

Text Coding: An Elementary Reading Strategy Grows Up and Goes To College

How do you get college students to read an assigned textbook chapter and think about it critically? How do you insure that students are ready for a class discussion on the chosen topic for the week? How do you avoid the phenomenon of “I can hide myself in a class discussion if I haven’t read the material?” Those were questions I struggled with as a new college professor of Educational Administration until the day I was talking with an elementary reading teacher who told me about text coding. It is a simple strategy designed to get early readers to interact meaningfully with printed text. The teacher instructs the children to use letters and symbols jotted in the margins or put on post-it notes to code what they are thinking about as they read. Then the teacher brings children together in small groups to talk about what they have been thinking. The original version of text coding was called INSERT (Interactive Notation System for Effective Reading and Thinking) and was developed by Vaughn and Estes (1986). It has been used as a comprehension strategy in various forms by reading teachers for 20 years. It seemed like an idea that could easily be transported to a college setting, so I decided to give it a try.

I assigned my graduate class in Leadership and Administration a chapter to read in our text. Students were to read and think critically about the material and jot notes to themselves as they read, using the following codes:

I = Interesting

? = I have a question about this

* = Important

A = Agree

D = Disagree

C = Connects to something else I know about

Most students did not mind writing in the margins of their textbooks, but the option of jotting their codes on small post-it© notes was also given. The goal of the text coding was to insure that students were ready to discuss the textbook material assigned to them. By using the codes to depict their reaction to the reading material, students interacted with the text in a meaningful way as they read it.

I had an unusually large class, so I anticipated that a whole group discussion on the text material would result in non-participation by many students. To insure that each student would get a chance to talk about what he/she had read that week, I had students organize themselves into discussion groups of five or six. As I planned to use this strategy throughout the semester, I asked them to choose a discussion leader in their groups for each week of the class. The discussion leader was responsible for composing five to ten questions for the group for class time. When the groups came together, each student was prepared with his/her individual text coding as a basis for making a contribution to the discussion. The assigned leader was armed with questions to facilitate the discussion. As the instructor, I floated from group to group, listening in on discussions, observing the quality of the questions being asked and the responses being

made. I could easily see at a glance which students had read the text and interacted meaningfully with the material by coding it. Students earned weekly participation points for the text coding and for being actively involved in their small group discussions.

Since learning about text coding, I have used it in several graduate courses. I have been amazed at the results. Students come prepared for class, having read their assigned material. They have thought critically about what they have read. They are ready to discuss, question, debate, and share with classmates. No student can fade into the shadows of non-participation. Those who are more reticent about contributing in a large group discussion have a safe forum for sharing in the small group. Equity and balance are observed in the give-and-take small group interactions. And most importantly, there is 100% engagement in the learning activity.

The reaction of my students has been overwhelmingly positive. I have had comments such as “I really like this approach!” and “This really gives me motivation to read my assignment, which I need.” I had a graduate student come up to me after small group discussion time and say “This is my favorite part of our class each week!” I have seen students take the initiative to type out their discussion questions ahead of time and bring copies for everyone without any prompting to do so. I have witnessed students who never speak up in class sharing quality thoughts in the small group.

There is a saying that “everything old is new again.” Text coding, which has been around as an effective teaching strategy for young readers for a long time, has grown up and graduated. Thanks, primary teachers, for giving me a way to engage my college students in their text reading!

Reference

Vaughn, J. L. & Estes, T. H. (1986). *Reading and reasoning beyond the primary grades*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.