Reading for Understanding
A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms

Reviewed by Bob Fecho

I have a natural tendency to distrust any book that bills itself as a “guide to improving reading.” What can I expect from such a book? To be sold yet one more fad, another educational gadget, some one-dimensional, fly-by-night approach to raise test scores? Such books tend to depend on prefabricated models; they envision classrooms as monocultures and pedagogy as one size fits most and too bad for those it doesn’t fit. Rather than building on the natural proclivities of students to make meaning for themselves and on the talents and insights of teachers for making rational decisions about their classrooms, too many reading improvement guides impose structures and dimensions that limit the many ways students can transact with text.

Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised by Reading for Understanding, a straightforward, yet nuanced, account of what the authors call a reading apprenticeship approach, one that centers adolescent reading instruction in three beliefs:

• that students bring both overt and tacit knowledge of the reading process to the classroom
• that reading is a process involving active engagement and monitoring
• that teachers have the insight to make informed decisions about their classrooms, as do students about their learning progress.

Such an approach flies in the face of high-stakes testing and national standards by insisting that learning decisions must be made at the school and classroom level. The focus here is on the teacher and the student. Accordingly, the book provides a clear but multbranched path teachers can follow to develop a strategic plan for helping adolescents improve their ability to read, not just their standardized test scores.

Reading for Understanding strikes the right balance between setting a theoretical basis for the approaches the book advocates and grounding them in classroom practice. The authors offer a conceptual framework for understanding reading apprenticeship and present an overview of instructional strategies that support reading development for adolescent learners. They then describe how they have put the reading apprenticeship program into practice, beginning with an account of Academic Literacy, the year-long reading course they conceptualized, designed, and taught to ninth graders at Thurgood Marshall Academic High School in San Francisco.

Their approach makes manifest in the classroom Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. They argue that teachers need to see that students can operate independently on some reading tasks and need the support of experienced others to facilitate the fuller grasping of more complicated reading challenges. To this end, they offer that students and teachers should enter into a reading apprenticeship relationship, one that calls reading process to the surface, that makes the invisible visible. This relationship allows for the social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions to transact through both internal and external metacognitive conversations.

The authors demonstrate that a primary way to help adolescents demystify reading is to teach it rather than to merely assign it. We continued on page 40
can't assume, they remind us, that all readers know or don't know how to question text. Urging us to put our assumptions aside, they provide strategies for helping students and teachers to understand the reading process as it applies to each reader.

For example, students are asked to read a complicated piece and to take note not only of what they read but of how they read it. Such an activity allows them, perhaps for the first time, to understand their reading process, to consider that they have a variety of reading strategies, and to think about other strategies they might add to their repertoire. This new perspective makes it possible for them to take part in protocols in which they think aloud about their thought processes as they read to the teacher, one to one. Once students get past the artificiality of the exercise—few of us make our thought processes known as we undergo them—they begin to understand how such periodic inquiry into their process provides insight into the ways they have progressed or remained static as readers.

While allowing for both teacher choice and creativity, the authors present ways to help students become better questioners, problem solvers, summarizers, and predictors of text. The strategies they outline have worked well for them, but readers are invited to consider other means to the same ends. Reading for Understanding provides a frame with which teachers can build, not walls that limit growth, the unfortunate downfall of too many other reading guides.

Of particular note for writing project teacher-consultants: this book acknowledges the importance and complexity of process. Like writers, readers have many ways into a text and may be at different stages of independence within a range of genres. Therefore, the competent interpreter of poetry may struggle with a science-oriented essay on the ramifications of cloning. Also like writers, readers have a repertoire of choices upon which to call and need to have a metacognitive grasp of those options. It follows then that readers improve as readers when they incorporate various writing-based strategies like charting and questioning into their repertoire.

Furthermore, competent readers and writers who are challenging their skills take risks as they push themselves further to grasp more complicated texts. In this way, struggle and challenge are seen as part of the process rather than as pitfalls to be avoided at all cost. Finally, the authors argue that, just as writing has been advocated across the curriculum, so too must reading be both taught and used in all content areas in substantive ways. Only then will students improve as both readers and learners in those subjects.

Perhaps my greatest concern regarding Reading for Understanding is a dimension that is out of the authors' control. Despite their avowed intention to "encourage others to adapt and extend the ideas presented here" and to join in "an ongoing dialogue about successful practices for developing stronger readers in middle and high school" (xvi), my fear is that too many schools will be tempted to adopt rather than adapt these ideas to their situations. I support the writers in urging teachers to embrace the theory behind these strategies and then to select, adapt, and invent techniques that suit each classroom's individual needs.

In addition, I am not sure that the book develops the need or means for helping students to find a larger purpose for reading other than that the teacher has required it. Perhaps it is not enough that the authors advocate both teacher and student taking an inquiry stance. Rather, teachers may need some explanation of how one embeds these activities into a larger pedagogic frame—one that encourages students to find queries, feedback, and understandings to fuel continued reading. As useful as the strategies discussed are, they will be ineffective unless they are seen as part of a larger focus on inquiry and critique that provides opportunity for students to discover their own purposes for reading.

Those concerns aside, Reading for Understanding urges all teachers of adolescents to consider the ways reading is both used and taught in their classrooms and provides theories and strategies that will allow teachers to continue to rethink, revise, and refine their efforts. It does so with one foot planted firmly in the realm of substantive ideas and the other in the day-to-day experiences of teachers, students, and classrooms. It also does so without sugarcoating experience or denying problems. Instead, it raises questions about how implementation of some of these ideas is difficult, complex, and time consuming. The authors argue, however, that commitment to the reading apprenticeship will yield positive and measurable results.

Intent on seeing their work as part of a larger discussion, they close their book with this remark: "Making a vision a reality will require other productive teacher-researcher collaborations to mutually enrich theory and practice in adolescent reading" (177). I encourage all of us who teach to take up their invitation, their vision, and their challenge.

Bob Fecho is assistant professor of reading education at the University of Georgia. He is a teacher-consultant of the Philadelphia Writing Project at the University of Pennsylvania.