



## DRAWING FROM YOUR WELL:

*Informing Your Literacy Instruction from Your Own Reading and Writing Habits*

Laura Benson

*You've always had the power within you.*

Glenda the Good Witch, *Wizard of Oz*

Knowing what to teach our growing readers and writers and considering how to model literacy for and with students is challenging, exhilarating, and often humbling. To develop edifying ways of helping students *see the invisible* and think like proficient readers and writers, turn within. Reflect on and record what you do when you read text and write text. Keep a notepad right by your bedside table (or wherever you do most of your reading) to name and jot down your ways of understanding (as a reader) and your efforts to be understood (as a writer).

Learning with hundreds of colleagues over the course of the last thirty-three years, I often begin our collaborations by asking them to *Draw From Your Well*. “Think about a text you read/wrote in the last seventy-two hours. How did you work to understand this text/be understood? What did you do – in your brain – to read/write this text?” My fellow brain searchers read everything from notes in our school mailboxes to newspapers to novels to computer manuals and professional books. Sharing our reading with one another, there are always numerous magazine readers and Internet surfers, too. Collectively, we also voice the variety of pieces we write – texts from the everyday and mundane (e-mails, lesson plans, to do lists, filling out forms, etc.) to more specialized texts (sympathy cards, report cards, poetry, letters of recommendation, memoirs for grandchildren, etc.). No matter what the text, what we DO as readers and writers By drawing from our literacy wells, we will know what and how to apprentice

students of all ages to become stronger readers and writers and to care about all this, too.

Here are some examples from my own literacy:

Text I read...	How I worked to understand this text...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E-mails</li>   <li>• Professional book/nonfiction text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skimmed...to see if there was a task I needed to complete</li> <li>• Ask questions</li> <li>• Read TOC first to see which chapters would answer my questions; Launched reading with ???</li> <li>• Kept thinking about “<i>I learned...</i>” and “<i>Hmm, that’s seem like an important idea!</i>”</li> </ul>

The text I read:

- *Leadership Change*
  
- *The Girl Who Played With Fire*

How I worked to understand this text:

- *Asked questions – What? Why? How?*
  
- *Searched for a definition of a key idea I been*
  
- *Predicted what Doug would say about and important supports*
  
- *Inferring how Lisbeth was feeling & what*



## *Draw From Your Well*

I encourage you to stop reading this piece now and reflect on how you are reading this piece – or how you recently read another text. Notice your self-talk and thinking by jotting down a few answers to these questions below:

Text I Read/Wrote	How I worked to Understand This Text/Be Understood

Recording insights from fellow educators who focused on their own reading, their words reflected wonderfully diverse and *intentional dispositions*...

- Reread
- Made predictions
- Used the pictures
- Visualized the story or information
- Remember what I read
- Noticed what lessons it taught me
- Kept an open mind to consider the author's point of view/new idea
- Scanned the newspaper to see what I wanted to read
- Reading the novel Salvador, I read it through once and read it again to visualize the characters and really see what was happening in the story
- Enjoyed it

In reflecting on their own reading work, many teachers identified their ways of *orienting* themselves to the text and *priming* their thinking. Some of their rituals of understanding included:

- Leafing through to see how many pages the text is
- Looking at the pictures first
- Paying attention to the chapter headings

- Scanning the text first and/or quickly studying the pictures to think about what the text would be about

Being in the habit of *connecting to the text* was also named as something we found ourselves doing during and after reading. Some responses reflecting this disposition included:

- I thought about what I already knew about this period of history as I read this chapter (textbook)/part of the novel.
- What I knew about the author's other writings helped me understand this text
- I read this to revisit a familiar place...and kept thinking about the similarities and the differences to my memories of the place.
- I like to read a current novel about the place I am going to visit (vacation trip).
- I have read a lot of books by the same author. So, I usually know where he is coming from and where he is going.
- I was pulling on my prior knowledge about this (content).

In other words, as proficient readers we are in the habit of *monitoring our understanding*. We know when we know and we know when we do not understand or are not clear as readers and writers. We also have a variety of ways of repairing or fixing our meaning breakdowns.

- Reread last part...It really stuck with me
- Put book down periodically to think about it; reread (parts) to remember
- Read slower and slower because I loved it
- Skimming the text
- Abandoned it – it just wasn't for me – or, at least, not right now
- The book has to hook me because I am reading in bed at night when I am really tired. I have to really want to read (the text)...
- I just let the book take me to another place (because this really) helps me wind down...
- I always read the cover, dedication, and thank you first.
- I reread some of the passages in this text
- I was listening to the author.
- I skipped some parts, read for details in other parts, sped up to get to the "good part", and slowed down (at times) to make the story last longer.
- I reread to savor the description.
- I had to think about the abbreviations here...and turned to the reference materials to figure them out.
- I was really spacing out here. I realized I needed to think more!

So many of us voiced our habits of *questioning and inferring* before, during, and after our reading...

- Where was the author coming from?
- What are the authors really saying here?
- I kept asking myself about free speech...As I read, I kept thinking about would this have been possible now/back then? Why did they do that? How did they have the courage to do that? Why were others silencing them?
- I predicted a lot from the pictures of this text.
- Looking at the title, I started asking myself questions right away which set the stage for thinking about the author's purpose for writing this, too.

...and name our habit of **Identifying Important Ideas**, too...

- To keep from getting bored, I say to myself "I am the character!" and I really think of myself and put myself in the character's shoes.
- When I am reading history, it's exercise for my mind...especially because I am thinking about the why...how this person or event changed history...
- I was reading this book by Ron Ritchhart to see how I can use it in my math class...
- I had to read a couple of other articles before I really got what this author was trying to say...
- I found myself jumping in personally...talking to the characters, trying to save a character...
- I glossed over things and keyed in on important words...
- I read the back blurb to get an overview...and make a decision about whether I wanted to read this text.
- When I am reading magazines, I flip through it to see what jumps out at me as interesting and important to read.
- I always read the summary of professional articles first – and sometimes that is all I read/all I have to read.
- I was highlighting the text and recording the topic on the top margin...
- I was reading this for self-help...and problem solving...

...and **Synthesizing** is a critical way we work to understand what we read...

- Now, I know...
- Putting all of this together, what seems really important is...because...
- My thinking has really changed by studying \_\_\_\_\_....Now, I think/will...
- Thinking about the order and sequence of the story/history was really important...
- Integrating all these pieces of information, I am thinking that...because...

...and our reading really comes alive when we are **Visualizing** as we read...

- Thinking about my reading, it was like watching a movie...
- Reading *A Thousand Acres*, I was visualizing like crazy...Jane Smiley's words really help you see every scene...even the pores of the character's skin!
- The pictures in my head did not match those in Bailey White's book...but I heard her voice as I read the book (from hearing the author on National Public Radio).
- Visualizing makes me involved as a reader...and as a writer, too.

...and *knowing ourselves as readers* including identifying what helps us do our best reading, we said...

- I like to get comfy when I read...be in my sweats...with pillows and just the right light...
- I need my children to be elsewhere when I read.
- I cuddle up with my book...sitting in my favorite chair and a mug of tea.
- I have books I read on the Stair Master/treadmill and I have books I have to read in a chair.
- We all pile in bed together with books and our electric blanket. We love reading side by side...and sometimes we read favorite parts to each other.
- I love sitting on the floor with books and read them for hours, especially children's literature.
- I read/need to read/love to read recommended books (Hundreds, if not thousands of teachers, have voiced this reading habit.).

Each of these ways of understanding and all of these brain tools are the *keys to the kingdom*. Each bullet listed here can be a lesson or a series of lessons for your own students. Knowing your students' strengths, needs, and passions, by having this type of menu drawn from your own reading you can align your lessons with integrity and edification. Your lessons will feel natural because you are thinking about what you authentically DO in your head as a reader and/or writer. Matching what you DO to what your students need to learn (for example), your lessons will be fueled with the fire of your integrity and your students' curiosity and relevance (i.e. the lesson represents something your students need and, ultimately if not immediately, find stimulating and helpful).

Being wide awake to our ways of understanding and being understood better informs us about how we can apprentice our students to comprehend and compost their own thinking.