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Interpreting texts in classroom contexts

Literacy educators want to promote reader-based interpretations of texts and negotiate those interpretations in secondary classrooms, but need a framework or model to guide planning and instruction. Here is a reader-centered lesson that informs and illustrates a model for the negotiation of interpretations in classroom contexts. Suggestions for developing interpretive classroom communities are provided.

Recent literacy publications indicate educators' unmistakable concern with how teachers can encourage students not only to form and discuss interpretations in response to texts but also to negotiate the validity of these interpretations. A themed issue of the *Journal of Reading* (Horowitz, 1994) was devoted to "Classroom Talk About Text." In that issue, authors of articles urged more talk between students, more authentic class discussions, more flexibility about perspectives readers adopt, and more practical ideas for teaching discussion, especially in culturally diverse schools. In *Exploring Texts*, Newell and Durst (1993) assembled a provocative set of essays to examine the role of discussion and writing in helping junior and senior high school students develop their understanding of literature. In their introduction, these editors point out the essential role teachers play in building environments for interaction that permit the social construction of meanings.

Throughout these publications and many others, there is an apparent and obvious shift from text-centered and teacher-dominated instruction to a reader-based framework for the construction of meanings and their sharing in classrooms. With that shift to new approaches in responding to texts has come a troubling search for a new theory or framework to guide teacher planning and classroom instruction. The articulation of a framework and a new model for the teaching of texts in classroom contexts is the aim of this article.

However, before presenting that model, we would like to tell a story about a story about a story—but you'll see what that's all about before we're done. The story we want to tell is about a series of instructional episodes that took place in Norm Unrau's 11th-grade classroom.

Meaning negotiation in the classroom context: An example

The class of 27 students that Unrau was teaching at the time of this investigation had read J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and was about to begin reading his short story entitled "The Laughing Man" (Salinger, 1981). It was late in the second month of the fall semester, so students were acclimating to the reader-based environment that Unrau was encouraging with response logs, sharing of responses in small teams, and ample whole-class discussions about meanings. As an initial task to activate knowledge and heighten motivation, readers were asked to participate in a modified Directed Reading-Thinking Activity; specifically, they were asked to predict the story's content on the basis of its title. "Knowing what you know about Salinger's writing," Unrau asked his students, "what do you think a story entitled 'The Laughing Man' is going to be about?" Several students responded.

Eric: I think it'll be about a crazy person in a mental hospital. He thinks everything's hysterical.

Sally: Maybe it's about the death of a comedian or a clown.

Margaret: I'd expect it to be ironic. Maybe about someone who's depressed and unhappy with his life but puts on a facade by laughing all the time to make people think he is happy.

The predictions often seemed to reflect what students had learned about Salinger's characters and to show that students' prior knowledge shaped their thinking. Actually, Margaret was not too far off.

Synopsis of "The Laughing Man"

A brief summary of "The Laughing Man" is essential for your understanding of the meaning negotiation that occurred in our classroom:

John Gedsudski, the story's almost hero, was a shy, rather short law student who went to New York University and who chaperoned and coached the Comanches, a group of young, energetic boys—mostly about 9 or 10 years old. One of the Comanches, who is now about 35, tells the story as he remembers John, whom the boys considered just short of heroic. It was baseball season, and the Chief (that's what the boys called John) took them in his bus to parks where they could play ball. As they traveled to and from parks in the bus, the boys were frequently entranced

by the Chief's exciting stories about a mysterious character called the Laughing Man.

The Laughing Man was disfigured as a boy when Chinese bandits put his head in a vise because his missionary parents wouldn't pay a ransom. He grew up among the bandits but was so ugly he would be tolerated only if he wore a mask over his face. Though shunned by people, he befriended animals in the forest. He imitated the bandits' style, soon surpassed them in crime, and aroused their jealousy to such an extent that they longed to kill him. In a short time, the Laughing Man accumulated a fortune, gave most of it to a monastery, but was pursued by an internationally famous detective, Dufarge. He evaded Dufarge with his four friends: a wolf, a dwarf, a Mongolian giant, and a beautiful Eurasian girl. But he was never seen without his mask.

Each time the Chief drove the boys to their baseball game, he told them another installment of the story. One unusual day, the Chief stopped his bus on the way to a game to pick up a girl, Mary Hudson. She was, in the boys' eyes, a beauty, but, when she asked to play baseball with them, she got a big "this-isn't-a-girl's-thing" response. She insisted and eventually took center field. Her fielding of the ball was terrible, but she got a hit every time at bat. The team forgave her fielding, and, for over a month, she would join the team several days each week.

One day on the bus while the Comanches waited for Mary Hudson to arrive, John told another episode about the Laughing Man. *Through detective Dufarge's cheap trickery, the Laughing Man was captured. He removed his mask, stunning his captors. But Dufarge, who had a coughing fit at the moment of the unveiling, didn't look at the horrid face. Covering his eyes, he emptied his gun at the sound of the Laughing Man's heavy breathing.* There the episode ended, even though Mary Hudson hadn't arrived.

Without Mary, the Chief drove the bus to the park where the boys were to play baseball. During the middle of the game, she arrived but refused to play ball. The narrator of the story, who was 9 at the time, explains that he couldn't figure out what was going on between the Chief and Mary but that he knew she wouldn't play again. She was crying on a distant bench. When the game was called because of darkness, the Chief went over and held the sleeve of Mary's coat. She broke from him and began running away. He didn't follow.

Back on the bus, the Comanches learned that *four of detective Dufarge's bullets hit the Laughing Man. As Dufarge approached, however, the Laughing Man spit out the bullets, a feat that burst Dufarge's heart. But the Laughing Man continued to bleed day after day. The animals in the forest soon summoned the Laughing Man's friend, the dwarf, who came with a fresh supply of eagle's blood, a vital food for the Laughing Man. But when the Laughing Man heard that Dufarge had killed the wolf, Black Wing, he crushed the vial of eagle's blood in his hand. As he died, Laughing Man removed his mask.*

At the end of the story, one of the Comanches was crying and the narrator's knees were shaking with emotion.

Conventional interpretation

A conventional interpretation of "The Laughing Man" posits a parallel between events in the Chief's relationship with Mary Hudson and episodes in the story the Chief tells to his Comanches. Often, the Chief is viewed as a mask for the Laughing Man. As the Chief's relationship with Mary dies, so does the famous and beloved masked bandit. The end of the Chief's affair with Mary is transformed through a creative process into the Laughing Man's demise. Although no one in the class predicted that "The Laughing Man" would be a love story or a story about the creative process, in several ways—under its mask—it is both. However, Unrau was careful not to impose or even to reveal this conventional reading to his students. Instead, he tried to remain open to their discoveries.

Students' initial interpretations

When his students had finished reading the story, Unrau asked them to write in their learning logs about the story's meaning—or, if they were totally "clueless," as some students said, to write a summary of it.

Mira, Laura, and Emily were three students in the class that read "The Laughing Man." Their responses to the story and the classroom context in which the story was discussed exemplify what happens in many classrooms as meanings are negotiated.

Mira, a student who said she "didn't really have an understanding when I first read the story," wrote the following summary of it in her log:

The story is about a young boy who is reflecting back on his childhood when he was in a boys' group called the Comanches. He is telling us how their "Chief" was adored and loved by all. Even though he wasn't very handsome, the boys still thought of him as gorgeous, and he was their hero. He would take them to the park on weekends to play ball. Then, after the game on the way home, he would tell them an installment of the Laughing Man. The Laughing Man was a disfigured man who stole and murdered, but he did it for good. The boys all looked up to him. Once the Chief had a girlfriend whom the boys adored, but she left suddenly one day. That day the boys saw the fall of two of their favorite heroes, for that was the day the Chief also killed the Laughing Man.

The summaries that students like Mira wrote represented their understanding of "The Laughing Man" prior to interacting with other readers.

However, even before small group discussion began, other students wrote their initial interpretations of the story instead of summaries. Laura and Emily were two of those students. Laura thought "The Laughing Man" was a ghost story told to a baseball team. In her log, she wrote:

Every time the chief has a few minutes on the bus before or after a game, he tells the team the story of the Laughing Man. It is almost like a ghost story. Throughout the story the Laughing Man's face grows old and horrid and he had this loud, obnoxious laugh. He would go around with a mask on and kill humans. Everyone was afraid of him except the animals in the forest, his only friends. The Chief frightened the boys on the baseball team by telling them this story. At the end of the story one boy burst into tears while everyone else was shaking at the knees.

Emily, the third student whose meaning making we'll trace, initially thought that the lesson in the short story was "Don't judge a book by its cover." She wrote:

The Laughing Man is a made-up creative character. He is hideously ugly so he keeps his face hidden. However, the Laughing Man has a beautiful inside. He means well and has a loving soul.... When a human saw Laughing Man's face, they were frightened. However, the animals didn't know Laughing Man was ugly. They didn't know the difference between it, so the animals loved Laughing Man. They reached further down than just skin to realize how wonderful Laughing Man was. J.D. Salinger I believe wants us to be mature enough not to judge people by their outside appearance.

Laura's and Emily's interpretations are two of many different meanings that students initially attributed to the story. We'll see how these initial responses evolved a little later.

Peer collaboration

After students read the story and wrote their summaries or interpretations of it in their logs, they gathered in groups of three to read and discuss each others' summaries and interpretations. Each team selected a recorder to write down ideas and a reporter to communicate those ideas to the entire class after the small group discussions. The re-

maining group member was asked to be a prompter, to keep the group on task by asking questions to move the conversation toward the goal of collecting ideas about the meaning of the story.

Students' ideas about the story's meaning often changed significantly as a result of reading—and then discussing—what others had written. For example, Kirk, whose initial response in his log was “I cannot figure out what the story means, and its significance, so I will summarize it,” commented that Susan “brought all my thoughts and understanding together” during small group discussion. In her journal, Susan had written, “I think the story is about a broken heart. The story inside the story was parallel.... When the Chief and Mary broke up, the Laughing Man died over the death of his wolf. He died of a broken heart, at the same time of the death of the love of Mary and the Chief.” Several students said that reading such commentary and discussing various interpretations made them think in new ways about the story's significance.

Class discussion

After students in small groups read and discussed their reactions, the reporters presented ideas to the whole class. As groups reported, Unrau encouraged the expression and elaboration of meanings—not only group meanings but also individual meanings within those groups and not only meanings for the entire story but also meanings for specific events or objects in the story. For example, during the discussion several students expressed different interpretations of the vial of eagle's blood that the Laughing Man crushes before he dies.

“We thought it represented his love for Mary Hudson,” said Erica.

“How would that work out?” Unrau asked.

“When their relationship was going well, the Laughing Man survived by drinking the blood,” said Erica. “But, when Mary and the Chief broke up, the Laughing Man crushed the vial, and he died along with his love for Mary.”

“Sort of his life blood being crushed?” Unrau echoed in a question.

“Yeah,” said Erica. “Something like that.”

“What other explanations for the crushed vial came up in your small group discussions?” Unrau asked the class.

“I thought it stood for the children in the Comanche Club,” said Mark.

“How does that work?” Unrau inquired.

“I don't know. Just seems that way,” answered Mark.

“But we need to tie the meaning to something. Events in the story. Ideas you had when reading it. Something so it makes sense,” Unrau said.

“Seemed to me that the children of the Comanche tribe were keeping the Laughing Man alive,” Mark said.

“I thought it was the baseball game,” said Alison.

“Someone in our group said it stood for a false lifestyle,” said Katie.

“Does anyone want to explain how those meanings would make sense in the context of the story?” Unrau asked.

“I don't know about baseball,” added Katie, “but I thought there was something false about how the Chief was living or about his relationship with Mary and that when the truth was out, the relationship died.”

“I'm not absolutely sure what the vial is,” said John, “but, if it has a deep meaning, I'm sure it isn't baseball or the kids because they are not really deep issues. I can see the false lifestyle but there are inconsistencies in the story because the Chief doesn't have a false life but a different life than the kids see. The mask would be more appropriate.”

“So what do you think the vial represents?” Unrau asked John.

“I'd have to agree with Erica,” he said. “The vial would be Mary and the Chief's love.”

Unrau explored these and other meanings with students. He frequently asked them to explain how an interpretation could be grounded in the text and how it made sense in relation to the whole story. But he tried not to impose his own reading of the story on the students—favoring interaction among them and with the text. Although he mentioned that the story might be saying some important things about the creative process and the unconscious mind, no students picked up or expanded

upon that idea even though Unrau pointed out the relationship between real-life experience and its transformation into our dream life.

Nevertheless, the whole-class discussion gave students an opportunity to create a classroom community meaning for the story or parts of it. One student wrote, "The discussion changed my view of the story completely. I never saw any link between the Coach's life and his bizarre stories. I didn't understand that the Laughing Man's death meant anything."

Interpretations negotiated and reformed

A few days after the small group and class discussions, students were asked to write their current understanding of the story and to describe how and why their interpretation changed—if it had. Most students reported that they had formed or reformed the meanings they had given to the story during or after the small group and class discussions. Mira, whose initial summary was presented earlier, arrived at a meaning that went significantly beyond that initial response. She wrote:

I think that the story of the Laughing Man that the Chief would tell the Comanches was in a sense the way he saw himself. The Laughing Man was an alter ego of John Gedsudski, the Chief. Both were not handsome and shunned by their society and peers. Both had a band of loyal followers who looked up to them. For the Chief, it was the kids; for the Laughing Man, it was a dwarf, a Mongolian, and a beautiful Eurasian girl. At around the time that the Laughing Man is held captive by the Dufarges, the Chief is having problems with Mary Hudson. When the Laughing Man gets shot, it is at the same time the Chief and Mary break up. This just enforces my theory that the Chief and the Laughing Man are one in the same. The Chief takes the installments from his own day-to-day life, but he enhances them and makes them more exciting.

Many students like Mira contributed to what became a classroom community meaning for the relationship between the Chief and Laughing Man, that is, that the two paralleled each other in many ways. As for the vial of eagle's blood that could have saved the Laughing Man, Mira wrote that it "represents the Chief's love for Mary."

Laura's ghost story interpretation, presented earlier, also changed and began to reflect the class-

room dialogue. In her log, she reveals the connections she's made between characters: "I think that the coach is the Laughing Man and the Comanches are his friends in the forest." While her meaning for the story does enlarge, she still sees the baseball team as central to the story's meaning. For her, the vial of eagle's blood that the Laughing Man crushes represents the Comanches, the baseball players. With the crushing of the vial, "The coach realizes that his players can't be there for him his whole life. When he breaks the vial in the story, he is giving up in real life." When asked why her opinion about the meaning of the story changed, Laura wrote, "I think the reason why I understand the meaning of 'The Laughing Man' now is because of our discussion in class. When I first read it, I was very unclear on the whole story. I didn't realize that the Laughing Man represents the coach. By hearing what others thought of the story, they helped me realize the meaning of the story. I just thought that the Laughing Man was a scary ghost story that the coach could tell his players in their spare time. I didn't realize that it had any significance to his life."

Emily, whose initial, rather stock response to the story was "You can't judge a book by its cover," later wrote that the story was "tragic." She thought that the Chief was so hurt and depressed by the breakup of his relationship with Mary that he "took it out on the players." Emily wrote:

That night, driving home on the bus, John began telling the story of the Laughing Man once again. In this final story, John killed the Laughing Man because Mary left him, and because his love was taken away from him, he did the same to the Comanches. They loved the Laughing Man so John took him away from them.

Although Emily interpreted the meaning of the Laughing Man's death quite differently from Mira, Emily wrote that the vial of eagle's blood that might have saved Laughing Man represented John's love for Mary.

Summary of student interpretations

In summary, many readers—the initially "clueless" as well as those who offered early interpretations—began to share a community interpretation of the

story or at least important parts of it. Almost everyone agreed that a close correspondence existed between the Chief's life and that of Laughing Man. Many came to think that the trouble the Chief was having in his relationship with Mary translated into the death of Laughing Man. Nevertheless, many readers still held divergent meanings about several aspects of the story.

Responding to texts in an environment that encouraged the formation and expression of individual interpretations and their negotiation in a classroom community appeared to benefit many of Unrau's students. One of them, Sarah, wrote the following:

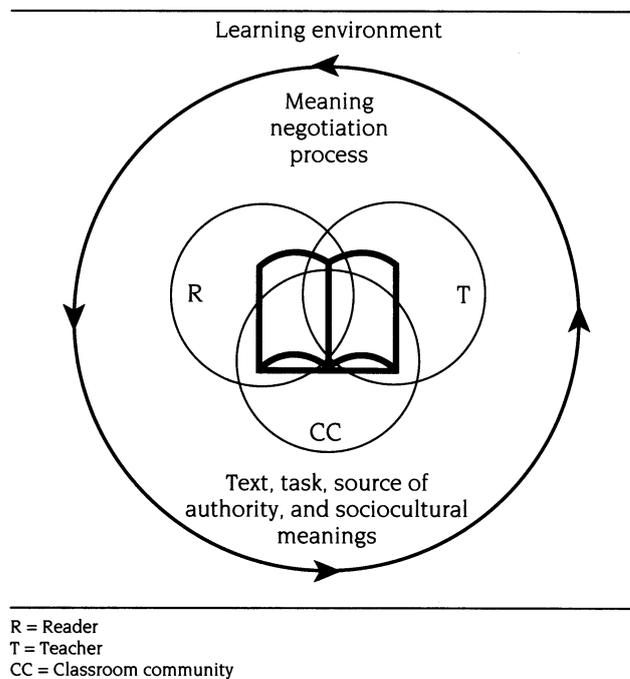
Too many teachers think that their understanding is the only correct one. Now I understand that a story can mean so many things, and as long as you can back it with at least some good thought, it's right—for yourself. Now I feel I can just put more of my thoughts out there even if other people don't agree. I basically think that's why my interpretation of 'The Laughing Man' has changed. I think I have a little more freedom to say what I think.

What is important about "The Laughing Man" example for our discussion is not only the divergent readings of the story by different readers but also the dialogue, the meaning-negotiation process, that occurred among students and between students and teacher.

A model for interpreting texts in classroom contexts

Having told our story about a story about a story, we'd like to introduce a model for conceptualizing reader-based instruction in a classroom context. The model was induced from numerous studies, both theoretical and empirical, including the study of teaching "The Laughing Man" which demonstrates features of the model in action. The purpose for this model is to provide a graphic representation and an explanation of a highly complex classroom process. The Text and Context model, which will be described, explained, and examined here, forms a portion of a larger model that looks upon reading as a meaning-construction process that also involves the reader and the teacher (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994).

Text and classroom context



The model (see Figure) was designed with a social constructivist perspective of learning in which the teacher fosters a learning environment that engages students in a meaning negotiation process. During that process, readers construct and negotiate meanings for texts, tasks, sources of authority, and features of the sociocultural setting. We will explore each of these parts of the text and classroom context in the following passages.

The learning environment

The learning environment, which includes the text, task, authority structure, and sociocultural backdrop, has a powerful influence upon the motivation of students to engage in learning (Marshall, 1992). How we structure tasks and who carries the power of authority in the classroom can make major differences in the goals that readers attempt to achieve and in the ways those readers feel about themselves, their classmates, and their accomplishments.

The learning environment can influence not only a reader's decision to read but also the ways in which the reading will proceed. If readers are motivated to read and to learn, if their prior knowledge

is activated, if they feel that tasks are personally relevant, and if they play a significant role in constructing knowledge, then they are more likely to engage in reading, interact with the teacher and other class members, and participate fully in the meaning-negotiation process. Classrooms that incorporate these features are much more likely to develop productive reading and learning (Ames, 1992; Covington, 1992; Maehr, 1984; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990).

Furthermore, readers' motivation to achieve is likely to be enhanced if social goals and a constructivist view of learning have been integrated into the learning environment (Blumenfeld, 1992). The constructivist perspective of learning is central to the design of this model of reading and the meaning negotiation process. It emphasizes that understanding arises from the assembly and transformation of knowledge—not from its passive acquisition. In a constructivist environment, students are confronted with and solve complex but authentic problems, like collaborating to figure out what a short story means. In addition, the problem-solving process takes place in a social context. Such an environment emphasizes meaningful dialogue, conceptual growth, and flexible—not rigid—understanding.

In summary, dimensions of the learning environment commonly include texts, tasks, locus of responsibility, and sociocultural influences. When these features shape a motivational field that emphasizes meaningful, problem-centered, strategic, and self-regulated learning, students have been found to learn best. These findings are also supported by studies of influential teachers (Ruddell, Draheim, & Barnes, 1990) whose instructional decision making is guided by a concern for the students' needs and aptitudes, by a choice of problems that engage students in intellectual discovery, and by an interest in making learning personally meaningful.

Meaning negotiation process

Within the learning environment, readers and the teacher negotiate meanings. However, they read much more than a text. In effect, students and

teacher read several "texts" in the Text and Classroom Context model—if we take "texts" to mean events, situations, behavioral scripts, or other symbolic processes that require interpretation (Bloome & Bailey, 1992). Of course, students and teacher read the text on the page. But students in particular also need to "read" the task, the authority structure, the teacher's intentions and expectations, and the sociocultural setting. They need to read the social dynamics of the group, which includes the group's psycholinguistic rules, like turn-taking and question-answer response patterns (Mehan, 1980).

Where are students—and teachers as well—to discover the meanings for these various texts? Let's first look at where readers might find the meaning for a printed text, as in a poem or a story like "The Laughing Man." While some critics and theorists have taken the position that the meaning for a text is located in the text itself and that the text is an object that can be objectively described, others (Bleich, 1980; Culler, 1980; Fish, 1980; Iser, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1938/1983, 1978) have argued that the meaning of a text is a more personal response to be found in the reader's mind, perhaps to be authorized by an interpretive community, but certainly not in an objective text. Meaning may best be understood as a result of the reader's meaning construction and negotiation processes. That meaning is not entirely in either the text or the reader but evolves from interactions among reader, text, teacher, classroom community, and context.

However, in a classroom of 25 or 30 students, each of whom may construct an interpretation for a particular text, which one will be accepted as correct or valid? In other words, whose standards for validity will count? While many interpretations for a single text may be constructed by readers and brought to a classroom, the work of both readers and teachers is to confirm that interpretations are grounded in the actual text and in readers' response to textual features. That does not mean that the ultimate meaning is only in the text but that interpretations should be reasonably supportable with reference to events, statements, or claims that occur there and in relation to concepts or impressions evoked in the reader's mind. As Rosenblatt

has written of the reader, "Fundamentally, the process of understanding a work implies a recreation of it, an attempt to grasp completely the structured sensations and concepts through which the author seeks to convey the quality of his sense of life. Each must make a new synthesis of these elements with his own nature, but it is essential that he evoke those components of experience to which the text actually refers" (1938/1976, p. 113).

The authority of an interpretive community has also been taken as a standard for validity (Fish, 1980). In this case, the meaning that is constructed as students and teacher interact in the classroom is the only meaning that counts. Intersubjective negotiation—without adherence to textual content—becomes paramount in such classrooms. While this view certainly frees readers from adherence to an objective standard—namely the text—it creates other problems. First, how is one's membership in an interpretive community to be confirmed? And, second, how does an independent evaluator identify what text has been interpreted? Those problems are of such a magnitude that, in spite of efforts to solve them, we tend toward Rosenblatt's constraint upon interpretations, namely that they should activate experiences "to which the text actually refers."

Nevertheless, classroom community negotiation of meaning is imperative—even if not its ultimate authority for validation. Readers and teacher share meanings in the classroom community so that, through dialogue, a community of readers comes to hold a possible range of meanings. In the Figure, the three overlapping circles represent the interactive nature of the meaning-negotiation process. However, that interactive process, as diagrammatically demonstrated, overlaps a real text upon which the dialogue is based. Symbolically, the diagram demonstrates that the text itself is not the sole object carrying meaning but that meanings arise from transactions with the text. During negotiation of meanings in texts, readers bring their meanings to the interaction, teachers bring their understanding of the story as well as their understanding of the reading process, and members of the class interact with the text to shape and reshape meanings.

Also important to note in the Figure is the circle with arrowheads surrounding the meaning negotiation process. That circle, as well as the circles for reader, teacher, and classroom community, indicates that texts and their interpretations exist in what is called a hermeneutic circle. Thus, meaning construction and negotiation are seen as fundamentally circular. While the meanings we have for a whole text influence the construction of its parts, our understanding of its parts influences understandings of the whole (Dilthey, 1900/1976). Furthermore, as readers and teacher voice their views about the meaning of the text, a circle of hypothesis and validation proceeds. In reading and discussing literature, students should discover that interpretations need not be seen as ultimate or final but forever being reinvented as discourse, dialogue, disagreement, and debate continue. In the words of Ricoeur (1979, p. 91), "It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them, and to seek for an agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our reach."

In summary, meanings are negotiated in classrooms among students and between students and teacher. Meanings are open—not closed or fixed—though they need to be grounded in the text. Classrooms form interpretive communities which may share common understandings; however, final authority for meanings does not rest there. Meanings are shaped and reshaped in the hermeneutic circle. As readers' knowledge changes, as readers talk with other readers and with the teacher in a social context, meanings constructed while interacting with different texts can change. A text may be fixed, but its meanings for readers are always becoming.

In the teaching episodes based on "The Laughing Man," we saw how students brought their initial constructions of meaning to the classroom to interact with each other and the teacher. As discourse and negotiation proceeded in small groups and in whole-class discussions, students began to modify their initial meanings and to move toward interpretations that were validated or confirmed in the classroom community.

Aspects of the meaning negotiation process

In the learning environment represented in the model, all participants negotiate several different kinds of meanings, including those for the text, tasks, sources of authority, and aspects of the sociocultural setting. Each of these forms of meaning will be discussed separately.

Text meanings. Text meanings arise from the reader's meaning-construction process. Because the teacher and readers who are part of a classroom community bring different affective and cognitive conditions to the building of interpretations for a text, we should expect divergent readings. To cope with these different meanings, the classroom can become a forum for their articulation and negotiation in the hermeneutic circle. Meanings shared by the entire class become part of the classroom community's intersubjective understanding of the text. However, even those meanings are not outside the hermeneutic circle and may, therefore, be reinterpreted as the classroom conversation proceeds.

Task meanings. Tasks are structured activities designed or selected by the teacher and related to a text. Asking students to write their interpretation of a short story into a response log is an example of a task. However, students may assign meanings to a task that differ from the meaning that the teacher intended, as might occur if a student's understanding of "interpretation" turned out to be "a summary."

Task meanings, the interpretations assigned to tasks, have both an academic and social content (Erickson, 1982; Harris, 1989). Academic meanings include understanding the goals for an activity, knowledge of subject matter, text structure, and instructions, knowing where materials for the task are located, and knowing what will count as a completed task. Social meanings consist of understanding the relationship between teacher and student and knowing what rules will guide participation.

Task interpretation has been shown to influence children's success in school (Dyson, 1984; Murphy, 1988). Once students define assignments for themselves, they process them that way. Because task interpretations may differ between teacher and read-

ers and because they affect student performance, both teacher and readers may need to negotiate the meanings that a task acquires in the classroom.

Flower (1987) found that college students interpret assignments quite differently from one another and from the teacher. After exploring reasons for that divergence in task representation, she discovered that the process was more powerful, problematic, and perplexing for students than teachers thought. What teachers, as established members of a discourse community, may not realize is that forms of response which may be instructionally transparent to them—such as asking students to analyze their responses to response about a story—may be difficult for students to construe. For example, a teacher may clearly understand what she wants her students to do when she asks them to analyze their reactions to a written response they had to a poem. She wants them to distance themselves from their initial responses and to ruminate on them, as if looking at a poem about a poem. But some students, having customarily gone only as far as articulating a response to a literary work, find an assignment at the next level of discourse, namely a response to a response, rather difficult to grasp, perhaps even incomprehensible unless carefully explained and exemplified.

In spite of the impact of task representation on student performance, students are frequently unaware of the process (Baker & Brown, 1984). Some tasks, such as writing a summary after a reading, are represented automatically if students have well-structured summary schemata to activate in prior knowledge. But, if a task is more complex and less known, it may require elaborate interpretation to give it structure.

These task interpretations may be constructed independently or negotiated among peers or between students and teacher as they interact in the classroom context. In all cases, readers and teachers need to monitor and evaluate decisions they make about meanings for assigned tasks.

Source of authority meanings. The teacher and each reader in the classroom usually come to an understanding of where or in whom authority for constructed meanings resides. Those sources of au-

thority may reside in the text, the teacher, the reader, the classroom community, or in the interaction among various sources that generate negotiated meanings. Each of these possible sources will be explored, and an explanation will be given for the conclusion that meanings negotiated between participants ought to hold most authority.

Some teachers and readers, because of prior beliefs and knowledge, assume that meaning lies only in the text or only in an understanding of an author's intentions that are expressed in the text. With such an assumption, readers' text representations may be invalidated if they do not correspond with the teacher's or another reader's perceived meaning of the author. Readers, however, construct a text representation through the engagement of their prior knowledge which may contribute to unique yet still valid readings.

Readers who think that the teacher is the only participant able to verify a meaning will tend to use the teacher as a bellwether for the "truth" of a text's interpretation. In such a classroom, everyone's interpretation is subject to the teacher's approval or stamp of certified correctness. In such environments, meaning negotiation is likely to be quite limited.

At the other extreme are readers who assume that their personal meaning is the only one that counts in the classroom. With such readers and readings, what the teacher or other readers think is basically irrelevant. Under such a radical assumption of reader infallibility, meaning negotiation is not likely to be productive.

For some theorists (Fish, 1980), classroom communities, as we discussed earlier, hold the authority for validation of interpretations. Shared meanings for a text find their grounding in the intersubjective negotiation that occurs during discussion and the shaping of meaning. Such meaning may not even need to be verified with reference to the text. Much negotiation over meaning is likely in classroom communities operating under this assumption—but grounding in texts may be quite limited.

None of these four—the text, the teacher, the reader, or the classroom community—need be or

should be viewed as an ultimate source for authority. The perspective taken on the source of meaning authority in this model is that meanings should emerge from the interaction of these sources, which are embedded in the hermeneutic circle. The continuing conversation grounded in the text contributes to the meanings created. Meanings under such conditions are not fixed in the text, the teacher, the reader, or the classroom community but are subject to change through dialogue and discussion.

Sociocultural meanings. The sociocultural meanings are shaped by the school and community ethos as well as by the unique conglomeration of attitudes and values that arises in classrooms. Students and teachers not only bring their own sociocultural values into the classroom, but they also interpret the social life and culture they find there. Furthermore, each student and teacher may "read" various aspects of the sociocultural setting differently. While some students may believe that the culture of their school supports their growth and development, other students—even ones in the same class—may be convinced that the school's culture is suffocating them and their identities. Teachers—like their students—may also have a range of sociocultural interpretations. In addition, some understandings of the social and cultural life of a school or a classroom may be shared by most, if not all, participants.

In summary, each participant negotiates meaning in a matrix of meanings—many of which are changeable and changing. Both readers and teacher bring meanings for the text, the task, the source of authority, and the sociocultural setting to the negotiation table. Furthermore, the classroom community negotiates and acquires group meanings that become influential in confirming validity of interpretations. If the text, the teacher, and the classroom community are all to contribute to the construction of meaning for each reader, the teacher plays a central role in establishing a learning environment in which the meaning-negotiation process can evolve.

Implications for teaching

What does an examination of this explanatory model for meaning negotiation of texts in classroom contexts yield in terms of teaching practices? While the implications are far reaching, we can make a few practical suggestions for developing interpretive classroom communities. Teachers could:

- ▶ discover and apply reader-based strategies, such as response logs, to encourage readers in their construction and exploration of meanings;

- ▶ use small groups or teams to share reader responses to texts;

- ▶ design small groups so that knowledge and interpretations shared there will be brought to the whole class for discussion;

- ▶ conduct whole-class discussions using strategies such as the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity that build upon readers' individual responses, explanations of their derivation, and comparisons between them;

- ▶ discuss criteria for the validity of interpretations so that the interpretive community becomes familiar with assumptions underlying that community;

- ▶ encourage and orchestrate discussions that result in more student-to-student interaction patterns rather than student-to-teacher patterns;

- ▶ cultivate in readers a perspective that allows for the evolution, rather than final determination, of interpretations (a hermeneutic perspective);

- ▶ ask readers to explain or support their interpretations with reference to reasons, such as evidence from the text interpreted;

- ▶ demonstrate the importance of dialogue in shaping meanings not only for the printed texts read in class, but also for tasks that are assigned, for sources of classroom authority, and for socio-cultural features such as students' perceptions of their own role and function in classrooms;

- ▶ encourage a welcoming, open, inquisitive, questioning, and skeptical spirit with respect to the meaning-formation process and the meanings formed.

In conclusion, the purpose for this model has been to focus on, magnify, clarify, and integrate features of a complex literacy event, namely the nego-

tiation of meaning in a classroom context. But we must use language to accomplish that intent, and, while language is a miracle that speaks for itself, it has a limited capacity to capture all that goes on in classrooms. As Tierney (1994) has pointed out, models can provide only a partial vision of dynamic, animated literacy events. Nevertheless, they possess explanatory power that can inform and guide teachers' design and construction of daily instructional plans and of a fulfilling learning environment. Perhaps this model of meaning negotiation in classroom contexts will contribute to conceptualizing and guiding newer approaches to the teaching of reading.

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The literate island

Literacy isn't a problem in Iceland; it's a given. Icelanders think that men and women should turn a verse as easily as they turn a profit, and both endeavors are considered important to one's well-being.... While the people of Europe wallowed in the barbaric ignorance of the Middle Ages, Iceland had mass literacy. Most scholars believe that a majority of Icelanders could read by the end of the 12th century.... Iceland has more bookstores per capita than any other nation in the world ("better shoeless than bookless" is a national motto).... Taxi drivers and waiters take part in literary analysis and criticism...and writing a book is considered a kind of national service, like military duty in other nations. Indeed, one in every 10 Icelanders will publish something during his or her lifetime.

William Ecenbarger, *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, February 5, 1995, p. 13.