

Implementing QtA: 25 Classroom Cases

The last chapter of Section 1, on implementation, may be viewed as a response to “Now that I’ve read and thought about Queries, planning, and discussion, what do I do Monday morning?” In contrast, Section 2 provides 25 mini-cases of authentic classroom situations and issues that go far deeper and much further than “Monday morning” for teachers who have already started to implement QtA. The cases were developed to help teachers deal with a variety of problems and issues that come up in the classroom, especially when a new instructional approach is being implemented: What can I do when . . . ? How can I handle . . . ? What if some students don’t . . . ? The cases were designed as resources that teachers could draw on over time in the course of using QtA in their classrooms. The materials in the cases come from authentic situations that arose in QtA classrooms.

We saw the need for these cases from our years of developing QtA in close collaboration with teachers. We came to understand the complexity of the teacher’s role in fostering classroom discourse that leads to building meaning. With the QtA frame-

work, lessons no longer consisted of reading straight through a text, then asking questions aimed at retrieving text information. We learned firsthand what Cazden (1988) observed: “It is easy to imagine talk in which ideas are explored rather than answers to teachers’ test questions provided and evaluated. . . . Easy to imagine, but not easy to do” (page 54).

Early on we were collaborating with teachers to learn about and solve problems in the implementation of QtA, so our contact with them was very close. We addressed their difficulties by providing extensive, ongoing firsthand support, such as lesson observations and feedback, demonstration lessons, and brainstorming meetings to consider specific problems and issues. Thus, we were confronted with the situation—one that has often been described in the literature—that what is learned from such efforts is in the form of anecdotal accounts of face-to-face collaborations among teachers and between researchers and teachers (e.g., Palincsar, Magnusson, Marano, Ford, & Brown, 1998; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1996). Although much of value resides in such accounts, it needs to be transformed before it can be useful to other teachers. So we undertook the task of transforming the detailed and exquisite content of our face-to-face interactions in a form that other teachers could use on their own.

We began the process of developing cases by analyzing the documentation of the first three years of implementation (see Beck et al., 1996; McKeown et al., 1996, for details on these implementations). The documentation included notes from meetings with teachers, teachers’ journal entries, classroom observation notes, and transcripts of 125 videotaped sessions.

As we analyzed the material, we noticed a pattern of development that seemed to typify the implementation process. The pattern began with the teacher moving from conventional retrieval questions to open-ended Queries. As the teachers became adept at opening up their questions, they then started to realize that student responses to open questions needed to be addressed with follow-up questions that invited elaboration, clarification, and the like. After follow-up questions became a more natural part of the teacher’s repertoire, we noticed that often a series of follow-ups was needed to build important text ideas during a discussion segment, but it was difficult for teachers to sustain a focused discussion beyond the first couple of student responses. Within this pattern, we worked to identify specific difficulties and issues.

From our databases of QtA lessons and our analysis, we created 25 cases. Each case has the same format. It begins with a “Classroom Snapshot,” an excerpt from a lesson transcript, or a teacher’s journal entry that illustrates the particular issue to be addressed. Next a section called “What Happened and Why” gives a brief explanation of what happened in the snapshot or was recorded in the teacher’s journal, and why it might have happened. Then a section called “Dealing with the Problem” suggests ways the problem might have been handled differently. This is followed by several examples of ways that other teachers have dealt with the same kind of issue, along with our commentary. Most cases also contain an additional example of the target issue, in a section called “Your Turn,” that provides an opportunity for teachers to design a solution on their own. Finally, we offer a “Recapping” of the issue and ways to handle it.

Our field-testing of the cases indicated that the case-based support yielded positive results comparable to that of face-to-face support (McKeown & Beck, 2004). The teachers in the study, as well as many other teachers who have subsequently used the cases, have told us that they learned a great deal from them, that they relied on them for direction and support, and that often they were surprised to find how relevant the cases were to their own issues. As one teacher told us, “It’s wonderful to see other teachers having the same problem I do. It makes me feel that I am not the only one. And the discussions of solutions to certain problems are terrific.”

We see the cases as playing a unique role in professional development. We believe that the most effective professional development provides means for teachers to understand to what extent their actions correspond to principles they are aiming to enact, and provides strategies for increasing that correspondence. The cases provide substantive content about the principles and actions of QtA, and how the two connect. The content is consistent and based on extensive documentation from previous implementations.

We have arranged the cases in an order that we think will be the most useful. Our experience has suggested that certain issues take priority earlier than others. We hope that as you use the cases, you’ll feel free to question the authors. Read, mull over what’s there, jot notes on the pages, and underline as you go, making what’s there meaningful to you and your classroom, in the best tradition of Questioning the Author.

CASE 1

Getting Discussion Going

Why Do Initiating Queries Sometimes Fall Flat?

Several teachers have told us that when they were first getting started with QtA they sometimes found that their Initiating Queries seemed to fall flat. Students just didn't have much to say, and it was a struggle to get discussion going.

CLASSROOM SNAPSHOT

Ms. C and her class are reading the novel *Mama's Bank Account* (Forbes, 1971). Ms. C wants to focus the discussion on the complications of a family problem that Mama and her sisters were trying to solve. But, as you'll see below, that is not how students respond to Ms. C's Query.

In the text segment that the class is reading, Mama and her sisters talk about how to care for their aunt, who is elderly, deaf, and now needs a place to live. The final sentences of the segment reveal a key issue:

The Aunts agreed and explored the subject endlessly. Each one was more than willing to offer their aunt a home—but would she accept? They remembered her stiff, unyielding pride.

MS. C: What problem has the author presented here?

BART: Aunt Elna, and she's, like, deaf.

JANET: She's the aunt of the aunts, like a great-aunt, and she's really old.

What Happened and Why?

Bart's and Janet's responses picked up small aspects of the text situation, but they didn't get to the heart of the matter—the question of how the family is going to deal with Aunt Elna. Why might this have happened?

Students may have difficulty recognizing which ideas are most significant when text material is complex or offers several possible ideas to discuss. A Query posed about such material may fall flat, with students providing minimal responses, as was the case with Bart and Janet.

Initiating Queries may fall flat because of the differences between Queries and traditional questions. When teachers develop questions, they tend to have a specific response in mind, so there's not much room for a question to fall flat—it just gets answered correctly or incorrectly. Queries, on the other hand, are supposed to provoke thinking and consideration of ideas. But because Queries leave room for thinking rather than pointing to a direct answer, students may be puzzled about how to respond, and it can be a struggle to get discussion going.

Dealing with the Problem

A key to dealing with discussion that falls flat is to develop Initiating Queries that leave room for students to think but also give enough direction to overcome their puzzlement. Although the intent of QtA is to get students to think about what the author is trying to get across, Initiating Queries such as “What is the author trying to say?” or “What problem has the author presented here?” may not always hold sufficient cues to direct students' thinking.

Working to prevent an Initiating Query from falling flat starts with anticipating the kind of response that it may elicit. Below are two examples in which teachers anticipated that an Initiating Query might fall flat if it were phrased too generally. The teachers then were able to plan Initiating Queries that were tailored to focus students' thinking.

EXAMPLE 1. In this first example, the class is reading a selection about young Native Americans in a school on a reservation. The story began with a scene in which the school's principal was transporting some students back to school after they had wandered off. The principal explained to Bob Woods, a teacher at the school, that staying put in school was sometimes difficult for these students because they were so used to wandering the wide-open spaces of the reservation. Here is the next segment of text:

“Yesterday I saw Grandfather Laughter with his flock of sheep and goats. I knew the older boys saw him. And I thought we might have a few stray students this morning. Excuse me, Bob. I’d better see that these fellows get back to the classroom.”

As the principal left, Bob thought of his visit to Johnny’s hogan. It helped him to understand why some of the students were restless. “I should give them more of a chance to tell about their life on the desert,” he said to himself.

When class began that afternoon, Bob Woods asked, “Did any of you see Grandfather Laughter yesterday?”

“I did,” Roger Lee said. “Grandfather Laughter is one of the best sheepmen of our tribe. Someday I hope to be as good as he is.”

The teacher’s goal for this segment is to signal her students to continue with a line of thinking begun in discussion of the previous text segment, which was the issue of the young Native Americans’ restlessness in school. The teacher has a sense that asking a general Initiating Query like “What is the author telling us here?” may invite students to focus on less important text ideas, such as the character of Grandfather Laughter. So, the teacher phrases an Initiating Query to direct attention to the young Native Americans’ feelings of restlessness in school. Notice the response it draws:

MS.W: How did the author settle this restlessness that was opened up? How does the author let us understand that?

JANET: Well, Bob Woods went to Johnny's hogan and we read about that already, and he's thinking, well, after I see these two boys, I'm not spending enough time asking these kids about their lives in the desert, I'm not, like, paying much attention to their lives, and I think that that's sort of what it is.

Janet took the teacher's cue and provided a good explanation of how Bob Woods decided to address the needs of his students. Capturing this kind of student thinking might have been less likely if the teacher had simply asked, "What is the author telling us here?"

EXAMPLE 2. Below is another example that accomplishes the same kind of student focusing. In this example from a social studies lesson, the class is reading about the colonization of North America. The text passage introduces the concept of a joint-stock company to describe a financing plan for future colonies. Here is the text:

Sir Walter Raleigh had lost a fortune trying to start a colony on Roanoke Island. His experience showed that trying to plant a colony was too risky for one person. So in 1606 a group of English merchants decided to share the costs of starting a colony by forming a joint-stock company. In a joint-stock company, instead of one person's putting up all the money, a number of people each put up part of the money and share ownership. Each owner receives a certificate called a stock, or share. If the company makes money, all the stockholders share in the gains. If the company loses money, all share in the losses. But no one risks everything.

The teacher's goal with this segment is to help students make sense of the notion of a joint-stock company. Yet, the teacher does not want to ask the obvious

direct question, “What is a joint-stock company?” because he is concerned that it could too easily result in students simply repeating a statement from the text.

The teacher is also concerned that a general Initiating Query such as “What is the author trying to say?” may not be sufficient to get the students started. So the teacher handles the situation by posing an Initiating Query and then constraining it by mentioning some of the key words from the text to help direct students’ thinking:

MS. M: What is this all about? The joint-stock company and sharing—what is that about?

The teacher’s approach appeared to be effective. The first student called on began by saying that people wanted to start a colony and “decided to share the cost,” thus setting in motion a productive line of discussion.

Your Turn

Try to develop Initiating Queries for the text segment below with two considerations in mind. First, you mainly want students to understand that New England is rich in forests and that the wood provided an important resource for industries that developed. And second, you don’t want to spend too much time on the concept.

EARLY USE OF TIMBER

The forests and woods of New England have long been an important natural resource for the people in the region. When the first English colonists came here, they were thrilled by the many tall, straight trees. These fir trees were perfect to use for the masts of the English sailing ships.

Although New England is today one of the most populated regions of the United States, much of the land is still forested. Many different kinds of trees are found there, including fir, birch, spruce, pine, oak, and maple. Timber became one of the earliest raw materials for New England industry.

➔ **Write & Compare** Jot down your ideas for Initiating Queries on a sheet of paper. Then, compare your Queries with those below.

To encourage students to focus on the general idea of the importance of timber to New England rather than talking about “tall, straight, trees” or “sailing ships,” Initiating Queries such as these may be useful:

- What big idea do you think the author is trying to tell us about?
- With all that, what do you think the author wanted us to know?

Recapping

It may be a struggle to get discussion going if Initiating Queries don’t help students figure out where to focus their attention, especially if the text segment contains difficult content or several ideas that could capture their attention. In such cases, a general Initiating Query such as “What is the author telling us?” may not give students enough to go on. Queries that are tailored with a focus may be more productive. The key here is to provide focus while taking care to leave room for student thinking.

CASE 2

Segmenting Text

How Do You Decide Where to Stop Reading and Start Discussing?

QtA teachers have found that segmenting text—making decisions about where to stop reading and begin discussion—is not an easy task in the beginning. Teachers have told us that certain decisions can make it difficult for students to focus on meaningful ideas.

CLASSROOM SNAPSHOT

Mr. W's class is reading a social studies unit on United States geography. The goal that Mr. W has selected across the unit is for students to develop a bird's-eye view of the geography of the United States. For the text segment below, about the Appalachian Mountains, Mr. W wants the class to understand that although the mountain range has different names in different states, it's all one range. Here is the final paragraph of the segment on the Appalachian Mountains:

The Appalachian Mountains have different names in different states. In New York they are called the Adirondacks. In Virginia and North Carolina, they are called the Blue Ridge Mountains. And in Tennessee they are called the Great Smoky Mountains. The highest point in the Appalachian Mountains is Mount Mitchell, which is in North Carolina. It has an elevation of 6,684 feet (2,037 m).

Notice below that Mr. W's Initiating Query has a general focus, in contrast to the response it draws:

MR. W: What is the author telling us here about these mountains?

DONNA: The highest one, in North Carolina, is 6,684 feet.

What Happened and Why?

Donna responded to the final sentences in the segment, which provided very specific information, rather than to the general concept. Mr. W's decision to include these final sentences in the segment, though they were unrelated to the general concept, resulted in distracting attention from the main point.

Dealing with the Problem

In segmenting a text, be clear about what it is you want students to understand from a text segment. An important part of that is considering what information is available to students to construct a response. Sometimes if a segment is very long, or if it is dense with ideas or details, students may be unable to focus on a key idea, such as occurred in Mr. W's class. On the other hand, if a segment is too brief, there may not be enough information for students to build a meaningful response.

EXAMPLE. Now, let's pick up on the next part of the text in the geography unit, which is called "A Flat Land." We'll look at segmenting decisions that take into account the content that students will have available as they respond. The teacher's major goal for the material that follows is to have students build into their geographical view that the vast expanse of the middle of the country is flat land known as plains.

The information in the section includes characteristics of plains: that there are two types, their geographical extent, and their form. Because this information is scattered among the three paragraphs, the teacher decided that it would be best to keep all three paragraphs together as a single segment. Stopping after the first or second paragraph could put more focus on facts about the cities mentioned and less on the overall concept of plains. Following is the text and commentary on the segmenting decisions.

A FLAT LAND

Moving westward across the Appalachian Mountains, we reach the Central Plains regions. This region has two major parts. The first part lies just west of the Appalachian Mountains. It is called the Interior Lowlands. Chicago, Illinois, is the largest and most important city in the Interior Lowlands.

The second part of the Central Plains lies to the west of the Interior Lowlands. This area is called the Great Plains. The largest city on the Great Plains is Denver, Colorado. That city lies at the western edge of the Great Plains. Together the Interior Lowlands and the Great Plains stretch about 1,500 miles (2,414 km) across the United States.

Here and there on these vast plains are some hilly areas. There are even a few small mountains. But mostly the Central Plains region is flat. Standing on these plains, one can see straight out to the horizon, where sky and land seem to meet, without a single rise in the land to interrupt the view.

- The temptation may be to stop at the end of this first paragraph since the idea of plains has been introduced and two types set up. But no content has been provided about the distinction between the two types, so the responses are likely to be limited to retrieving the fact that there are two parts to the plains. And that is not building meaning.
- Why not stop here since both types of plains have been characterized? The decision to go on through the next paragraph allows some more characteristics to accumulate, to help students see the bird's-eye view.
- At this point, the material is available for students to put together their view of a big, flat expanse at the center of the United States. A Query such as **“What’s the picture here that the author is trying to create?”** may help them do that. If students respond with more specific information, a Follow-Up Query may be: **“How does that help us understand our country’s geography?”**

RAINFALL

The main difference between the Interior Lowlands and the Great Plains is the amount of precipitation each gets. The Interior Lowlands receives 30 to 40 inches (76 to 102 cm) of precipitation a year. That is more than enough precipitation to support the growth of tall grasses, which are often as tall as a person.

To settlers first seeing the Interior Lowlands, the tall grasses were a welcome sign. They knew that if there was enough rainfall for tall grass to grow, there would be enough for farming.

In contrast, many parts of the Great Plains receive only 20 to 25 inches (51 to 64 cm) of precipitation a year. Also, precipitation is not the same each year. While the average yearly precipitation for an area might be 20 inches (51 cm), that same place might get more precipitation in some years and less in others. For example, it might get 5 inches (13 cm) of precipitation one year, 20 inches (51 cm) each of the next two years, then 30 inches (76 cm), and finally 25 inches (64 cm). The five-year average would be 20 inches (51 cm), but precipitation the first year would have been too low to support grasses and trees.

As a result there are almost no trees on the Great Plains. There is hardly enough rain from year to year for short grass to grow. When settlers first arrived on the Great Plains, they took one look at the short grass turning brown in the summer sun and decided that this was no place for them.

In time, Americans did settle on the Great Plains. As you will read later, they learned how to farm with little rainfall. They also found the short grasses of the plains ideal for grazing cattle and sheep.

Even though this paragraph implies that one kind of plain has enough rainfall and the other does not, keep going—the information is made explicit and explained in the following paragraph.

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Stop here because the contrast between the types of plains has been stated, and the details in the paragraph beyond this point may complicate establishing the basic contrast.

To settlers first seeing the Interior Lowlands, the tall grasses were a welcome sign. They knew that if there was enough rainfall for tall grass to grow, there would be enough for farming.

Stop here to discuss the general idea that the amounts of rainfall on the Great Plains wouldn't be sufficient for farming. Getting this information is tricky because the reader has to wade through the particulars about rainfall from year to year before being able to establish the point of the segment. So it would seem best not to let students leave this paragraph without grappling with the information to make it meaningful.

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• Stop here and connect what the settlers saw and concluded with what was presented previously. That is, the settlers reached the conclusion that growing things would be very difficult on the Great Plains, which connects to the previous information about lack of rainfall.

In time, Americans did settle on the Great Plains. As you will read later, they learned how to farm with little rainfall. They also found the short grasses of the plains ideal for grazing cattle and sheep.

• Don't include this paragraph in the segment with the above. The discussion of people's eventually settling and learning to farm there muddies the issue of the Great Plains' distinction from the Lowlands. So it makes sense to establish the notion that the Great Plains lacked rainfall and the consequences before discussing that the consequences were overcome.

Your Turn Again

Moving along across the country, we reach the Rocky Mountains. Where would you segment this section of the text in order to promote the bird's-eye view of United States geography? Explain your reasoning.

➔ **Write & Compare** Mark where you would segment the text and note your reasons on a sheet of paper. Then, compare your decisions with those on page 145.

HIGH, RUGGED MOUNTAINS

As you reach the western end of the Great Plains, the land rises quite sharply. You'll recall that Denver, Colorado, is a city at the western edge of the Great Plains. Its elevation is 5,280 feet (1,609 m)—exactly one mile above sea level. But just about 100 miles (161 km) west of Denver is a peak of land called Mount Elbert. The elevation of Mount Elbert is 14,433 feet (4,399 m)—nearly 3 miles above sea level!

Mount Elbert is the highest point in the broadest chain of mountains in our country. These are the Rocky Mountains. The Rocky Mountains are about 3,000 miles (4,827 km) long. This mountain range runs like a giant spine, or backbone, down the North American continent from Alaska to New Mexico.

Some peaks in the Rockies are so high that their tops are often hidden in the clouds. The snow never melts on some of these peaks. That is because as a general rule, the higher a place is, the cooler it is. In fact, a mountain peak as high as Mount Elbert is about 45° colder than another place at the same latitude but at sea level.

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• Stop here to focus on the significance of the difference in elevation from Denver to Mt. Elbert. Recognizing the enormous difference here provides a good basis for understanding the geographical pattern of this part of the country. To go on to the next paragraph in the same segment may lessen the impact of the elevation difference, lessening its usefulness as a hook to understanding the geography.

• Although this paragraph is fairly short, it is incredibly dense! Even though none of the information is particularly difficult, the sheer number of ideas suggests a need to stop to let students sort it out:

- highest point
- broadest mountain chain
- 3,000 miles long
- spine of the continent
- Alaska to New Mexico

• Again, there is quite a density of information in this paragraph! Even though the paragraph revolves around a single concept, that of cooler temperatures at higher elevations, quite a bit of information is offered. It would probably be helpful to stop and allow students to make sense of it all.

Recapping

The point at which a text is segmented—where reading stops and discussion begins—should help students focus on key ideas and avoid drawing attention to distracting information or less significant details. A segment should provide enough grist for students to build meaning, but it should not be so dense that students don't know where to focus their attention.