Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy 6-12
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The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning
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is a book grounded in relationships and built on connections—between generations of learning theorists starting with Lev Vygotsky and extending to George Hillocks and Michael Smith; between learning theory and the innovative practice of that theory in secondary English classrooms; and between teachers and learners engaged in two-way learning in collaborative classrooms. Consistent with this focus on relationships and connections, Strategic Reading has three authors bridging the worlds of theory and practice: Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, a professor at the University of Maine, Director of the Maine Writing Project, and author of “You Gotta BE the Book”: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents (Teachers College Press, 1997); and coauthors Tanya N. Baker and Julie Dube, both secondary English teachers. Through their collaboration as teacher-leaders in the Maine Writing Project, the authors embarked on “a hike up a set of trails blazed by Lev Vygotsky and George Hillocks” (xiv), applying this theoretical orientation to their teaching of secondary English and illustrating how their students have developed into more engaged and independent readers and writers, thinkers, and citizens as a result.

Strategic Reading honors and challenges teachers by reminding us that the best teaching practice is grounded in theory; the more clearly we understand and can articulate the theories on which our practices are based, the more able we will be to act on them in our classrooms in strategic ways that benefit students. The authors’ clear explication and innovative applications of a Vygotskian theoretical framework build a hopeful vision of what Maxine Green calls “wide-awake” teaching and learning that engages teachers and students alike in an inquiry into “what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they are or could be doing it” (5).

Informed by Vygotsky’s and Hillocks’s assertion that what is learned must be actively taught, the authors offer a model not of teacher-centered or student-centered but of learning-centered instructional practice that engages students in purposeful, carefully scaffolded learning processes focused on challenging learning tasks. Following Vygotsky, the writers develop tasks in the student’s zone of proximal development (ZPD), a cognitive region just beyond what the student can accomplish alone (16). To guide and scaffold learning in this area, first the teacher models a strategy or approach for tackling a challenging learning task, talking it through and highlighting when and how the approach can be used. Next the teacher engages in the task with students helping out. Then students take over the task, with the teacher observing, helping out, and intervening as needed. Finally, students independently use the strategy or approach while the teacher watches. With enough practice, students internalize the strategy, which becomes part of their problem-solving repertoire, to be used flexibly and as needed. The power of this model is that it is “two-sided” (30), requiring mutual effort and resulting in mutual learning on the part of both teacher and learners. It takes place in a collaborative community where there is considerable social support and expert modeling as well as strategic instructional scaffolding.

This teaching and learning theory parallels Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of literature, which asserts that readers need to bring meanings and strategies to a text in order to understand what the text is trying to communicate. Because different kinds of
texts place particular demands on readers, less experienced readers need guidance to develop a set of strategies that support their "transactions" with such texts. Students need to be explicitly taught what texts expect of them as readers and how to fulfill as well as challenge these expectations, thus developing their "authorial reading skills" (59-60). As expert readers of literary text, teachers have both the responsibility and resources to serve as guides and mentors for this authorial reading.

After framing learning and reading theory, the authors go on to build a rich picture of classroom applications that demonstrate this authorial reading in practice. For example, in Chapter 3, "Authorial Reading and Democratic Projects," Wilhelm uses a concrete example of how Directed Reading and Thinking Activity (DRTA) can help students notice important features of a text ("You will want to pay attention to how characters are described and what they are doing when they are first introduced. This is the rule of notice! Authors expect you to notice how characters are first introduced!" [79]) and accomplish interpretive moves that lead them to confront, and perhaps challenge, the author's generalizations or themes. ("How can your thinking [about the themes in this story] be applied to the relationships in your own life?" [81]) The DRTA technique is not an end in itself but rather a flexible resource for guiding students through a text as well as leading them beyond it to the provocative questions, such as, "So what? What do we do about it? How can we inquire further about this or related issues? How can we figure out what to do as a result of the issue and our beliefs about it?" (87). These questions support the kind of engaged, independent practice of meaning making and critical thinking that truly make reading "democratic work" and lead to meaningful projects with real-world applications.

Strategic Reading offers a variety of flexible and adaptable resources for helping students understand both form and substance, content and process—the what, how, and why of reading literary texts. Chapter 4, "Frontloading," draws on schema theory to illustrate ways of helping students use their prior knowledge as a resource for making meaning of increasingly challenging texts. ("One way to prepare students to read is to provide them with a number of different quotes by one character in a story. This helps them infer personality traits of a character."[116])

Chapter 5, "Loving the Questions," uses questioning techniques drawn from a number of sources to teach students how to generate good questions to guide their reading, their thinking, and their talk. The three "discussion clips" on The Great Gatsby illustrate students' growing maturity and independence in thinking clearly and critically about what and how they read but also about how issues in the reading relate to their lives and the world in which they live. Throughout this progression of student-generated questions (i.e., "How important is the past to you as compared to the importance of the past to Gatsby?"; "Why does Gatsby want Daisy to say she never loved Tom?"; "How does the phrase 'love conquers all' affect people?"; "Which characters in The Great Gatsby represent true American qualities?" [150]), the teacher serves as a guide and a resource, modeling and lending support as necessary, but also stepping aside as students internalize and use questions independently.

The importance of planning thoughtful progressions and strategic support to help students accomplish increasingly challenging tasks is addressed in Chapter 7, "Assignment Sequencing." Embedding many of the resources and techniques discussed earlier, the chapter maps out an instructional sequence beginning with a "frontloaded" introductory activity to surface students' background knowledge, moving through a teacher-directed activity with a picture book on the same theme, and extending to the carefully scaffolded reading of a set of more complex texts that demonstrates how carefully orchestrated assistance from experts and peers can move students toward increasing independence as they internalize the rules of the "reading game."

As the book's epilogue points out, in our current, highly politicized educational environment, teaching is often seen as "telling" and students are frequently denied the opportunities, tools, and authentic learning contexts that could motivate and engage them. When we join them in a discussion about literacy, when we help them develop the resources and tools they need to tackle challenging learning tasks independently, we are not only equipping them to be strategic readers, we are also preparing them to be "active and ethical agents" in society (237). This transformation is demonstrated by the "Buddy Reading" project between high school students and pre-schoolers described in Chapter 8. Although the original goal of the project was to improve the literacy skills of less-than-engaged high school students, it also resulted in the growth of students' self-confidence and ability to communicate, cooperate, and reflect. The relationships and resulting learning community that were built between young children preparing to enter the world of school and high school students getting ready to leave it demonstrates the abundant benefits of two-sided learning.

Strategic Reading offers a rich array of resources and tools to help both new and experienced teachers work toward the visionary goal
of guiding adolescent readers to engagement, competence, and independence. Although the book provides many concrete classroom-based techniques, as well as stories and figures to illustrate them, its primary focus is not on strategies. Rather, it develops an argument—grounded in theory and supported by extended examples of classroom practice—that “reading and writing should create new meaning, connections, and relationships. Reading and writing, like all effective learning is dialectical and social, and makes use of past and present materials to reach into the future” (52). The instructional examples come primarily from English-language arts classrooms, but the theory and many of the classroom applications translate easily into a reading focus in other content areas.

This is a resource I will return to again and again—for a review of constructivist theory, for models and practical classroom applications that make that theory real, and for reminders that learning-centered environments have the power to transform us all—as readers, writers, thinkers, and citizens.

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The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning


Arguably, no current trend in educational policy generates more controversy than the use of mandatory assessments. As states implement standards for schools, high-stakes testing has become a powerful index of accountability and performance in teaching and learning. In some states, performance is linked to teacher bonuses and students’ graduation; in others, poor test scores can mean the takeover or dismantling of an entire district. While opinion polls show that teachers and parents generally favor setting higher standards for schools, the grades for current mandated assessments are far less favorable. As recently reported in Education Week’s Quality Counts 2001, nearly 70 percent of public school teachers surveyed feel that standards have led to an overemphasis on assessments. In some states (Massachusetts and New York, for example), parents and students have even boycotted them. High-stakes testing looms as public education’s next battle royale.

Among those who believe in these tests are President Bush, for whom “testing is the cornerstone of reform,” and prominent business executives such as IBM chairman Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., who, in a March 14 New York Times editorial (“The Tests We Know We Need”), called standardized assessments “an essential part of the drive toward world-class standards in our public schools.” Gerstner, who also serves as cochairman of Achieve, Inc., a nonprofit school reform group created by governors and business leaders, cites a recent Public Agenda (www.publicagenda.org) poll of middle and high school students, 80 percent of whom “believed that the standardized tests used in their schools are generally fair.” For many advocates, assessments are the bottom line and sine qua non of education reform. The need for them, argues Gerstner, could not be clearer: “Last fall, college professors and employers were asked to assess the writing proficiency of high school graduates. Three-quarters of both groups rated graduates as poor or fair on writing. Two-thirds rated graduates as poor or fair in math.”

But advocates often speak as if the tests themselves, rather than teaching or standards, are the heavy artillery of reform. High standards may promise rich curriculum, but if assessments are only loosely tied to learning objectives, they can undermine and weaken effective classroom practices. As Warren Simmons, executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, has warned, “unfortunately what we have in too many districts is test-driven reform masquerading as standards-based reform” (Education Week, April 5, 2000). Test scores may offer a quantifiable fix on a school or district’s progress and an expedient yardstick for politicians and administrators, but what if they don’t measure the standards the curriculum advances? What if they aim too low in what they assess? How standards, teaching, and testing are aligned is a crucial element in the story, and the implications for the teaching of writing are far reaching, argues George Hillocks, Jr., in his new book, The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning.

Hillocks, a distinguished composition researcher who currently directs the University of Chicago master’s program in teaching, presents a trenchant and provocative analysis of a diverse and representative group of state writing assessments. And, as his title