

Why Reading Is Like Baseball

Here is a sentence I'd thought I'd never write: My beloved Anaheim Angels ended forty-one years of pain and futility by winning the World Series. To this day, two years later, I wake up expecting it all to be a perverse dream. But it's true; it happened. I attended game seven, and I saw it with my own eyes. Divine intervention occurred in Anaheim. On one magnificent fall evening, all those years of ineptness, all those years of painful pennant collapses, all those years of broken promises were washed away. (Readers in Boston and Chicago, take heart—jinxes can be broken. Anything is possible.)

My loyalty to the Angels began one summer day in 1968 when my Uncle Phil took me to my first professional game. It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky, a slight breeze blowing in from center field. As we walked into the stadium, the grass was so green it hurt my eyes. The sharp crack of the fungo bat, swung by Jimmy Reese (a former roommate of Babe Ruth's), echoed through the air. To top it off, the Angels' opponents that day were Reggie Jackson, Blue Moon Odom, Catfish Hunter, Joe Rudi, and the rest of the hated Oakland Athletics.

In the third inning, Jim Spencer, first baseman for the Angels, hit a foul ball that ricocheted off a seat straight into my eager hands. My first game

ever, and I caught a foul ball (a feat that I have been unable to repeat in the thirty-five years since). The Angels won the game on a line drive single by Jim Fregosi. All in all, a perfect introduction to baseball. I was never the same.

Now, a generation later, both my daughters are baseball fans. My older daughter, Caitlin, has developed into a baseball snob, refusing even to acknowledge the existence of any team that plays in the shadow of “her” Los Angeles Dodgers. My younger daughter, Devin, roots for the Angels—and thank goodness the Angels did not collapse because she was beginning to exhibit symptoms of permanent psychological damage. Another Angels meltdown and there’s no telling what the long-term effects would have been on her sunny disposition.

About now you might be asking yourself: Why the baseball anecdote in a book about the teaching of reading to secondary students? The answer is simple: While I was sitting at game seven of the World Series I was struck with the realization that baseball is a metaphor for how adolescents read. Reading is like baseball. Allow me to explain.

Seeing the “Real” Game

Even when only five years old, my daughters had a rudimentary understanding of the game of baseball. A five-year-old’s understanding of baseball goes something like this: Our guy is going to stand on a hill and throw a ball as hard as he can to our catcher. The batter, with a bat cocked over his shoulder, is going to try to hit the pitch. If the batter makes contact with the ball he will run like crazy to as many bases as safely possible. Our team will try to catch the ball and throw it to get the runner out. If the runner makes it all the way around the bases, his team will score a run (or a “point,” as Devin used to say). If we get three outs, the good guys will get their chance to bat and score runs. Our opponents will do this nine times, we will do this nine times, and whoever scores the most runs will be declared the winner. If the Angels are the winners, we go home happy. If the bad guys are the winners, we go home sad.

Even at the age of five, my daughters had these basics of baseball down. (They also understood at all times the exact section and row of the roving cotton candy vendor, but that’s another story.) It could be said that at a certain level they “understood” the game.

But did they? As they sat right next to me watching the game, I was seeing things on the field they were oblivious to. I saw the catcher peek into

the dugout for a sign from the manager, which was then relayed to the pitcher. I saw the center fielder realize the catcher was setting up for an outside pitch, so he cheated a few steps to his left to get a jump on any ball hit to right field. I then noticed the base runner on first base look to the third-base coach for a secret sign to see if he had permission to try to steal second base. This made the shortstop and the second baseman nervous, because if that runner were to attempt a steal of second base, one of them would have to cover second base and catch the throw from the catcher. Yet they didn't want the hitter to know who would be covering the base, because he might try to hit the ball through the hole left by the covering fielder. Therefore players have devised a secret sign, which they flash (and change) just before every pitch. All this, and more, occurs prior to every pitch. In other words, there are many games within the game of baseball. My daughters, sitting right next to me, had no inkling of these other moves. They watched and "understood" the game on a surface level while I watched and understood the same game on a much deeper level. We watched, and yet did not watch, the same game.

It dawned on me sitting in the stadium that my high school students read text a lot like my daughters were "reading" baseball games. My daughters were able to read the game on a superficial, surface level, but they were unable to see the deeper, richer meaning of the game. They were unaware of the craft, the complexities, and the nuances of the game of baseball.

Isn't this how many secondary students read text? They rarely get below the surface to the richer, deeper meaning of the text. They think one reading is sufficient; they don't have the skills to uncover the craft, the complexities, and the nuances of the text. They can read and "comprehend," but they do so almost exclusively on a surface level. They miss much of the deeper beauty of the game.

I should note that my daughters, now both in their teens, have developed the ability to read baseball expertly. They are attentive to many of the nuances of the game—nuances often missed by the casual fan. They are able to anticipate managerial strategies. They now read the game at a fairly sophisticated level, but they were *taught* how to do so. They did not acquire their skill spontaneously or randomly. My daughters can now "read" baseball because over a number of years, through scores of games, they sat next to me. I taught them to recognize the difference between a screwball and a slider. I instructed them on the intricacies of the Infield Fly rule. I coached them to anticipate the squeeze play. In short, I taught them how to read the game, much like my Uncle Phil taught me, and much like my grandfather taught him.

Digging Deeper

This book is about teaching adolescent students to become good readers, not of baseball, but of the challenging works of fiction and nonfiction they will encounter in junior high school, high school, and beyond. It provides guidance on how we, as teachers, can “sit” next to our readers and teach them how to read text at deeper and richer levels. We want our students to graduate with the ability to dig below the surface of text and read the nuances of the game.

Here’s an illustration of how text can be read at various levels. Please read the following passage (adapted from Weaver 2002) and answer the questions that follow.

How to Bartle Puzballs

There are tork gooboos of puzballs, including lapiies, mushos, and fushos. Even if you bartle the puzballs that tovo inny and onny of the pern, they do not grunto any lipples. In order to geemee a puzball that gruntos lipples, you should bartle the fusho who has rarckled the parshtootoos after her humply flufu.

1. How many gooboos of puzballs are there?
2. What are lapiies, mushos, and fushos?
3. Even if you bartle the puzballs that tovo inny and onny of the pern, they will not what?
4. How can you geemee a puzball that gruntos lipples?

How’d you do? Here is the answer key:

1. There are tork gooboos of puzballs.
2. Lapiies, mushos, and fushos are tork gooboos of puzballs.
3. They will not grunto any lipples.
4. You should bartle the fusho who has rarckled her parshtootoos after her humply flufu.

My guess is that you got most, or even all, of the questions correct. I would also surmise that you have very little understanding of what you’ve read. This exercise illustrates that we can assign reading in our classrooms, give students shallow reading assessments, and have students pass them. On the surface, everything looks fine: the students read the text and are able to answer the questions. But in reality, do they really understand what they have read? They can answer surface-level questions, but once you ask

them to evaluate, to analyze, to synthesize, they can't do it. Unfortunately, I think there is a lot of "puzball-level" reading going on in our schools.

Now read Ned Guymon's "Conversation Piece," which first appeared in a 1950 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and is surely the world's shortest detective story. Then answer the question that follows it.

Conversation Piece

"No!"
"Yes."
"You didn't!"
"I did."
"When?"
"Just now."
"Where?"
"Bedroom."
"Dead?"
"Yes."
"Why?"
"You know."
"I don't!"
"You do."
"Unfaithful?"
"Yes."
"With whom?"
"With you."
"No!"
"Yes."
"She didn't . . ."
"She did."
"We didn't . . ."
"You did."
"You knew?"
"I knew."
"How long?"
"Long enough."
"What now?"
"Guess."
"Police?"
"Later."
"Why later?"
"Guess again."
"Tell me!"
"Look."
"Oh, no!"
"Oh, yes."
"You can't!"

“I can.”
“Please!”
“Don’t beg.”
“Forgive me!”
“Too late.”
“Good God!”
“Goodbye.”

“Operator?”
“Yes, sir.”
“The police.”

Question: What happened in this story?

Readers who look below the surface, who can apply a little inference, will come up with quite a complex story compared to the few short words on the page. (Students, who year in and year out arrive in my classroom with morbid imaginations, love this story and with very little prodding are able to read between the lines.) That’s the kind of reader we want to help our students become: readers who can move beyond the literal and who can interpret the text. Readers who read way beyond a “puzball” mentality. Readers who can read between the lines to see the real game being played.

Building Scaffolds

Let’s say today is the first day of school for your twelfth-grade class, and as a teacher with extraordinarily high standards, you decide to assign your students an ambitious research paper (even though it’s only the first day of school and this is not an honors-level class). You are preparing them to read Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, so you assign them the following take-home research essay:

Trace the development of Chinese immigration to the United States. Consider how this history may still influence the attitudes of contemporary Chinese-American women.

A real zinger. The students arrive and you distribute the question, explaining that the finished paper should be a minimum of ten pages in length, typed, double-spaced. You tell them you want multiple sources and that students should cite these sources properly. You make it clear that once the students leave the room, they are on their own—you will not be

there to assist them. You want to see how they fare without teacher assistance. Your last words: “Your papers are due next Friday. Good luck.”

Next Friday arrives. What kind of papers do you think you’d receive? Do words like *atrocious*, *horrible*, and *dreadful* come to mind? Why do we shudder when we think of the papers we’d receive? Because we know students do not come to us knowing how to write a complex paper. They cannot automatically employ the necessary behaviors that lead to writing wonderful papers. They lack the strategies and know-how to brainstorm, to research, to outline, to draft, to seek feedback, to revise, to revise again, to revise yet again, and to edit. This is why the public pays us, the teachers, to be in the classroom—because we know that if we assign a complex writing essay to inexperienced writers without any instruction, we will receive poor results. We provide the instructional scaffolding—the guidance—our students need to become competent writers. We are the key element.

This is not meant as a slight to our students. We simply know that teachers must develop their students’ writing through intensive instruction. Doing so allows us to lead them to levels of writing they otherwise would be unable to attain. No good writing teacher would assign a complex writing assignment to a class of inexperienced writers without first teaching them the steps necessary to achieve success.

If we agree that giving a difficult writing assignment without teaching any of the skills good writers use is a recipe for poor writing, isn’t the same principle true for challenging reading? We know from experience that you cannot tell adolescents, “Here’s Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Take it home and read it. Make sure you understand it thoroughly, and bring it to class a week from Friday for discussion.” To assign this novel to students without providing them any instruction on how to manage the difficulty of the text would surely produce a level of reading that might make us cringe (much like the bad writing we would have received in the *Woman Warrior* research paper example). If we simply assign writing instead of teaching students how to write, we’ll get poor writing. If we simply assign reading instead of teaching students how to read, we’ll get poor reading.

When it comes to reading challenging text, not enough attention has been paid to understanding the steps we can take to provide effective scaffolding for our struggling readers. Does this ring true? Aren’t students in all content areas given difficult reading assignments to take home to read? Have you ever had a student come back the next day only to say he tried to read the chapter but simply didn’t “get” it? When this happens to me, it raises some important questions: Have I given the student the proper level

of support to make meaning from the text? Did I anticipate the needs of this student prior to assigning the reading? Have I supported this challenging reading assignment with the same attention and level of understanding I would if it were a challenging writing assignment? Did I simply “throw” this reading at the student? Am I *assigning* challenging reading, or am I *teaching* challenging reading?

Preparing Our Students

I have taught English at the high school level in Anaheim, California, since 1985, and over the years I have noticed a troubling trend developing among my students: More and more, my students are coming to me less and less prepared to tackle challenging text. By “challenging text” I do not mean simply the literature and poetry that serve as the foundation of our curricula, but also challenging nonfiction, speeches, textbook passages, primary source documents, newspaper and magazine articles, and various forms of functional text (such as maps and charts) found in our state reading standards. (Henceforth, when I refer to “challenging” or “difficult” text in these pages I am referring to all of these types of reading, not just short stories, novels, and poems.)

I think it is fair to say that my students are having an increasingly difficult time when it comes to reading and understanding the hard stuff. With this in mind, I have written this book in an attempt to answer one central question: What can we do, as teachers, to prepare our students to read challenging text at the deepest levels possible? When considering this question, I must remind myself that there is a big difference between *assigning* reading and *teaching* reading. As their teacher, I am the determining factor when it comes to how deeply my students will comprehend.

Knowing that teaching matters a great deal, I have structured this book to examine the key reading issues and to present effective strategies teachers can use to move their students to the deepest levels of comprehension. Chapter 2, “Teaching Challenging Text,” explores the elements of an effective reading lesson. Here I examine how to move students into deeper reading comprehension, and I offer suggestions to help our students work through the “hard parts.”

Chapter 3 is entitled “Focusing the Reader.” The success of a lesson often hinges on how the teacher “frames” the text. “Cold” reading can often lead to disaster. In this chapter I suggest where and when prereading

strategies are most necessary and present effective strategies to help prepare students for difficult reading.

Chapter 4 is concerned with what I call “first-draft” reading. A careful initial reading of the text is foundational to achieving deeper reading. How do we get students to pay close attention while they read? How do we encourage students to fix their comprehension when it begins to falter? Why is establishing a purpose critical to raising our students’ comprehension? Chapter 4 presents strategies proven to help students make deeper meaning possible from first-draft reading.

The richest level of comprehension is often found in what I call “second-draft” reading. The focus of Chapter 5 is on the benefits of rereading. Here I share techniques to help students internalize these benefits. As teachers, we are often faced with students who have adopted a “I read it once; I’m done” mentality. This chapter explores ways of moving adolescent readers past this mind-set.

Meaningful collaboration raises reading comprehension. In Chapter 6, we explore how comprehension is elevated by talk. Two key questions are addressed: (1) When should collaboration take place? and (2) What can I do as a teacher to prompt meaningful interaction in my classroom?

In Chapter 7, “Using Metaphor to Deepen Comprehension,” I make the case that metaphorical thinking deepens reading comprehension. Suggestions on how to infuse more metaphor into our curricula will be presented, as well as a number of proven strategies to help draw out rich, metaphorical thinking in our students.

Moving students beyond surface-level understanding and into deeper levels of reflection is a challenge facing all teachers of adolescents. In short, how do we make books relevant to the modern adolescent? In Chapter 8 I discuss how we can use the books in our curricula as springboards into meaningful student reflection.

Chapter 9, “Reading the World,” addresses the following questions: How does the deeper reading of text help students to critically read the world? Which strategies are most effective in helping students develop lifelong critical reading skills? What benefits will students reap by developing critical reading?

The final chapter, “The Art of Teaching Deep Reading,” explores how the principles and strategies discussed in the previous chapters come into play when a teacher sits down to plan an effective deeper reading lesson. A planning template is provided to help teachers determine which strategies will best assist their students to reach deeper levels of comprehension.

The classroom-tested strategies and lessons found in this book are designed to teach students how to dig below the surface to read the “real game.” When successfully implemented, they will not only help us teach content more effectively, they will also help us teach adolescents reading skills they will take with them far beyond graduation. When we teach students how to read deeply, we become more than information dispensers in our classrooms. We become cultivators of critical reading skills—skills of lifelong value.