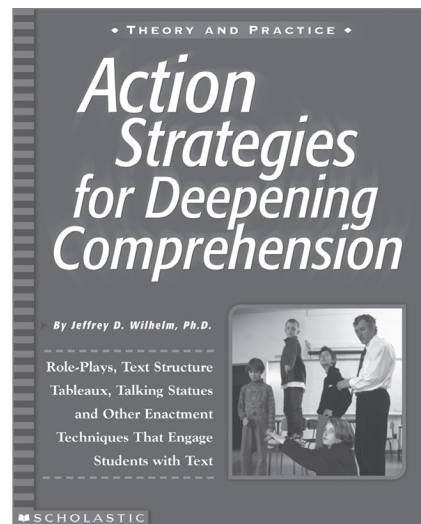


A Study Guide for  
***Action Strategies  
for Deepening  
Comprehension***

by **JEFFREY D. WILHELM**



This study guide can be used as a vehicle for discussion and an exchange of ideas, as well as a resource for using the presented ideas and generating new action strategies and drama-in-education techniques that you can use with your students. The guide is organized into two sections:

1. Thinking About Your Practice, which provides questions to ponder before you start reading *Action Strategies for Deepening Comprehension*
2. Guidelines for your Study Groups, which include the following:
  - A short synopsis of each chapter
  - A quote or excerpt to react to
  - Questions to discuss
  - Take Action, which provides you with activities you can try in your classroom and then discuss in your next Study Group.
  - Teacher Research, which invites you to learn from your practice and your students in ways that inform your future teaching

## Part 1: Thinking About Your Practice

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You may wish to use the following questions to begin your discussion before you start reading *Action Strategies for Deepening Comprehension*.

- How do you currently teach comprehension strategies in your classroom?
- What are the most effective strategies you use for teaching comprehension?
- How often do your students engage in meaningful discussions throughout the process of reading a text?

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- In what ways do you/could you have students engage in an action strategy (e.g., movement, role play, or other kinds of dramatic, symbolic activity) to help facilitate comprehension?
  - How do you provide opportunities for students to actively construct their own responses and interpretations of what they read?
  - What types of scaffolding do you provide for students when they are learning a new strategy?
  - How do you currently assess students' use of comprehension strategies?
  - How often do you assess students' comprehension?
  - What do you use most often for assessment of comprehension?
  - In what ways do you/could you use action strategies to support students' use of strategies and their achievement of textual understanding?
  - In what ways do you/could you ask students to write or act out their responses to and interpretations of a text or other curricular material?
  - In what ways do you/could you document growth in comprehension?
  - In what ways do you/could you encourage students to take interpretive risks when they read, discuss, make meaning?
  - What resources do you have/use to support comprehension instruction?
  - How extensive is your classroom library?
  - How do you/could you use a wide range of books, poems, articles, songs, and popular culture materials and articles to engage students and teach comprehension?
  - In what ways do you/could you use articles from the Internet to help supplement reading materials?

## Part 2: Chapter Overviews, Study Guide Questions, and Actions

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### Introduction

In this introduction you learn what an action strategy or enactment is and the benefits of using enactment strategies to help students interact with texts before, during, and after reading. You will also learn what it means to motivate students and, by using the checklist on pages 17–18, you can find out how good a motivator you are, and what more you could do to motivate students and engage them with the work of the classroom.

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# CHAPTER 1: Show Me, Help Me, Let Me: Assisting Readers to Higher Levels of Comprehension

## Overview

In Chapter 1 the learning theory supporting the use of action strategies to promote students' learning is reviewed. You will learn the process used to help students develop their own expertise through their Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD).

## React To

*...I do have a desire to learn, and I have found out that if I give something time and get the right support, I can learn just about anything. This jibes with the Vygotskian insights that given the proper assistance, nearly anyone can learn nearly anything and what is learned, must be taught. (p. 24)*

## Discuss

- Share experiences that would support or undermine the contention that anyone can learn nearly anything given enough time and support.
- What activities do you do with your students that allow them to show or verbalize their thinking processes as they read?
- How do you assist them in doing new things as they read?
- Vygotsky asserts that learning can only occur in the student's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). How do you determine a student's ZPD (i.e., what they cannot yet do alone but could do with support)?
- When teaching, what is the difference in focusing on the How rather than the What?
- How do you build in time for students to name and articulate how they do things?
- What role does "having fun" play in learning in your own life? In your students' lives both inside and outside of school?

## Take Action

- Review the steps of the process for giving over expertise to students found on page 21. Go over a lesson you are planning and compare your process to the one presented. How does it compare? Do you include all these steps? What have you included or left out? How can you change your lesson to include all these steps? When would including all the steps be especially necessary?
- Have the people in your study group or students tell you about a time when they were learning a new skill. During the discussion, have students tell what helped them the most in learning this skill—a video, modeling, practice, help and encouragement from someone else? On a chart, list the activities that helped them the most. As you start teaching your students engagement strategies, add to the chart and keep the discussion going about what helps them learn!

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## Teacher Research

- Looking closely at what you do as a teacher, reflecting on it with colleagues, and using new understandings to refine your teaching are the hallmarks of teacher research, and study groups are an excellent starting point for action research. Throughout this guide, you'll find suggestions for identifying questions and challenges that arise in daily classroom life, using various enactment strategies in addressing them, eliciting and analyzing students' responses, and putting your new understandings into immediate practical use.

## CHAPTER 2: Making the Connection: Enactments to Use Before Reading

### Overview

In Chapter 2 you will learn how to use various before-reading enactment strategies to motivate and equip students with the knowledge they will need to approach and deeply comprehend a new text. You will also learn how to prepare for enactment strategies so that your students will understand the why and how before they engage in these strategies.

### React To

*The famous educational philosopher Jerome Bruner has called a teacher who can create significant learning experiences a “drama-creating personality.” There’s no time when it’s more important to make use of this ability than when you are preparing students to read a new text... The findings from various research studies...compel me to assert that the most important time to teach is before students read. (p. 32)*

### Post-Reading Discussion

- Why do you think the author believes that the most important time to teach is before students read?
- What strategies do you/could you use most often to prepare students for reading a new or difficult text before they read? During and after reading?
- It is often difficult to motivate students to read. In fact, the National Reading Research Council calls motivation the primary challenge facing teachers today. What motivates you to read? What motivates your students to read and learn? What do you do to promote student motivation?

### Teacher Research

- As a teacher research strategy, you could ask your study group or your students to list or keep track of their reading for a short time period, along with why they read what they read. You could then identify and discuss themes that recur in responses.
- Another way of doing this is to have your study group and/or students write a story about their best and most motivating reading experience, and their worst and most unmotivating reading

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experience. You could then look at the stories to identify what features of the situation, the reader, and the text seem to motivate or undermine motivation in your own experiences.

### **Take Action**

- The author uses “The Fan Club” as an anchor piece throughout the book. Choose a favorite story or text that you can use to get started with action strategies in the context of a unit you already teach.
- Review an upcoming story or text that your students will be reading. As you plan your lesson, review the Before Reading enactment strategies and select one to try with your students. Since this may be your first time using an enactment strategy, select one that you feel most comfortable with and that your students will be able to do easily.
- Review the steps for framing an enactment found on page 33. Plan your enactment strategy by writing out the answers to each of these steps before you present them to your students. Then, try the strategy with your students!

### **Teacher Research**

- Before your next meeting, write an informal one-page paper identifying:
  - What you did with your students.
  - What happened.
  - What you will do the same and differently the next time.
  - Any wonderings the experience evoked. You might start with the stem “I wonder what would happen if...”
  - Share your reflections at your meeting in pairs, triads, or small groups. Then share important ideas with the rest of the group.
- Reflective teacher research is all about learning from your practice and from your students about how to make changes in your future teaching. This kind of activity and reflection is essential to improved instruction.
- Interestingly, research shows that trying new instructional strategies is the most important thing you can do to be a better and more reflective teacher. Trying new things causes you to think about why certain approaches do or don’t help you achieve your goals. Trying new things has been shown to be the primary way teachers change or deepen their theoretical understandings of teaching, learning, and content.

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## CHAPTER 3: Getting in Role: Reading and Learning from Various Points of View

### Overview

Role Play, the staple of enactment strategies, is the subject of Chapter 3. You will learn basic role-playing activities that will involve all of your students. Students will have opportunities to assume the different perspectives of characters, objects, forces, or ideas.

### React To

*All reading involves “imagining to learn.” Sentence by sentence we imagine a story world or a mental model that reflects our evolving understandings. As we read, we also exercise the ability to elaborate on what we are learning, and we conjure situations and processes for applying what we have learned. (p. 61)*

### Discuss

- How do you/could you access the mental models or story worlds that students are forming as they read? How can you be sure that their understandings make sense and can be justified?
- How might role playing assist your students’ understanding and application of new learning?

### Take Action

- Start with a “close to home” role-playing activity. Select a character and have students brainstorm information that character would know and how he/she would feel. Try to connect the character’s life or problem to something in the student’s world. Use the Role Play Frames/ Planning Sheet on page 69 to help you get started.
- In order to actively engage all students, have them report on what they learned from each other about the character, the text, important concepts, and even about using action strategies. Begin by discussing how they can learn from one another, and the importance of using feedback to improve their comprehension skills by taking on roles, even if it is inside their own head. Then, teach students one of the feedback strategies found in Chapter 3. Students can be asked to identify what they found useful, difficult, challenging, and so on. about doing the Role Plays, and how they would like to use variations on these techniques in the future. Many of the best teaching ideas come directly from students, and when students suggest when to use action strategies, you will know that they have internalized the strategies as ways of addressing comprehension problems and issues in the world.

### Teacher Research

- Be ready to report on what you did, what happened, and what you might do differently next time. You might also bring in student artifacts (photos or video of their work, their writing, their reflective responses, etc.) and share in small groups to see what you can learn from them.

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## CHAPTER 4: Sitting in the Hotseat: Deepening Understanding of Characters and Concepts

### Overview

In Chapter 4, you will learn, in depth, a role-playing technique called Hotseating. Hotseating intensifies role-playing by putting students “on the spot” so they can be addressed, advised, and questioned. This technique helps students improve their ability to analyze characters, infer, elaborate, and think on their feet.

### React To

*I can see why they call the hotseat the hotseat. You feel hot when you are in it! Instead of being bored in class, you feel alive. So alive you can feel your heart pumping pretty fast! (p. 82)*

### Discuss

- What situations and activities do you or your students engage in that make you feel so alive you can feel your heart pumping and are aware of your engagement and thinking? In school? Outside of school?
- Struggling students are often not engaged in classroom discussions. How do you think having students use the Hotseat technique—and variations of it such as Lifeline or Inner Voice will help them become more involved in the text they are reading? Why?

### Take Action

- Plan a Hotseat activity to do with the whole class before you ask them to do it in groups. Select an article for the whole class to read. Then, using the Planning Guide on page 86, plan the activity. Be the first to take the Hotseat or be an Inner Voice!
- Think about a particular character or concept that is especially difficult to teach. What is it about that character or concept that makes it difficult? Use the Hotseat technique to help students understand this character or concept.

### Teacher Research

- Write about your own experience in the Hotseat and how you take the Hotseat and “imaginatively rehearse” what you will say to someone you are angry with, or someone you need to address to solve a problem.
- After students use this technique, write a teacher research journal entry regarding what you did, what happened, and what you might do next.
- Often, we try things one time and think we have tried them. But think of anything you have ever learned of significance, from kissing to cooking. It took several repetitions to get the basics; then you could start elaborating and improving. The same thing is true in teaching,

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so it is important to reflect on what you are doing and to commit to trying it again as soon as you can. That is how you and your students will master the techniques and explore their possibilities.

## CHAPTER 5: Mantle of the Expert: Learning to Read Deeply Enough to Gain Expertise

### Overview

In Chapter 5 you learn how to use the Mantle of the Expert technique. Donning the Mantle of the Expert means to wear the cloak of a more expert person and to operate on the story world or imagined context with her expertise or power. This technique helps students learn the ways of thinking and knowing that experts use to understand, produce, represent, and use content knowledge.

### React To

*The point of all reading, and of all learning activity, is to change our understanding and, as a result, our ways of thinking and being in the world. The goal of studying particular subjects is to understand the topic the way experts in the field understand it—to enter as a novice, into the “Community of Practice.” In studying history, we want to learn how to read, think, and reflect like historians do; in science, we want to learn how to approach problems, consider data, and make decisions like scientists. In other words, we want to become “novice experts” who “take on” the language and strategies of the expert. (p. 98)*

### Discuss

- How often in content area classes do you think students actually take on the language and strategies of the expert? How often do they work on problems that simulate or are similar to the problems real experts work on out in the world? Why or why not? What can you do to help students take on the language and strategies of experts?
- Every subject has its own language and strategies. What is the language or “discourse” of your content area? What are the skills, strategies, and ways of thinking and talking that are key to becoming an expert in your subject area?

### Take Action

- Decide on a focus for trying the Mantle of the Expert technique. What is the next unit you are teaching? Frame the unit—what are the macro-frame and the micro-frame? (Refer back to page 33 if you need help with this.) How can you use Mantle of the Expert to put your students in the position of exercising the authority and ideas of an expert, in ways that will help your students move from being more novice to more expert?



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- After you have discussed the language and strategies of your subject, brainstorm a list. Present the list to your students. Post the list on a chart and keep adding to it as you go through the year. By the end of the year, you will have a language and strategy guide to your subject area.

### **Teacher Research**

- Share your lists of expert language and strategies and ask what might be missing. Consider how real practitioners of your subject (scientists, mathematicians, ethicists, historians, et al.) talk, solve problems, and do work. What counts as an adequate or powerful performance for them? What must they know and be able to do?
- Many mantles can lead to social-action projects. Plan a social-action project with your students that will address a problem in the school or community. (See pages XX for ideas.)

## **CHAPTER 6: Tableaux: Visualizing Meaning Through Image and Gesture**

### **Overview**

*Tableau* is derived from the French word for visual presentation. In this chapter you learn how to use Tableaux to help students visualize and explore both the text and the subtext of a narrative, including setting, scenes, situations, characters, relationships, and meanings. Using this technique, students can *also* represent vocabulary and create mental models of complex concepts and procedure.

### **React To**

*You know how they say a picture paints a thousand words? Well our slide show (or Tableaux) did the same thing. With pictures, it told the whole story, and what it meant, in about three minutes flat. We were that good! (p. 116)*

### **Discuss**

- Describe a time when you learned something significant. Why were you motivated to learn? What helped you to learn? Most importantly, how did you demonstrate and offer proof positive of your learning? Given your reflections, how do you think you learn best? Are you a linguistic, visual, kinesthetic, or auditory learner? What about your students? How do you/might you know what type of learners are in your classroom? How do you/could you accommodate different learning styles?
- How can using a visualizing technique help your students become motivated to learn, or to represent and share their learning?

### **Take Action**

- Survey your students to find out how they believe they learn best. Have them give examples of what helps them learn. You might try for yourself some of the multiple intelligences tests

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that are available on the Internet—and then use this experience to help your students to explore their own learning styles.

- Bring a still or video camera in to class so you can document your students' use of the Tableaux. Start a bulletin board displaying the Tableaux. Have students write an explanation of why they chose to do their Tableaux in a particular way and post those along with the pictures.

### **Teacher Research**

- Have students write about what they learned by creating and performing Tableaux, or seeing other's. Share these with your study group.
- Also, as usual, you should write a reflective journal response after trying something new, outlining what you did, what happened, when you will use the technique in the future, and how you will adapt it in that situation.

## **Chapter 7: Reenactments and Interventions: Playing to Deepen Understanding of How Texts Work**

### **Overview**

In Chapter 7 you learn about two different families of enactment techniques that can be used before, during or after reading. The first family is pre-enactments that will prepare students to figure out and represent the literal and implied meanings of text. The second family of enactments consists of strategies for intervening, reframing, recasting, changing, and probing texts. These strategies will help students figure out what texts are—explicitly and implicitly—and are not saying, and how a different construction would change the text and what the text means.

### **React To**

*Reading is a powerful way of expanding and transforming our understanding, but only if we have the willingness and the tools to see other points of view, reconceptualize our understandings, and change our thinking and behavior. (p. 137)*

### **Discuss**

- What are your major goals as a teacher? In what ways are you teaching for understanding and application? If you are teaching for something other than understanding and application, how is what you are teaching in service of eventual understanding and application?
- Recall a time when you did not understand the perspective of a person you cared about or needed to get along with. What did you do to try to see their perspective? Recall a time when you read a book in which you could not understand why a character or characters would live a certain way or have a particular belief. What did you do to help yourself understand and relate to the character? How were the life strategies similar to or different from the reading strategies?

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- What can you do to help your students understand characters whose lives or viewpoints are so different than their own? To understand ideas that are distant from them in time, place, or situation?

### **Take Action**

- The author gives examples of several novels that help us consider different points of view of characters and authors who are different from us. Talk to the school librarian, and colleagues to find out titles of books or articles that they feel can be used to help examine different points of view around a topic that you address in your classroom. Keep a list and add to it whenever you learn about a new book.
- Select a historical piece in which characters lives are very different from your own student's lives. Try the Day in the Life enactment technique found on page 144.
- Try the Day in the Life enactment technique with a science or math concept.

### **Teacher Research**

- Discuss with your students how these techniques helped build and clarify meaning for them. What worked for them? What didn't work?

## **CHAPTER 8: Writing in Role: Radio Shows, Voice Collage, Memory Circles, and Other Correspondence Activities**

### **Overview**

Correspondence enactments are the focus of Chapter 8. These enactments are any writing the student does while in role. They provide students with a purpose, meaningful information, a situation, and an audience. Writing also helps deepen a student's awareness of how different types of text are constructed.

### **React To**

*I liked writing the letters and acting as the soldiers and the Vietnamese people, the protestors, the President and the families and all that because it made me see things from new directions...and that makes me understand it all in a really stronger way. (p. 154)*

### **Discuss**

- How do your students feel about writing? Do they ever engage in writing to deepen their comprehension? If so, what do they do and how do they do it?
- How can you make reading and writing matter to your students in the immediate situation of school?

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## Take Action

- Choose a text you will soon read with students, or revisit a text or story that you have used for other enactment techniques. Use that text to start students with a correspondence enactment. Begin this technique by having the class select one character from the text. Then, as a group, using the guidelines found on page 156, select one type of writing to do. Plan and do the writing with the entire class. Remember that you may need to teach them the genre features of the text type you use, whether a public service announcement, a formal letter, news article, and so on. Discuss what students learned about the character by doing this correspondence.
- Have students create a yearbook for the characters in a favorite story. In addition to writing captions about each character, have them decide in which clubs, sports, and other extra curricular activities the characters would engage.

## Teacher Research

- Analyze the writing your students did. Compare, if you can, to the writing they have done in other situations. What do you notice? Share some of the student writing with your study group.
- As always, compose a reflective journal piece about what you did, what happened and why you think it happened that way, and how you will use and adapt the technique next time.

# CHAPTER 9: Discussion Dramas: Rehearsing and Developing Our Thinking

## Overview

Discussion Drama is the focus of Chapter 9. In this chapter you learn how these techniques support student talk and conversation around issues that matter. By using these enactments, students not only deepen their understanding through talk, but their participation increases and they are more willing to try out new points of view. Through these discussions they also enhance their thinking skills.

## React To

*In school, all you ever do is play 'guess what the teacher already knows. (p. 169)*

## Discuss

- Think of a time when you were engaged in a deep and exciting discussion. What was the topic? Who was involved? What made the conversation work? Think of a time when students were engaged in a classroom conversation and it seemed to run without you. What was the purpose of the discussion for students? What was the content? What did the students do? What was the topic? What other topics and situations might engage your students enough to promote deep and prolonged discussions?

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- How has your instruction in reading changed since you started using enactments? Which enactments have brought about revelations for your students? How are you going to use enactments to promote and assess student growth?

### **Take Action**

- Try a discussion drama technique instead of leading typical classroom discussion. Remember, it might take some modeling and framing to help students get going. How did what eventually happened differ from a typical classroom discussion?
- Teacher Research Strategies: Reflect on the enactments you have used. Which enactments have worked for your students? How? Which enactments haven't you used? Select three enactments that you have not tried and plan when you will use them in your instruction.
- Throughout this book you have read e-mails to the author from teachers who are using enactment techniques with their students. These teachers have noted that they were skeptical, hesitant, and excited about using enactments with their students. They have given examples of how students have reacted and embraced these activities. Now that you have read most of this book, what kind of e-mail would you write to the author? What have you learned about your students while doing enactments? What new understandings and strategies have you added to your repertoire? What questions or worries do you still have?
- You can actually send an e-mail and description of your students' work to the author at [wilhelm@boisestate.edu](mailto:wilhelm@boisestate.edu) He promises to reply, eventually!