrated, that the activity is important, and that during the process they will not be humiliated or denigrated. In other words, the experience must be “risk free.” *Expectation* is another condition of learning. It means that the learners understand what is expected of them and they are supported in their efforts. *Responsibility* requires that the learner participates in making decisions about when, how, and what to learn. *Approximation* allows the learner to make mistakes and to continue to try to be successful in the learning task. *Use* means that the learner has the opportunity to use and practice the new learning in personally meaningful ways. *Response* provides feedback to the learners in their attempts. It must be “relevant, appropriate, timely, readily available, and non-threatening” (Cambourne, 1988, p. 166). As will be discussed, all eight of these conditions of learning are integral to constructivist theory in education, as described in the Exploratory Phase and Discovery Phase of the Two-Step Model recently published by Flynn, Mesibov, Vermette, & Smith (2004).

Stages of Guided Reading activities

Guided Reading is divided into *Before*, *During*, and *After Reading* activities. *Before Reading* activities prepare the students to get ready to read by activating background knowledge and engaging the learners in questioning and predicting. It provides

teachers with opportunities to assess what children already know and assisting them in teaching what they need to know to be successful in reading the text that will follow. It often includes mini-lessons on skills or strategies that may be helpful to the students to successfully read the selection.

During Reading activities may include reading out loud (sometimes called whisper reading), reading silently, reading to answer questions or for information, and opportunities to discuss comprehension or word difficulties as they arise. These conversations may also lead to the “teachable moment” as students reveal their understandings or confusions about print or meaning.

After Reading activities include discussion of the material on a cognitive or affective level. This requires students to explain their positions using the text, prior experience, or both. Follow-up lessons often include specific target skills or strategies lessons based on the text. These may focus on the content of and the application of phonics, specific comprehension skills, fluency practice, and/or writing extension and applications of the newly explored skills and strategies.

All of these activities provide opportunities for collaboration and construction of meaning and understanding. They also align with the three underlying constructivist concepts upon which the Two Step Model published by Flynn, Mesibov, Vermette, & Smith (2004) is based:

1. Student engagement with the information must precede teacher explanations,

2. Instruction (guidance) should come in the form of interventions as students engage with information, ideas, and concepts, and
3. Authentic tasks create an environment for student engagement and teacher interventions.

(Flynn, *et. al.*, 2004, p.3)

Standards-based constructivism and the two-step model

To help better understand how Guided Reading aligns with constructivist theory and practice, it may be helpful to analyze its components and relate them to the elements of a constructivist based education as explained in Applying Standards-Based Constructivism: A Two-Step Guide for Motivating Elementary Students (Flynn, *et al.*, 2004). The authors divide the constructivist learning cycle into two parts: the *Exploratory Phase* and the *Discovery Phase*. During the *Exploratory Phase*, teachers provide experiences that will allow them to assess students' knowledge, understandings, and perceptions related to the material. Teachers may plan instruction or interventions that they believe will be helpful for students. Teachers may discover that there are concepts, skills or strategies that students need to be successful. In this instance, spontaneous intervention may be appropriate. These may become teachable moments or teachers may have to design more specific instruction to be implemented at a later date. This *Exploratory Phase* is designed to introduce and foreshadow the underlying knowledge and concepts to be addressed in the *Discovery Phase* (Flynn, *et al.*, 2004, p. x), and it "begins to broaden the learners' understanding and stimulates the learners' interest" (p. x) in the upcoming learning experience.

The *Discovery Phase* is based on learning standards, curriculum guidelines, and learning objectives. Learning objectives may include information that “students are expected to recite, reproduce or recall” (Flynn, *et. al.*, 2004, p. vii), knowledge, skills and concepts that “students are expected to understand and apply” (p. vii), strategies, competencies, applications, operations, tasks, or creations. Learning objectives can also become the foundation for assessment and assessment rubrics. These structures provide opportunities for the teacher to act as a “guide and coach through instructional responses to students’ needs” (p. ix). The instruction that results from this may either be planned or spontaneous. This two-step model aligns itself perfectly with the International Reading Association’s position on the characteristics of excellent reading teachers. In their publication, Excellent Reading Teachers: A Position Statement of the International Reading Association (IRA, 2000), the IRA states that one characteristic of excellent reading teacher is that:

...they help children solve problems or practice new skills and strategies, they “coach” or “scaffold” children by providing help at strategic moments. They are skilled at observing children’s performance and using informal interactions to call children’s attention to important aspects of what they are learning or doing. They often help children with a difficult part of the task so that the children can move forward to complete the task successfully. It is important to note that such teaching is neither incidental nor unsystematic. Excellent reading teachers know where their children are in reading development and they know the likely next steps. They help the children take these steps by providing just the right amount of help at just the right time (p. 3).

The ultimate goal of a constructivist learning environment is to create students with “positive disposition(s), [so] the learners may become able to operate at a higher level of performance” (Flynn, *et. al.*, 2004, p. xi). This higher level of performance and the

confidence created by these positive dispositions will hopefully lead to the intended outcome of Guided Reading. That outcome is independence.

Interrelationships among Guided Reading and the two-step model

The interrelationships among Guided Reading and the Two-Step Model are generally structured as follows:

Constructivist Step 1 – Exploratory Phase

Before Reading Activities

Constructivist Step 2 – Discovery Phase

During Reading Activities

After Reading Activities

Comprehension is the ultimate goal and the driving force of reading. It is viewed as the purpose of reading. While comprehension is often considered the end product of reading and is assessed after reading, it actually takes place throughout the reading process. It begins before the text is even seen, during the *Before Reading* activities. The pre-reading, or before reading, activities that are identified as part of the *Exploratory Phase* begin the comprehension cycle. As reading takes place, the act of reading adds, deletes, or modifies understanding. This is an example of the *Discovery Phase*. *After Reading* activities that address comprehension include a variety of activities such as sequencing, cause and effect, and compare/contrast activities.

In addition, all of these activities provide opportunities to address all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). The foundation for many of these activities begins in the

During Reading phase. As students work through text, they can highlight, use Post-It-Notes™, and enter information in journals or on graphic organizers. While reading and collecting information they can modify and clarify thoughts as they progress through the material. This allows them to monitor and modify their understanding as they continue to construct meaning.

The *Discovery Phase* addresses the main components of comprehension.

Understanding is built as reading takes place. This is when important facts and understandings are investigated and refined. It allows teachers to assist students to overcome “learner confusion” (Flynn, *et. al.*, 2004, p. ix). According to these authors, this disequilibrium may come from one of two sources: “The learner understands the goal of the task but he/she is at a loss regarding the steps to be taken to achieve the goal” (p. ix) or, the “confusion may stem from the learner’s growing awareness of the existence of knowledge/information/skills/concepts that conflict with his/her prior perceptions” (p. ix).

Before Reading activities are designed to activate background knowledge and engage students in the learning to take place. As in the *Exploratory Phase*, *Before Reading* “encourages students to play with the ideas connected to the lesson and enables them to own the concepts, skills, and competencies to be demonstrated in the *Discovery Phase* by finding links to their prior knowledge and experiences” (Flynn et al, 2004, p.13). It goes beyond Hunter’s “anticipatory set” which was identified to engage learners before the lesson (Hunter, 1982). “An anticipatory set may prepare the student

for what comes next, but may do little to grab the learner's attention or create a relaxed environment conducive to learning" (Flynn et al, 2004 p. 13). It provides opportunities for teachers to assess knowledge and experiences and introduces and foreshadows what will be addressed in the learning experience. *Before Reading* activities include the following; picture walk, previewing discussions, predicting activities, vocabulary, prior knowledge discussions, KWL charts, genre investigations, settings, and concepts of print activities. These kinds of activities best fall under the category of the *Exploratory Phase*. They provide teachers with opportunities to understand students' knowledge and expectations before the learning experience. They help teachers assess and design instruction or "interventions" prior to the *Discovery Phase*. In other words "(t)he learner's confusion may stem from the learner's growing awareness of the existence of knowledge/information/skills/concepts that conflict with his/her prior perceptions" (Flynn et. al., 2004, p. ix).

In the *During Reading* phase, teachers provide support for the readers in decoding words and comprehension. At early stages the teacher listens to the children reading aloud, providing strategic support as needed to help them apply skills and strategies that have been learned or they are learning. This is when the concept of "coaching" becomes most apparent. At later stages of literacy development, teachers assist children in constructing meaning by providing opportunities to predict, read to confirm, and to modify understanding as they progress through text. Providing diminishing support, or scaffolding, as students move through text levels helps them to become more experienced in solving word or comprehension problems in their reading and

ultimately allows them to become more independent. The ultimate goal is to help students reach a progressive level of the understanding of the skills and strategies they need to access new words and read for understanding without reliance on a more experienced reader. *During Reading* activities include the following:

- periodic comprehension checks
- decoding/phonics skills activities
- semantic skills activities using content and/or context
- syntactic skills activities
- self-correcting and monitoring activities
- journaling activities
- graphic organizers
- Post-It-Notes™
- reading silently or to partner
- choral reading activities
- reading with proper voice inflections
- buddy reading
- guided questioning

During Reading activities encourage students to discover as they read. Teachers design opportunities for students to expand their knowledge and competencies and guide them to do so. Planned interventions and spontaneous interventions are also part of *During Reading* activities. Teachers use this time to assess students' understanding and competencies. They can also utilize the opportunity to help students resolve confusions.

The *After Reading* phase includes activities that engage children in application, reflection, and clarification. They may include such activities as:

- comprehension checks
- summarizing
- follow-up writing activities
- reading responses

- predicting what might happen next (sequel)
- application projects
- enrichment activities
- retellings using puppets, pictures or memory
- introducing stories by the same author
- introducing stories by same illustrator
- story mapping
- using graphic organizers
- creating replications
- creating innovations
- comparing and contrasting

While “exploration” can be seen in many of these activities, the *Discovery Phase* is most relevant in *After Reading* activities. Here students can engage in discussions and application of new learning. Teachers can use these opportunities for assessment of understanding and application, as well as opportunities for new learning and new directions for exploration.

Conclusion

The theoretical foundations for constructivist education are put into practice in Guided Reading. Learning is guided by standards and objectives, but based on the developmental needs of the learners. Assessment is a continuous process that assists the teacher in pursuing planned or spontaneous interventions. Engaging the students is essential in motivating them and helping them to establish their own personal connection to the intended learning. Guided Reading also allows the teachers to employ good “coaching” skills as they determine how best to guide the learners to understand or apply new learning. The *Exploratory* and *Discovery Phases* are important elements in Guided Reading and help to drive the enthusiasm and joy of learning to read.

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