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Anne Crout Shelley
University of South Carolina at Spartanburg

Nicole J. Ashley
Fairforest Elementary School

Christy Emerson
Fairforest Elementary School

Christi Medlock
Dawkins Middle School

Tammy Smith Owings
Woodruff Middle School

See next page for additional authors

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Exploring the use of three level guides in elementary and middle school classrooms

Authors

Anne Crout Shelley, Nicole J. Ashley, Christy Emerson, Christi Medlock, Tammy Smith Owings, and Kelly Richardson



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Anne Crout Shelley

University of South Carolina at Spartanburg

Nicole J. Ashley

Christy Emerson

Fairforest Elementary School

Christi Medlock

Dawkins Middle School

Tammy Smith Owings

Woodruff Middle School

Kelly Richardson

Pauline-Glenn Springs Elementary School

ABSTRACT

Collaborative classroom research among a group of elementary and middle school teachers provides insight into the effective use of the Three Level Guide. Building lessons around content area materials, teachers employed the Three Level Guide regularly, coming together to share successes and frustrations and to offer suggestions. Their reflective analyses of the use of the Three Level Guide offer insight into its impact on teacher effectiveness as well as its impact on students' academic achievement, critical thinking ability, and academic esteem.

As reflective professionals, we all search for techniques, strategies, and approaches that support our students and increase our effectiveness.

We want our students to think critically; we want our students to learn independently; we want our students to feel academically confident and competent. We want to grow professionally — learning from experience, learning from the wisdom of colleagues and researchers, and learning from astute observation of our students. Certainly a vehicle for stimulating professional growth is classroom research. Particularly when research is a collaborative endeavor, the opportunities for new insights, new ideas, and new options increase significantly. Based on our working together during the fall of 1997, the six of us offer an example of collaborative research. Continue for our story.

SETTING THE STAGE

Effective teaching and learning are active processes. Good teachers set the stage for learning — choosing material carefully, designing thought provoking questions, modeling higher level thinking, and promoting good discussion. They communicate to students that reading is an active, not a passive, activity during which the reader “constructs” personal meaning (Cambourne, 1995). Furthermore, as teachers design and model increasingly complex questions, they shape both the way students think and students’ expectations about reading comprehension (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, and Kucan, 1997; Goldenberg, 1993).

Herber’s (1978) Three Level Guide is a tool for interacting with specific text or information while teaching students how to interact or construct understanding on three different cognitive levels — literal, interpretive, and applied. Vacca and Vacca (1996) elaborate on these levels noting that at the literal level the guide helps the reader identify the important information stated directly in the text. At the interpretive level, the reader must discern significant relationships among ideas in the text, while at the applied level, the “reader attempts to seek significance or relevance in the text” (p. 233). These categories, rather than being rigid and discrete, are interactive and thus inseparable. Given that the reader brings varying life experiences and background knowledge to the classroom and the task, the stage is set for a dynamic learning opportunity.

The Three Level Guide provides scaffolding for students — structuring their interaction with the text and shaping the quality of their responses whether completing the guide independently, with a partner, or with a small group. Teachers' use of the Three Level Guide provides an effective framework for classroom discussion, engages students in higher level thinking (Ruddell, 1991) and develops metacognitive awareness of varying cognitive levels.

DESCRIPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Seeking to investigate the power and flexibility of Herber's (1978) Three Level Guide, the five authors who currently teach in elementary and middle school classrooms incorporated a Three Level Guide into their instruction once a week for eight consecutive weeks. Researchers experimented with the (1) design of the guide; (2) procedures for incorporating the guide in each lesson; and (3) the impact of the guide on the academic achievement, critical thinking ability, and the academic esteem of their students. During the period of research, teachers analyzed and discussed the use of the guides on a weekly basis considering variations in how each guide was designed and implemented, the successes and frustrations in using the different guides, and thoughts about future use of the guide. What follows is a melding of these discussions.

VARIATIONS IN THE DESIGN OF THE GUIDE AND HOW IT WAS USED

Though variations in the design and use of a Three Level Guide are highly appropriate, the guide is basically constructed of teacher developed statements or questions on three levels — literal (reading the lines), interpretive (reading between the lines), and applied (reading beyond the lines). Students, in completing the guide, are led to construct meaning on three levels, defending their answers with information from the text or from their background experiences.

Christy E.

With kindergartners, Christy used the guide orally to nourish language development and listening comprehension. Using informational books and *Weekly Reader* magazines related to her current thematic unit, Christy first introduced the book or *Weekly Reader* by having children

discuss the cover and pictures and make predictions about the selection. For example, Christy read to her kindergartners a simple book about bats. After having children make predictions based on the title and cover, Christy asked her students: “(1) What do most bats do at night? During the day?” — a literal question; (2) “Why do people sometimes say, ‘You’re as blind as a bat!’” — an interpretive question; (3) “If you were a bat, describe the body part that would be most important to you” — an applied question.

Christy found this particular guide, as well as others, worked best if she interspersed her questions during oral reading. An assistant recorded abbreviated versions of children’s responses on chart paper headed with the questions. Two techniques encouraged thoughtful answers. When Christy asked a question, she frequently reminded her students to take a few minutes and think before responding. If children struggled, Christy found that restating the question in a slightly different way often allowed success. A second technique was to have children talk over a response with a partner before sharing with the larger group. Follow-up conversation was often punctuated with comments such as “That’s what you said,” or “we talked about that too.”

Throughout her research, Christy found interpretive questions most difficult for her students. During one discussion, Christy asked, “If a squirrel has not stored enough food for the winter, how or where do you think it would find more food?” Only with significant prompting was a student able to respond, “They could find seed in a bird feeder.”

Nicole

Using Three Level Guides during her social studies lessons, Nicole provided scaffolding for her second graders by completing the first guide as a whole group, completing the second and third guides in small groups, completing the fourth and fifth guides with a partner, and finally having students work independently. Unlike Christy’s kindergartners, Nicole’s second graders were provided their own copies of the Three Level Guide. Expecting students to give an oral reason for each response, Nicole recorded a sample of responses on chart paper. Though in her first guide, Nicole wrote questions at each level, she later experimented with statements as opposed to questions (see Figure 1). Wanting

to encourage careful consideration of the statements, she inserted one statement at the literal level which was untrue. Nicole found that students were less comfortable with statements as opposed to questions and that they had greater difficulty going back to the text to support their answers in response to statements than they seemed to have with a question format.

Because many of her students were still emergent readers and writers, Nicole found that her students were more attentive if she spread the Three Level Guide activity over two days of instruction. As with Christy's kindergartners, Nicole's second graders, particularly her weaker students, found work at the interpretive level most difficult. For example, Nicole asked the interpretive question, "How is a community related to a neighborhood?" Even though her second graders knew the definitions for both a community and a neighborhood, they struggled with combining the definitions and articulating a reasonable relationship.

Figure 1. Example of a three level guide used in a second grade social studies lesson.

Living in Communities
What is a State?

After reading about states, I would like for you and your group members to read these statements and put an X beside the ones your group feels are true. If there is a statement that your group feels is not true, do not put anything beside it. We will discuss the statements when all groups are finished.

The information in your book will help you with the first two.

1. _____ A state is made up of many communities.

2. _____ There are 49 states in our country.

Be careful with number 3. You need to use your brains.

3. _____ Columbia is the capital of South Carolina.

Use the information from your book and your brain to figure out number four.

4. _____ If you were to visit another state, that state would have a different capital than your own and a different governor.

Kelly

Working with social studies materials, Kelly introduced her first Three Level Guide and discussed the questions with her students. Students were then to read the text silently and work with a partner to answer the questions. Finding that students tended only to search for answers rather than really read, Kelly tried presenting the Three Level Guide on a transparency before students read; once they completed the reading, they were given a copy of the guide and asked to answer the questions independently. This technique proved more effective in having students actually read the material.

In trying to maximize the benefits of the Three Level Guide and to emphasize the relationship between a question and the source of the answer, Kelly borrowed from Raphael (1982) her notion of Question-Answer Relationships. Directions for literal items indicated that the answers were “right there” in the text; at the interpretive level, directions noted that the reader must “put it all together” or “think and search;” directions at the applied level indicated that responses must be generated by the “author and you” or “on your own” (Alvermann and Phelps, 1998; Pearson and Johnson, 1986; Raphael, 1986). Wanting to use the Three Level Guide as a vehicle for having children express themselves in writing, Kelly experimented with true/false statements at the literal level; students were required to correct in writing any statements which were false. At the interpretive and applied levels, Kelly used questions and required students to support their answers in writing. She concluded that the repeated use of this procedure did encourage more thoughtful responses from her students.

Christi M.

For her sixth grade social studies classes, Christi initially asked students to read a passage, to respond to a Three Level Guide individually and then to discuss their answers in heterogeneous groups. However, she found that students tended to wait to work on the questions until they moved into their groups. Her lower achieving students particularly were frustrated by the application level questions such as “During the 1600’s, what kinds of problems might Native Americans from the Great Plains experience if they were suddenly required to survive in what is now Georgia and Florida?” Struggling students tended to search the text for

the “right” answer and only after Christi convinced them to combine their knowledge and ideas with those in the text were students successful.

When she allowed group responses to the guides, Christi’s high achieving students assumed natural leadership roles. Christi recounted the experience of being asked by a student “Why Native Americans didn’t all live in the same kind of shelters?” Before she could respond and to her pleasure, the “leader” of the group, a high achiever, interrupted and began to explain how the immediate environment — weather patterns, building materials, food sources — all influence the kinds of shelter used by different groups of people.

Christi noticed that with repeated use of the guide, some students became careless and spent considerable time socializing; however, she learned that varying the composition of groups and alternating among whole group, small group, and individual work relieved the tedium and encouraged thoughtful work.

Tammy

Using Three Level Guides in conjunction with a sixth grade social studies unit on the Americas, Tammy, like Nicole with her second graders, found that devoting two class periods to the reading, completion, and discussion of each of the guides maximized effectiveness. After explaining and modeling the Three Level Guide strategy, Tammy experimented with independent and group work. She, like Kelly, incorporated into her directions Raphael’s (1982) Question-Answer-Relationship terminology. For literal level questions, she wrote “You will find the answers to these questions right on the page;” while for applied questions she noted, “You must answer these questions based on ideas in your head, but you must also use the information in this lesson to explain your answers.”

Tammy found that her students’ performance on the guides and comprehension of the material increased if before reading, students brainstormed and shared background knowledge about the next text; then students scanned the text to isolate any unknown words. As a class, these words were defined using the context provided. At that point,

Tammy distributed her Three Level Guide and went over the questions before her students began to read.

Tammy chose to “grade” some of the guides to discover if this increased the seriousness with which students approached the work. In retrospect, she decided that grading was counterproductive. Tammy experimented in using the last of the eight guides as a review of her unit on the Americas; this, she found to be effective.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Students

With this kind of “messy” classroom research, impact on students is difficult to measure quantitatively. All teachers involved in this research noticed a significant difference in the quality of their students’ responses to questions. Christy noted that her kindergartners’ oral answers became longer and more detailed with the use of the guide. When asked “If you were a squirrel, what kind of home would you live in and what kinds of materials would you use to create your new home?”, A.J., a student usually reticent to share responded, “If there are no holes in the tree, I would build my nest in the crown. I would use the same things that Samuel and Colby said (branches, leaves, grass) and I would use pine needles.” Her students learned that often there is no right or wrong answer; they became willing to accept a greater variety of thoughts and opinions.

Nicole echoed the growth in divergent thinking, commenting that the guide encouraged risk-taking since students quickly learned that a diversity of answers can be correct as long as the answer can be supported or defended. Her students became more skillful at turning to the text to support their answers and more willing to learn by interacting with each other rather than being dependent on the teacher for assistance. Nicole offered a fine example:

The question read: Is a computer a need or a want? The book had listed the definition of a need and a want but had not made a reference to a computer. I wanted to see if they [the students] could form a relationship on their own and decide how a computer would be categorized. One of the children said, “I think it’s a need because we have one at

school to do things on and I have one at home that my dad works on for his job." His partner disagreed with him by saying, "A computer is a want because the book said that a want is something we can live without. We would not die without a computer."

In a similar vein, Christi noted that this strategy seemed to teach her sixth grade students not to look for the one "right" answer. She noted that her students became more comfortable with making connections between the text and their own lives. Similarly, Tammy commented that the use of the Three Level Guide taught her students how to think about and how to talk about a text. She went on to say that giving students a guide moves them from searching the text to thinking about the text.

These teacher/researchers, particularly Nicole and Kelly, noted that use of the guide had a positive impact on student writing as children formulated answers to interpretive and applied level questions. Both Christy, with kindergartners, and Tammy, with sixth graders, commented on the improvement in students' ability to discuss the text. Nicole added that explaining the text to someone else is often the best way to understand it yourself. She noted that the interaction which occurred in discussing the guides improved the self-confidence of her weaker second graders especially as they learned that all answers have worth as long as they can be defended. Kelly commented that her fourth grade students seemed to gain self-confidence in their work. Tammy remarked that success with the guides enhanced the academic esteem of her sixth graders.

Teachers

Without exception, Christy, Nicole, Kelly, Christi, and Tammy declared that their work with the Three Level Guides had significantly improved their ability to write questions at the literal, interpretive, and applied levels. Nicole came to a greater awareness that the more time and energy she put into the preparation of the guides, the more her students benefited from them. She had to study her material in depth and word her statements carefully.

Tammy commented that her use of the guide made her aware of the possibility of teaching content and reading/writing skills simultaneously.

She wrote, "I have learned how important it is for students to take responsibility for their learning by knowing HOW to read a textbook. I feel a sense of accomplishment with these guides because I know that I am teaching a life skill. I am giving my students a framework for reading and analyzing text."

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

A study of this nature certainly suggests more than it proves. One suggestion emerging from this collaborative research is the value of the consistent use of the Three Level Guide as a vehicle for helping students construct meaning from text. Students participating in this research improved in their ability to respond to questions at varying cognitive levels and to support and defend those responses both in discussion and in writing. The academic esteem of students improved as they became more skillful at approaching new text. As students became bored or frustrated with the repeated use of the strategy, teachers were reminded that any strategy can be overused. The intermittent use of a variety of strategies and techniques to provide scaffolding for the comprehension of text — particularly difficult text — is desirable. Also, as groups ceased to function effectively, teachers found that regularly varying group size improved student attention and achievement.

Specific suggestions for the construction and use of Three Level Guides include:

- Allot time to provide a framework for the lesson before students are introduced to the Three Level Guide; this might involve discussing the pictures in a book before it is read orally, brainstorming background knowledge about a topic, or scanning the text to identify and define unknown words.
- Ask fewer high quality questions rather than larger numbers of poor quality questions.
- Experiment with both statements and questions using the format most effective for your particular students.
- Be aware that for some children interpretive questions will be more difficult while for others applied questions will be harder; be prepared to provide additional scaffolding where needed.

- Discuss questions before students read the assigned passage.
- Model or “think aloud” responding to questions when the guide is initially introduced.
- Adjust the quantity of reading for less able readers.
- Encourage young children to respond independently by drawing responses, dictating responses, or using invented spelling to respond.
- Require older students to defend their answers in writing making connections to specific passages in the text.
- Encourage wider individual participation by using yes/no or true/false response cards during discussion.
- Rotate group arrangements and frequency to offset boredom.
- Give each small group a different applied question and encourage creative presentations of their responses.

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Anne Crout Shelley is a faculty member in the School of Education at the University of South Carolina, in Spartanburg. Tammy Smith Owings is a teacher at Woodruff Middle School, in Woodruff, South Carolina. Christy Emerson and Nicole J. Ashley are teachers at Fairforest Elementary School; Christi Medlock is a teacher at Dawkins Middle School; and Kelly Richardson is a teacher at Pauline-Glenn Springs Elementary School, all located in Spartanburg, South Carolina.