

# Assessing Readers, Not Reading by Dr. Alfred W. Tatum

AS I PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT to secondary teachers, I find the following scenario typical:

A ninth-grade teacher informs me that her students have difficulty responding to the questions she constructs to assess their comprehension. I ask, “What is causing the difficulty?” She responds, “They have difficulty with critical thinking questions and making inferences.” I then ask, “Why are they having problems with the critical thinking questions and making inferences?” She responds, “I do not know. They do not understand the materials.”

In this scenario, the teacher has been constructing assessment questions and capturing the students’ responses. It is clear that the students have difficulty responding to those questions. However, it is less clear why the students are struggling with the questions. This suggests that the teacher has not been able to “capture” the reader—that is see into the reader’s thinking processes to understand the source of the reader’s struggles.

Here is another example. Read the test passage and answer choices:

Very little was known about the structure of living matter until the development of the light microscope. Then Robert Hooke, an English scientist, made an important discovery in 1665 while using a simple microscope that he designed. He observed tiny, orderly spaces in a thin slice of cork, a type of dead plant material. These spaces reminded him of the small rooms in which monks lived. So he gave the tiny spaces the same name as the small rooms, cells.

Robert Hooke discovered

- a. a simple microscope
- b. tiny, orderly spaces in cork
- c. small rooms used by monks

Out of a group of 132 students, 53% of the students (n=70) identified *b* as the correct answer choice. However, 46% of the students (n=61) identified *a*, an incorrect response, as their answer choice. A brief diagnosis can be made for the students who answered the question incorrectly by looking at the passage and the question. They saw the same words in answer choice *a* – *simple microscope* – and the sentence with the name *Robert Hooke* and the word *discovery*. As a result, a relatively high percentage of students answered the question incorrectly. On the other hand, 53% of the students were able to use information

from several different sentences to answer the question correctly. These are patterns that are helpful to analyze. Not only will teachers begin to capture the students’ responses, but they will begin to capture the reader as well.

There is often a thin line between capturing students’ reading responses and capturing the reader. A student’s response to a comprehension question indicates how well that student performs on an assessment. A score or a grade can be easily generated. However, identifying students’ reading-related strengths and weaknesses is more complex. Different students can answer the same question incorrectly for different reasons. For example:

- Christopher may provide a wrong answer for a question because of his over-reliance on decoding and his failure to pay attention to the structure of the text. He may view reading as a word-calling task.
  - Sarah may fail to monitor her comprehension while reading. She may be interested in finishing the text and hope that she understands the material when she finishes. This may result in her failure to use fix-up strategies.
  - Sidney, however, may not be familiar with the relationships between questions and answers and may not know that his background knowledge is important when reading materials.
- This may cause him to look for the same words in the text and the comprehension questions as a strategy to respond to comprehension questions.

Each readers’ concepts of reading can help him or her in some situations, but can adversely impact reading comprehension in others.

## How to “Capture the Reader”

As noted in *Reading for the 21st Century: Adolescent Literacy Teaching and Learning Strategies* (Kamil, 2003), about 10 percent of students enter middle and high school with reading problems that stem from not having mastered the alphabetic principle. The majority of struggling readers at high school do not view reading favorably because they lack successful experiences. These students are often not motivated to read. Other students can decode text, but they have difficulty comprehending texts written at their assigned grade level. Many of these students have “survival” strategies or use avoidance mechanisms to protect their identities as adolescents and to avoid the stigma of being viewed as a struggling reader.

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*“Capturing” the reader means seeing into the reader’s thinking process to understand the source of the reader’s struggles.*

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Many of these struggling readers have experienced reading-related failures over the years and are not open to receiving support from teachers because they believe failure is inevitable. In most cases, they attribute failure to ability, not effort. These issues make capturing the reader difficult. However, four considerations should be honored when assessing these students in order to provide responsive instruction.

### 1. Establish a Trusting Relationship

For many students, it is painful not knowing how to read. They know that they are falling behind their peers. To mitigate their problems and protect their identities, they often resist instruction and assessment until a personal rapport is established with the teacher. These students will begin to discuss feelings about their reading problems when they establish kinship with an adult they perceive as being responsive and caring. At this point, teachers can then begin to have conversation about the dilemmas associated with reading problems.

### 2. Allow Students to Fail and Recover

It is important to help adolescent students attribute their reading difficulties to effort or lack of strategy use, *not* to lack of ability. Give them opportunities to practice their strategy use under non-threatening conditions. Answering comprehension questions should not be a one-time proposition. Students should be made aware that some questions will not be graded, but rather used to give feedback about what they can do to increase their comprehension.

The *Edge Online Coach*<sup>TM</sup> is very useful in this regard, since it allows students to read at their own pace, to choose appropriate supports, to answer comprehension questions, to get feedback and hints, and then to attempt the question again. The software provides opportunities for students to both experience success and receive corrective, responsive feedback. The privacy of one student and one computer also helps lower students' affective filters and encourages them to take risks.

However, students must also be made aware that they will be held accountable for answering the same types of questions independently for a grade, as on the Cluster and Unit Tests provided with *Edge*.

### 3. Involve Students in the Assessment Process

The voices of adolescents are valuable to the assessment process. They can provide insights into the variables contributing to their reading difficulties. When I was teaching, I went to conferences and read professional materials to find

ways to engage my students with text. Then, it dawned on me one day to ask the students. They provided answers that allowed me to support them. They told me that they loved the reading materials and were learning a lot, but they had difficulty with the vocabulary, suffered from fear of embarrassment, and had limited experiences in school reading the types of lengthy pieces they were being asked to read. They also offered that no one expected them to succeed.

As a result of hearing their voices, I learned that students are in a good position to help teachers craft responsive instruction. However, this information is often not given voluntarily by the students. A sincere effort must be made by teachers to invoke and honor the voices of adolescents. Their voices are valuable resources for identifying the challenges they face when reading. Use the **Reader Reflection** affective and metacognitive measures, provided for every reading assignment in *Edge*, as one way of invoking students' voices and listening to their own ideas about their reading power.

### 4. Assess Strategically

Here are four techniques that are built into *Edge*, which will help you reveal students' comprehension of texts:

- Ask students frequently to find supporting evidence in the text that shaped their responses.
- Give frequent daily and weekly practice with and feedback on students' use of reading strategies.
- Ask metacognitive questions that target the use of reading skills and strategies and therefore provide a picture into how students are using (or not using) those key strategies.
- Develop in students the practice of self-questioning.

With these strategies in place, you will be much more equipped to capture the reader, and not just the reader's response.

## Conclusion

Providing quality instructional support for struggling adolescent readers depends on assessment practices. All too often, struggling adolescent readers have little understanding of why they have difficulty comprehending text. *Edge* has been designed to help teachers "capture" adolescent readers, to give them chances to fail and recover, and to involve students in the assessment process. These assessment practices yield information that leads to responsive literacy teaching. ❖