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In Praise of Wiggle Room: Locating Comprehension in Unlikely Places

The spiders that Americans call tarantulas are part of a family, or group, of spiders named Hairy Mygalomorphs. Hairy Mygalomorphs are known by scientists as primitive spiders. They have existed for millions of years, yet have changed very little. (McGinty, 2002, p. 7)

Just after reading this section of *The Tarantula* (McGinty, 2002) in his small reading group, fourth-grader José (all names are pseudonyms) offered aloud this understanding of the text:

"Right here, I think with the 'million years,' 'millions of years,' I think, like, spiders can live for a million years and that's how long scientists have been studying them. For millions of years, to get used to them and to get a lot of information and facts about them, so they can, like, tell us, so they can tell us which ones are deadly and which ones are not deadly."

Now, we know, in fact, that a single spider *cannot* live for a million years. (Male tarantulas seldom live much more than 10 or 12 years; the more fortunate female tarantulas may live up to 25 years or so.) Scientifically, then, José's understanding was incorrect.

There are those who would extrapolate that José, an English-language learner, demonstrated poor reading comprehension, but I believe there is far more to José's idiosyncratic reading—and to his comprehension—than first meets the eye. José was, after all, actively hypothesizing and making his own meaning. I will argue here that our pedagogies of teaching reading need to take this active meaning making more seriously than we often do.

Of course, what we think about José's reading comprehension (and what we think we ought to do about it as teachers) depends on what we think comprehension is. I begin, then, by looking at three ways that comprehension has been conceptualized, and then consider their implications for the teaching of reading.

WHAT ARE SOME MEANINGS IMPLIED BY "COMPREHENSION"?

It is helpful to think about three different hypothetical teachers, and how each might describe what was going on with José's comprehension.

Teacher A: *"José did not demonstrate comprehension of* The Tarantula *book. He really missed the boat when he started talking about how long he thought spiders lived, didn't he?"*

In this case, *comprehension is seen as **an outcome,** something that one has or does not (perhaps to varying degrees) as a result of having read a text.* The text is seen as containing certain information, and comprehension means having the predetermined "right" understanding of that information. If the author of *The Tarantula* meant one thing by "millions of years" and José thought it meant another, then José did not comprehend. When we rely on comprehension tests, both standardized and nonstandardized, we usually are seeing comprehension in this light. I label this view the *comprehension-as-outcome* perspective.

Teacher B: *"José has poor comprehension. He simply doesn't have the strategies, skills, and prior knowledge that he needs to figure out what the text means."*

In this case, *comprehension is seen as **a stable, relatively uniform procedure** that enables students to arrive at the "right" understanding of texts.* The good reader is seen as one who accesses a fixed set of strategies to arrive successfully at the outcome with which Teacher A was concerned. Those without sufficient expertise with these strategies will not comprehend. I call this the *comprehension-as-procedure* perspective.

Teacher C: *"José's comprehension of the text does not always match the ways I am constructing my understanding of the text as I am reading it. I have to really think about how he is constructing his understandings, what his reasons are for saying what he did."*

In this case, *comprehension is seen as **a purposeful decision-making process about what a text might mean,** a process that does not depend on the reader arriving at any one particular "right" understanding.*

From this perspective, we comprehend whenever our minds engage in figuring out what a text could mean. Different people will engage in this hypothesizing differently, and this "figuring out" counts as comprehension, regardless of whether the resulting understanding is always recognizable as "right." There is a radical premise involved in accepting Teacher C's view: even though José arrived at a different understanding (and one that was scientifically incorrect), he was still doing the intellectual work of comprehension. He was engaged in sense making—an active pondering of how the text fit with his understandings of the world and with what he wanted to accomplish—in order to construct a meaning that *he* found textually consistent. I term this *comprehension-as-sense-making.* I argue that this perspective on meaning making should become central to how we conceptualize reading comprehension pedagogy.

While I have attributed these three distinctive views of comprehension to different hypothetical teachers, it is important to understand that the same teacher might use this one term, *comprehension,* in each of these different ways at different points. Thus, an initial imperative (if we want to tease apart these multiple meanings) is to be explicit about which meaning is in play when we speak of a particular student's comprehension, or when we discuss the teaching of comprehension more generally.

NONSTANDARD UNDERSTANDINGS VERSUS THE SENSATION OF NOT UNDERSTANDING

It is important that we recognize that there are times when readers are unable to generate any hypothesis about the text that satisfactorily explains the text from their own perspective. This is *not* the same thing as having a *nonstandard* ("incorrect") *understanding,* as José did; José, after all, had a meaning worked out for what he thought the text was talking about.

It would be a very different situation if one of José's classmates, Rebecca, had said, "I have no idea what that paragraph was about. Something about hairy Mygalomorph somethings, but I have no idea what. Just tell me what it means!" Of course, even Rebecca (like José) expressed an idea that involved a few dimensions of a *standard understanding* (one recognized as plausible by the teacher). She was not proposing that the passage was about Rumpelstiltskin. Rebecca, though, was overwhelmed by the *sensation of not understanding.*

José and Rebecca would both probably fail a reading comprehension test question about this part of *The Tarantula.* But José was able to make sense of what he read, just as someone who wound up with a more standard ("correct") understanding would, even if the sense that he made was different. He was successfully engaged in hypothesizing: weaving together textual evidence with his prior understandings, rejecting theories that did not fit his reading of the evidence, and actively deciding on a meaning that was (to him) consistent with the evidence. Rebecca, by contrast, was not successful in finding a way of using what she already knew to account for what the text might mean. Even though his reading was "wrong," Jóse had far more in common (as a reader) with those of us whose readings are "right" than he did with Rebecca.

The Comprehension-as-Outcome View

Differences like those between José and Rebecca get overlooked when the *comprehension-as-outcome* view predominates. From this perspective, either a student gets the one "right" meaning, or (like both José and Rebecca) s/he doesn't get some or all of it—and thus does not have comprehension.

If comprehension-as-outcome is the primary goal of instruction, the teacher's job is to make sure that the student learns what the text is "really" saying. In José's case, this might involve the teacher providing a mini-lesson at what would seem to be a teachable moment—the point when José's nonstandard understanding came to light. (Perhaps even better, from this perspective, would be for the teacher to present the accurate information beforehand—to "build prior knowledge" before the reading so José would be sure to "get it" when he got there.)

In the mini-lesson, the teacher could explain that when the text says spiders "existed for millions of years" (McGinty, 2002, p. 7), it means that the species has existed that long, but that many generations of spiders have lived and died during that time span. Alternatively, the teacher might ask a series of directive questions aimed at the same result. Or, the teacher might ask another student whom she felt had better comprehension of the text to explain the

concept to José. Rebecca might need a somewhat different mini-lesson, but she too would be in dire need of having the "real" meaning explained to achieve comprehension-as-outcome.

There are times when explicit explanation of what a text means might well be important. For example, if I want a young child to learn that the illuminated red words that say "Don't Walk" mean one needs to wait to cross the street, telling the child what the sign means may well be the most efficient means of getting that message across. Similarly, if I know José is about to take a high-stakes science test in which he will be quizzed about the tarantula's life span, I might have good reason to make sure that his comprehension-as-outcome is the "right" one.

While some instruction of this sort is defensible and necessary, it has considerable pedagogical limitations because only the *outcome* of reading is emphasized. From this perspective, what students understand, not how students *come* to understand, is the main focus, thus positioning students as passive recipients of knowledge rather than as active readers themselves.

In this instance, a mini-lesson that explains what the phrase "existed for millions of years" means in this context may help José understand that spiders do not live for a million years. (This outcome itself is far from certain.) But even "getting" that, he may have learned little that will serve him well when he reads the next book. After all, in that mini-lesson, José was led to the standard understanding by the teacher, rather than through choices that he himself made about how to read. He may as well have listened to a lecture about tarantulas and never

read a tarantula book at all; with such a mini-lesson, he would not have been engaged in any textual heavy lifting for himself.

I argue that, when instruction is aimed at producing comprehension-as-outcome, it is the content of the material, *and not reading itself,* that is being taught. At best, the absorbed content becomes available prior knowledge for the next reading. At worst, José will harbor the expectation that he should *not* independently pursue his own hypothesizing, but should instead wait passively for the teacher's explanation of what the text "really" means—something that Rebecca, who felt so confused, might do.

The Comprehension-as-Procedure View

At first glance, teaching *comprehension-as-procedure* may appear to be a more appealing alternative than teaching toward comprehension-as-outcome. Here, after all, the emphasis is on teaching students a standard procedure that will enable them to generate the "right" understanding, rather than focusing on comprehension-as-outcome itself. Often, comprehension-as-procedure involves teacher-modeling of "good" comprehension strategies (such as summarizing), followed by guided practice where teachers do everything possible to ensure that students get the target strategy—and the meaning of the text—"right" (e.g., Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Comprehension-as-procedure can also be foregrounded during guided reading or literature discussions when the teacher gives the students specific steps to follow or tells them the best way to "fix" a nonstandard understanding or to resolve confusion (e.g., Fiene & McMahon, 2007).

Even though the idea behind teaching comprehension-as-procedure is that students will eventually use the given reading procedures flexibly and independently, it is not clear that explicitly taught strategies transfer well to new reading situations (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Another, larger problem with this view is that it sees the process of comprehending as something that all good readers do in fundamentally the same way, thereby making it teachable through generic imitation coupled with the kind of directive step-by-step coaching that might help a young child learn to tie her shoe.

But is reading comprehension in fact a procedure that can be executed with the same relative uniformity as tying one's shoe? I argue that reading requires the ability—and freedom—to make decisions about a text and to subsequently evaluate and revise those decisions. There is evidence that, when given the opportunity, children have different interpretive styles of engaging in the process of comprehending, but that these individual styles frequently become invisible when the emphasis is on lockstep approaches to learning reading comprehension (Santori, 2006). Teaching comprehension-as-procedure runs counter to readers' need for intellectual wiggle room.

Most major theoretical perspectives on textual meaning making paint a complicated picture of what texts are and how we build meanings from them—they do not lend support to privileging comprehension-as-procedure. Consider schema theory, which proposes that the mind that encounters text is never a blank slate. We are always looking for a "mental 'home'" (Anderson &

Pearson, 1984, p. 255) for textual ideas by reading them through, with, and against what we already know about the world (our existing schema). Thus, texts do not have uniform meanings across readers; because we do not draw upon the same prior experiences, it is inevitable that the connections that we generate as we read will look somewhat different—even when we are reading nonfiction text, as José was. Put simply, I can never read just like you read (even if I admire how you read and think) because I am never starting from the same place in the mind. For this reason, comprehension-as-procedure—like comprehension-as-outcome—does not sit well with schema theory.

Teaching comprehension-as-procedure is arguably even less compatible with a sociocultural view of learning than is teaching comprehension as outcome. Socioculturally oriented educators note that, in addition to constructing meaning on the basis of prior experiences, readers work with texts to accomplish their own social purposes as well as to respond to the social purposes of others (Aukerman, 2007; Dyson, 1999). For example, José explained his understanding of *The Tarantula* (McGinty, 2002) not simply to express a meaning he found in the text, but also to present himself as a certain kind of person (one knowledgeable about spiders and scientists), to respond to things he had heard others say, and to secure responses from others.

We are social actors whenever we read. Even when we read alone, our meaning making is responsive to the ideas that others have brought to the table, or may bring to the table in the future. And, because readers' purposes depend on social context, the decisions they make about what texts mean depend on context as well. Teaching students that comprehension is a procedure that can be learned by imitation and can be practiced by applying a fixed set of strategies minimizes this context-dependent social responsiveness that is at the heart of textual meaning making.

To think of the practical pedagogical implications of a view that makes comprehension-as-procedure central, consider the message we communicate to a student like José when we say, "You didn't comprehend. Here's how you should do it so that you can." At best, we fail to acknowledge the purposeful social and intellectual work he is already doing, and the context of meaning making as understood from *his* perspective. This is already a bit of a deficit view. At worst, we communicate that this purposeful work is the *wrong* thing to be doing when he encounters a text, a profoundly disrespectful view that is likely to confound young readers trying to figure out what they should be doing when they read. In this scenario, José is taught, implicitly, that comprehension is something done by rote imitation—by doing it like others are doing it—rather than by working from his own existing understandings and purposes (which he was already doing quite successfully).

The Comprehension-as-Sense-Making View

I argue that we would do well to look at comprehension as *textual hypothesizing for social purposes.* What I mean by hypothesizing, specifically, is *decision making about possible textual meaning(s),* something that we all do as we read in order to accomplish particular social purposes. It is important to note that, while these social purposes are frequently *interpersonal* ones that involve others directly, they can also be *intrapersonal* ones—ones that play out within the self but are inevitably shaped by relationships with others (as, for example, when we read alone).

This perspective, which I have termed *comprehension-as-sense-making,* does *not* depend on whether the reader reaches a particular "right" understanding of the text at hand: José's scientifically incorrect understanding, paradoxically, represents successful comprehension-as-sense-making because he engaged in textual decision making in order to reach it. Rumelhart (1981), one of the early architects of schema theory, might describe José's reading as a case where "the reader will 'understand' the text, but will misunderstand the author" (p. 22). In other words, the process José undertook was fully comprehension work, even if the product did not represent a standard understanding.

Even Rebecca, who struggled with the sensation of not understanding, may have been engaged in some textual hypothesizing—if only to be able to reject possible alternatives for what the text could mean. But she was ultimately stymied in her decision making. Being stymied in our thinking about text probably happens at some point to just about everyone, and being stymied does not necessarily mean we stop trying to figure out the text ourselves. But if Rebecca's main solution to being stymied is to ask the teacher to do the decision making about textual meaning *for* her (e.g., "Ms. Jones, can

you explain this? I don't get it!"), she may be doing far less textual hypothesizing herself. Arguably, then, a student such as José, who actively comes up with a possible (but "wrong") meaning for a text, is more deeply engaged in comprehension-as-sense-making than a student who passively waits for the "right" explanation to be given and accepts it just because the teacher said so.

But, of course, José still got it wrong when he thought a spider could live for a million years, and this raises an important question: Do we really want a pedagogy that simply lets a kid think the text means whatever s/he thinks it might mean, unquestioned? Not at all. We live in a world in which some meanings get recognized as "right" and others as "wrong," and students do need to learn about this. Comprehension is not only sense making—it is socially purposeful sense making. If José wants to convince those around him to agree with him, some understandings of the text (and some ways of presenting textual evidence related to those understandings) are more likely to meet his goals.

For this reason, educators cannot afford to pay attention to only the textual hypothesizing itself; we must also attend to social purposes that come into play as possible meanings are constructed. I propose that every textual hypothesis is bound up in social purposes. Yet, in conversations about reading comprehension, one seldom hears about them. Too often, social purposes are either ignored completely or seen as something that plays out on a separate, parallel track.

But if we accept that comprehension-as-sense-making is always shaped by social pur-

poses, several things are worth bearing in mind. First, while comprehension is *not* learned primarily by imitation, it is learned from (and with) others. For example, we are studying each other's purposes, and ways of meeting those purposes, around reading and discussing text; we are figuring out how to respond to the social purposes that others bring to the table; we are deciding which of our understandings accomplish which kinds of social purposes. If we want to impress someone, to persuade others, and so forth, some ways of textual hypothesizing will serve us better than others, depending on the circumstances.

Teaching comprehension-as-sense-making does not mean valorizing every textual hypothesis without question. Rather, it involves offering opportunities for reading in which developing readers not only engage in textual hypothesizing, but also can make discoveries about the relationship between ways of textual hypothesizing and the accomplishment of social purposes. This brings up a further question: if we want students to participate in textual discussions that stimulate such discoveries, how might we want to reconceptualize the teacher's role in classroom dialogue?

How Evaluation Can Inhibit Comprehension-as-Sense-Making

Currently, the most common form of dialogue between teachers and students involves the teacher *initiating* with a question, the student(s) *responding* with an answer, and the teacher then *evaluating* that response as right or wrong (Mehan, 1982). These sequences, known as I-R-E exchanges, look something like this:

Teacher: *The book says that tarantulas are part of what family?*

Student: *The Hairy Mygalomorphs.*

Teacher: *Right! The Hairy Mygalomorphs.*

These kinds of questions can work well for documenting whether students have arrived at the "correct" comprehension-as-outcome, but are not as helpful for facilitating comprehension-as-sense-making. To understand why not, consider how the teacher's question is different from one that happens in ordinary talk:

Tourist: *Do black widow spiders live around here?*

Texan: *Well, you do have to watch out. I killed two in my garage last year with my bare hands.*

Tourist: *You did? Wow! I'd better keep an eye out then. What do they look like?*

In the tarantula exchange, the teacher already knew the answer that she wanted. Although the student did need to make a preliminary decision about the text's meaning within the tight parameters set by the teacher, the decision that actually counted had already been made—by the teacher. The student's textual hypothesizing was part of a largely predetermined script in which the teacher's textual decision making and limited range of social purposes dominated. In addition, when a student participates in such an exchange, classmates rarely get to think for themselves about whether they agree with the student's idea; only the teacher's evaluation matters.

In the black widow example, though, the tourist posing the question genuinely wanted to

know the answer, and the information shared by the Texan was new information that shaped what the tourist did next. (One could only imagine the Texan's puzzlement and irritation if the tourist had responded, "Right! Black widows do live in this area! Very good!")

What the Texan said helped establish her as a particular kind of person (one who kills venomous spiders with her bare hands!). It was uttered in response to someone else's authentic purposes for asking a question and shaped the subsequent purposes of that other person (the sudden need to be able to identify black widows). Providing a response to the tourist's question had varied potential consequences that the Texan had to consider as she formulated that response: the decision making about what to say mattered socially.

I argue that *textual* decision making should matter socially, too—ideally in ways that extend far beyond whether or not the teacher approves of an answer. If we want students to make reasoned decisions about textual meaning, ones that are attentive to their own purposes and to the purposes of others, then they need opportunities to have their hypothesizing matter. We need to work toward conversations where students see themselves and their peers as contributors of new ideas that shape the subsequent course of discussion—and each other's views about the text's meaning.

Teaching toward Comprehension-as-Sense-Making

I propose that one of the most important things a teacher can do to cultivate comprehension-as-sense-making is to adopt a

respectful, curious stance toward students' textual hypothesizing and their social purposes. I think of it like this: the teacher's genuine need to understand how students are constructing *their* meanings from text reflects a social purpose. As students observe the teacher's need to know, the textual work they do will often respond directly to that—that is, the teacher's curiosity may foster social purposes among students for sharing textual ideas that they would not share otherwise.

In this section, I will briefly explain several ways I have seen teachers act upon their curiosity about student thinking during conversations about text. Such teaching may facilitate comprehension-as-sense-making, though these ways are *not* to be taken as a formula—teaching comprehension-as-sense-making cannot be reduced to a procedure. I have called the orientation toward teaching I describe here *shared evaluation pedagogy* (Aukerman, 2006), or SHEP, because it is not simply the teacher who decides what a text means and evaluates claims made about the text: the students work together with each other and with the teacher to share in that deciding and evaluating. These are six acts of teaching that characterize SHEP:

1. *Follow student ideas.* If students' social purposes for sharing hypotheses are to matter, the flow of the conversation must be meaningfully contingent on the things *students* say rather than aimed at a teacher's highly specific predetermined agenda. SHEP involves asking students to elaborate on their thinking, what Nystrand (1997) calls uptake. It may

also involve returning to ideas previously raised by students later in the discussion. However it takes place, neither the teacher nor the students will know in advance the shape the conversation will take.

2. *Make textual decision making visible.* The teacher asks students to explain how they arrived at their thinking—how textual evidence and their understandings about the world give them reason to decide what they think the text means.

3. *Highlight puzzlement, ambiguity, and differences of opinion.* The teacher points out places where the text might appear ambiguous, and may adopt a stance of puzzlement about the text's meaning. The teacher may draw students' attention to differences of opinion about textual meaning that exist in the group, or to different understandings that others outside their peer circle might have reached about the same text.

4. *Open up spaces.* The teacher opens up spaces for students to share their thinking by inviting students into the conversation, particularly the quieter ones. The teacher may also ask students to respond to an idea that has been voiced by a peer.

5. *Hold back.* SHEP is characterized by stretches of talk where the teacher is nearly silent while the students talk with each other; when the teacher does speak, s/he often does so to draw attention to (or seek clarification about) ideas already raised by students. The teacher does not consistently respond after each student turn, and instead waits to see how students respond to each other.

6. *Share evaluation.* The teacher resists evaluating a student's textual hypothesis as right or wrong—even when a student expresses a nonstandard understanding. Instead, the teacher abdicates the exclusive authority to decide what the text means; students are encouraged to elaborate, contest, and extend their peers' ideas.

Enacting Shared Evaluation Pedagogy

To provide an example of what SHEP can look like, I turn back to José and his group's discussion of *The Tarantula* (McGinty, 2002). Once a week, Ms. Haven facilitated this nonfiction literature discussion group; it included three fourth-grade boys, all of whom had been designated as "low readers" by their regular classroom teacher (not Ms. Haven). José and Jorge were Latino; Ned was European American, as was Ms. Haven.

When José voiced his hypothesis about spiders living for millions of years, many teachers would have stepped right in to correct him. Ms. Haven *held back,* watching carefully to see if other students would verbally take issue with José's idea. None did for awhile. A few minutes further into the discussion, Ms. Haven returned to José's hypothesis and *highlighted textual ambiguity.* Although she herself held a standard understanding of the text, she did not explain that meaning. Instead, she noted two alternatives for what the text might mean and posed a question. Here is an excerpt from that transcript:

Teacher: *That's what I'm really confused about by this line, and I need you guys' help. This one: "They have existed."*

To me, I think there's two ways to think about that and I'm not sure which one they mean. When it says—if you follow with your eyes—"They have existed for millions of years, yet have changed very little," does that mean that the same exact spider has been alive for a million years, or does that mean that this type of spider has existed for that long? Like, not one spider, but it had babies and generations and generations. Which one is it?

Jorge: *The second one.*

Teacher: *How do you know?*

Jorge: *It said, like, they live for a million years. So, like you said, the generations have been going on and on, so they live for millions of years. I think the second one is better.*

Teacher: *So, it's not the same spider that lives for a million years? I don't know.*

When Ms. Haven highlighted the ambiguity in wording and asked what it meant, this still could easily have been the beginning of an I-R-E exchange, where she solicited an answer she found acceptable, evaluated it, and then moved on. But her response to Jorge's answer ("How do you know?") did not function *in this case* to evaluate his response as correct. (It was, I believe, an attempt to *make his decision making visible.*) Her expressed uncertainty, both in her initial question and in her repetition of the question after Jorge's explanation, kept the students' decision making about textual meaning central: she was *sharing evaluation* with the students.

Because she did not endorse Jorge's response, the students could not count on Ms. Haven to resolve the ambiguity for them. Working through the textual

ambiguity—to explain it to Ms. Haven, to explain it to each other, to explain it to themselves— emerged as a purpose for thinking about what the text was saying by "existed for millions of years." After the second time Ms. Haven asked the question, José offered a response indicating that he was beginning to explore an alternative to his initial hypothesis, but was hedging his bets:

"I think it's kind of both, because the kind of spider can live for a million years and make, produce, produce other spiders so they can live for a long time."

And when Ms. Haven followed up on this comment from José by asking, pointblank, if spiders could live for a million years, both José and Ned indicated allegiance to José's initial "incorrect" hypothesis rather than to Jorge's "correct" one:

Ned: *Yes.*

José: *I think so, yes.*

Ned: *They can.*

From the perspective of comprehension-as-outcome, this exchange would seem to call for finding an immediate way to correct the flawed understanding; some teachers might even call it a teachable moment. And yet, after a few more ideas were raised, Ms. Haven simply asked Ned to continue reading. The nonstandard understanding was left uncorrected; this would constitute questionable teaching, from a strictly comprehension-as-outcome perspective.

Seen from the perspective of teaching toward comprehension-as-sense-making, however, this move was quite sensible. José and Ned appeared satisfied with their understandings of the text

(as was Jorge, though of course his view was different)—they did not, at the moment, have a purpose for making a different decision about textual meaning. And, since the words could be interpreted either way, there was no reading work that José and Ned could actively undertake at that moment with that text, collaboratively or individually, that would be likely to cause them to change their hypothesis. Of course, the teacher could have told them, explained why Jorge's reading was "right"—but then she would be doing the reading work, the comprehension-as-sense-making, not them. So she left it alone, with the disagreement unresolved.

The students went on to read and discuss other parts of the text; among other things, this included a longer exchange in which, after initially hypothesizing that silk glands were where the spider "gets its food" (Ned), the students eventually used textual evidence to decide that "maybe instead of storing food, they store their, like, silk" in the silk glands (Ned). The issue of how long tarantulas live did not reappear until about 20 minutes later, shortly before the end of the session.

Because there was little time left, Ms. Haven gave the boys the option of silently reading one of several pages they had not yet read; each boy chose to read the same page, which described the tarantula's mating practices. After they had done so, the teacher began *opening spaces* with an open-ended question:

Teacher: *Think about what you want to tell me. So, who wants to say something about what this page means? I didn't get a chance to read it.*

Ned: *Ooh, ooh, I learned that tarantulas do not live a thousand years 'cause I read, "Did you know?"*

Ned went on to read aloud the "Did you know?" sidebar that said, "*In the United States, male tarantulas almost always begin their search for female tarantulas in the fall. The male tarantulas usually die after mating*" (McGinty, 2002, p. 16).

Teacher: *So this was evidence that what?*

Ned: *The tarantulas can't live for a thousand years.*

Teacher: *Good way to use the clues from the book to solve your mystery. Yes, José.*

José: *I know why it dies, 'cause it just said. I was reading and it said the female is almost blind. So it doesn't know, so it, so it defends herself and it kills the male.*

A full 20 minutes after the uncertainty was left on the table, the boys were still engaged in a process of textual decision making about it. Not only that—Ned was actively searching the text for evidence that would confirm or disconfirm his early hypothesis. Even though the text did not directly talk about life span of spiders, he used the available information about the male tarantulas dying to extrapolate that they were unlikely to live for a very long time. Both he and José now understood that tarantulas (at least the males!) did not live a million years. Just as important, they were able to use the textual evidence to present themselves socially as certain kinds of people—knowledgeable ones ("I know why it dies") and textually thorough ("'cause I read 'Did you know?'"). They had tested and

revised their understandings for purposes that mattered to them.

But What if Students Don't Change Their Minds?

José and Ned changed their nonstandard understandings to ones that were more standard, in light of textual evidence. This is a happy ending, in the sense that comprehension-as-sense-making took place and comprehension-as-outcome was the fortunate result. Shared evaluation pedagogy, then, can result in students deciding on more standard understandings for themselves (cf. Aukerman, 2007).

But, of course, it is not always the case that students solve their "mysteries"—or that their solutions at the end of a given discussion reflect standard understandings. What if José and Ned had left the classroom that day still believing that a single spider can live for a million years? I argue that this would not negate the purposeful textual hypothesizing the students did during this lesson as they used the text to respond to each other's understandings, to explain their own reasoning, to consider multiple possibilities, and to present themselves as certain kinds of people. Comprehension-as-sense-making would still have taken place, even if students had never reached a standard understanding.

I do not mean to suggest that there is no time or place for explicit explanation. Sometimes communicating content will be more important than fostering comprehension-as-sense-making. And, in conversations where comprehension-as-sense-making is the norm, a teacher may well be able to explain some

important aspect of the text without undermining the dynamic that keeps student decision making about textual meaning central overall. But I believe that substantial letting go of the need for students to always arrive at the "correct" understanding is prerequisite to a pedagogy that fosters comprehension-as-sense-making. The textual hypothesizing that took place with José, Ned, and Jorge would likely not have taken place if the teacher had stepped in, again and again, to make sure they were getting it "right." Figuring things out often involves a number of missteps and blind alleys: these are not irrelevant and unproductive detours, but rather an integral part of the decision making that constitutes comprehension-as-sense-making.

I acknowledge that it is enormously difficult to hold one's tongue when students reveal nonstandard understandings, especially when just a few words would seemingly clear things up. I recently asked a teacher I know to explain how he is able to think past the intuitive tendency to correct every nonstandard understanding when he structures classroom conversations around shared evaluation pedagogy.

It is hard, he says, not to get caught up in an emphasis on "right" answers, particularly in a standards-driven environment that privileges teaching comprehension-as-outcome. But he believes in the value of comprehension-as-sense-making, so he frequently asks himself this question: *Is today the last time my students will ever think or read about this particular material, or encounter these textual conventions? If it is, then perhaps the details I'm sweating here are not so important. If it is not, there may well be another opportunity on another day for students to hypothesize actively, to work with related texts and each other's ideas about those texts—for them to move toward understandings closer to my own, if that is important* (M. Vélez, personal communication, May 2007). There will be another day, that is, if students continue to encounter classroom opportunities to actively decide what texts mean—for themselves and with each other.

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