

## Using the HPST Framework to Improve Reading Comprehension with Students with Intellectual Disabilities in a University Setting

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**Abstract:** The Historic, Philosophic, Societal, and Takeaway (HPST) Framework, a guide developed for document analysis (Pombo, 2015), was implemented in *Panther LIFE*, a postsecondary transition program. The purpose of this study was to explore the necessary adaptations for implementation with students with intellectual disabilities as well as their reading comprehension outcomes.

With the implementation of Higher Education Opportunity Act or HEOA (2008), students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in postsecondary programs are accessing university courses and coursework across the nation. In the United States alone, there are approximately 242 postsecondary education programs in 47 states that have admitted students with ID (Grigal et al., 2015). Florida International University (FIU) in conjunction with Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) houses a postsecondary program titled Project *Panther LIFE*: Learning Is for Everyone. The program is in its fifth year of implementation and currently serves 30 students with ID from the Miami-Dade community in Miami, Florida. It has been the researchers' experience as educators in the *Panther LIFE* program that students with ID show poor decoding and reading comprehension skills, often with reading levels significantly below high school level. Because of this, a solution is required to assist the students in achieving comprehension via analysis leading to higher-order thinking in a university setting.

Czarniawska (2004) described narrative texts as a bastion of social life, articulating that individuals try to understand and make sense of their own lived experiences (and or personal reality) by creating biographical, auto-biographical, and ethno-autobiographic narratives. These types of text act as a source for knowledge because they serve as an organizing catalyst for "experiences using a schema that assumes the intentionality of human action" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 7). Schunk (2012) conveyed that learning and development are not dissociated from interpersonal context and social interactions ultimately transform into learning experiences. Additionally, research has shown that narratives and expository texts can be used as a pedagogical tool to enhance students' overall comprehension in adults with ID (Reichenberg, 2014; Van Den Bos, Nakken, Nicolay, & Van Houten, 2007).

Pombo (2015) developed a pedagogical tool titled the Historic, Philosophic, Societal, and a Takeaway Framework (HPST) to be used and adapted for narratives. The model works on the assumption that narratives possess historic, philosophic, and socio-cultural components that when harnessed properly can directly catalyze comprehension. The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to explore the adaptations necessary for the usage of the HPST Framework with students with ID; and (b) to discover reading comprehension outcomes of student learners with ID in the *Panther LIFE* program.

### Program Overview

Project *Panther LIFE* is a postsecondary transition program for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) made possible through a partnership with FIU, M-DCPS, and Parent to Parent of Miami, Inc. (a nonprofit parent support agency). *Panther LIFE* is a non-degree certificate

program which allows students access to and participation in university courses and events with an ultimate goal of paid employment at program completion. Students in the program follow a program of study (POS) that includes university courses, M-DCPS online curricula (e.g., i-Ready), trainings and workshops (e.g., Money Management), and other program-related events (i.e., summer residential program). Students audit university courses in a variety of areas including, but not limited to Computing and Technology; Social Inquiry; Sciences, the Arts, and Health; and Nutrition. Supplemental academics are provided by the M-DPCS online curricula in the areas of reading, math, and independent living skills. Additionally, students are provided an array of support systems including an M-DCPS Project Coordinator, FIU student mentors, and faculty advisors. M-DCPS Project Coordinators assist *Panther LIFE* students on a regular basis with daily scheduling, time management, and instructional programming. FIU student mentors are comprised of peer coaches and academic mentors who meet with the students three times a week for one hour each session. Peer coaches assist with participation in campus life, and academic mentors assist with access to university coursework and academic independence. Faculty advisors meet with the students once a week for one hour per session to assist with appropriate interactions with professors in a university setting.

#### **HPST Framework Description**

The HPST Framework can be best described as a pedagogical tool used to interpret and understand narrative, producing an authentic learning experience. The purpose of the HPST is to serve as a guide for document analysis that when applied to a course's readings will help extract content knowledge, create higher-order connection making, be used as a platform for student dialogue, be utilized as a deliverable form of student assessment, and provide students with an authentic learning experience.

The HPST Framework resonates with the Common Core State Standards Initiative (NCSS, 2010). The Common Core espouses literacy competencies (or standards in the strand) which must be met. These standards in the strand are based on reading material that is to be analyzed by students so that a greater understanding of content can be achieved. The researchers believe that this Framework will help with the aforementioned process. Additionally, the HPST aligns with the National Council for Social Studies Standards (NCSS, 2002) by catalyzing: (a) meaningfulness via building curriculum networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that are structured around enduring understandings, essential questions, and learning goals; (b) integration via drawing from history, political science, and sociology to increase the understanding of an event or concept and to provide opportunities for students to conduct inquiry, develop and display data, synthesize findings, and make judgments; and (c) activity via developing new understanding through a process of active knowledge construction through interaction in a cooperative group dynamic.

The HPST Framework works on two levels. The first is the interactive level, which is composed of three interconnected elements: author, text and reader/student. The second level is the analytic level. This level is created by the use and application of four perspectives or frames: historic, philosophic, societal, and takeaway. Figures 1 and 2 provide a graphic representation of the two levels. Within the historic sphere, it is imperative that the teacher embrace the idea (and transmit to the students) that this frame is based on a Historiographical Approach. This entails the presentation of history based on its critical examination, evaluation, and interpretation leading to student understanding. The who, what, where, and how are explored. Moreover, students will identify the context, causes, continuity, change over time (if applicable), and

periods of time. The philosophic dimension of this Framework will have students exploring the belief(s) of a time period, school(s) of thought, public opinion, and psychological paradigm. Students will discuss, within the societal frame, the underpinnings and cultural nuances of the period. Examples of possible topics can include food, religion, traditions, enclaves, morals, and values. Students will work in assigned groups and will create a deliverable using both the selected excerpts from the narrative itself and outside sources (i.e., visuals, auditory artifacts) that exemplify, describe, answer, and/or justify their assigned frame. Most importantly, a personal takeaway will be given by each student which will catalyze a student dialogue platform and/or practical assessment element.

## **Method**

### **Description of Participants**

*Panther LIFE* acquired Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from FIU and all students were given the opportunity to opt in or out of any data collection activities at the beginning of each academic year via consent form. Participants were notified at the beginning of this study that they could opt out at any time. The participants consisted of four students ages 19-21 in the *Panther LIFE* program, of which three were females (75%) and one was male (25%). All students (100%) were in their first year of the program. The group's racial/ethnic composition consisted of three (75%) Hispanic and one (25%) Asian. Participants in this study were selected through a convenience sample. *Panther LIFE* students were asked if they wanted to participate in a short research study and those that volunteered to take part were selected.

### **Research Design**

This qualitative study utilized a focus group format where the students met with the researchers three times throughout the Fall 2015 semester for approximately one hour each session to read, review, and respond to a selected text. The text selected for use in this study was the book *The Prince of Los Cocuyos* (Blanco, 2014). This text was selected because all *Panther LIFE* students had read the book as part of their introductory course prior to partaking in the study.

Previous to the beginning of the focus group sessions, the researchers met to highlight the desired content. A roadmap was developed from the content extracted from the text, composed of two elements: (a) background on the author, and (b) vocabulary, concept, essential questions, and terms. The focus group sessions were then broken down into three main topics: (1) an introduction to the author, (2) an introduction to a selected passage with vocabulary, and (3) a reflection on the selected passage. Figure 3 shows a detailed representation of each session. The first session opened with a slideshow of pictures of the author. Students were questioned about who the man was as a person, his authorship, and his career. Using technology, the students researched interesting facts about the author which catalyzed a discussion surrounding their initial impressions of him. The second session opened with a video clip of Mickey Mouse and a discussion about Disney World. The section of the book was read aloud as the students followed along. The students were given a word list and then participated in a discussion focused on students' reactions to the text in which they identified the content attached to each word. Reconvening within a whole group dynamic, the vocabulary words were discussed and analyzed. The third and final session opened with a brief recap of the selected text with rereads of target areas. The session then revolved around open-ended questions regarding immigration, Communism, and personal takeaways from the text.

### **Data Analysis**

Each session was recorded and detailed notes were taken from observation. The researchers then used thematic analysis for each session a total of two times. The first thematic analysis examined accommodations within each session, and the second analysis scrutinized recurring patterns of student responses especially in the areas of making personal connections with the text and responding to societal themes.

## **Results**

### **Adaptations to HPST Framework**

Instead of having one academic class session, the accommodation was to break it down into three course sessions as the sample of students needed more time. The first part of the Framework, the interactive level, required little to no accommodation. This sample of students was able to accomplish what the Framework suggested which was to identify the author, to research background information, and to create a biographical profile that catalyzed a personal reaction within the student. The only accommodation in this level was the utilization of a simplified graphic organizer to record findings regarding the author's biographical profile. Figure 4 displays a sample of the graphic organizer.

The second part of the Framework, the analytic level, required accommodations. The first accommodation was using a twenty-page excerpt of the overall text. This accommodation was due to a time limitation with the sample of students. Due to a variation of word recognition levels within the sample of students, additional accommodations were put into place to assist with reading. The researchers read orally along with the group rather than having the students read on their own. Also, the researchers stopped occasionally to explain nuances of the text. This included having the students look up definitions of words using technology (i.e., iPhone, iPad), probing for understanding (i.e., colloquialisms, foreign language terms), and explaining significance of literary nuances (i.e., Confederate flag, Chevy Malibu). The next accommodation made was that the sample of students completed the terms and concepts list (see Figure 5) as a group employing researcher prompts. Moreover, the students were prompted to find the word in the text and find definitions and examples using technology; this led to a discussion focusing on students' reactions to the text. It is important to note at this point that this session required a greater amount of time than previous sessions because the students struggled with abstractions in the literary content (i.e., paradise, *gringa*).

As part of the analytic level, all three frames (historic, philosophic, and societal) are typically covered in one session. However, due to this sample of students, it was broken up into two sessions: one session covering the historic and societal aspects and one session covering the philosophic paradigm. Within this last session, the researchers first probed for literary content retention and discussed literary particulars in the assigned excerpt to regain interest. Then, the researchers introduced new terms and concepts. Since the underlying theme of the book was immigration due to Communism, accommodations had to be made to ensure student understanding. The researchers had to reconcile words (i.e., immigrant, immigration) in order to explain the philosophic underpinnings of Communism before the students were able to reflect.

The final part of the framework includes a personal student takeaway. Typically, this would be embodied in a formalized deliverable (i.e., presentation) where students elaborate on the three frames justified by the text. In this case, the researchers used an informal reactionary discussion in place of the aforementioned. This accommodation allowed the students to connect to the literature in a non-stressful environment that enhanced their higher-order thinking. Additionally, because of the time constraints, this was a viable option.

### Reading Comprehension Outcomes

The researchers identified two main reading comprehension outcomes: (a) increased ability to find definitions of words via context clues and technology, and (b) increased ability to make higher-order connections without excessive prompting. During this exercise, students made connections with the text while also utilizing technology to compensate for any lack of content knowledge. An example of this occurred during the first focus group session when a student utilized her iPad to share a fact about the author before any prompt was formally given. The student said, “Richard Blanco met with Barack Obama in 2014 and he got his degree from FIU.” When asked how she knew the information, she identified an online source on her iPad. Another example included a student sharing that the author of the book was a Poet Laureate, and the student went on to explain that Blanco read an Inaugural poem. During the session where the terms and concepts list was expounded upon, the researchers found that the students identified the meaning of the word using context clues and reflected using their personal experience. When asked what the author referred to as “paradise,” one student reflected, “It is a place to stay forever.”

Beginning in the first focus group session, the students were making higher-order connections with the author and by the last focus group session, they were making the same higher-order connections in relation to the literary content with few prompts. One example took place in the first session when a student made a connection to the author without any prompts. The student said, “He is a world explorer like me and we love trying new things and meeting new people [...] He was born in Madrid [and] I was born [in] India. Richard Blanco was [a] famous writer [and] my dad is [a] PhD student and he loves to write and read.” In the last focus group session, the same student made correlations between her personal experience and the author’s experience in the text. The student commented that if she had to leave her home country due to a Communist dictator, then she would have to make a choice: “[I would have] to find a different place to live. Somewhere where they spoke my language at least.” Additionally, she shared that she would miss her country and she would struggle with her identity as an immigrant, forming new relationships in the new country, and paving a new life for herself.

### Discussion

Based on these findings, the authors recommend that students with ID should engage in these types of higher-order thinking activities provided by the HPST Framework on a regular basis. The sample of students was able to synthesize what they were reading, and the goal of higher-order thinking and connection making was achieved that is a requirement of the university setting. Additionally, the nature of the Framework makes it adaptable to a myriad of student and teacher needs, thereby allowing it to be useful in multiple areas of *Panther LIFE* as well as other postsecondary transition programs.

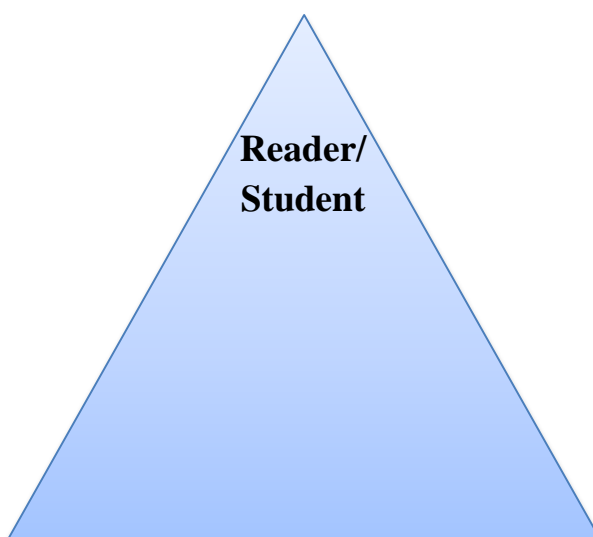
Given that it took three sessions to review a twenty-page excerpt of the assigned text, the time allotted in regards to the usage of the Framework would most likely need to be increased in further studies. This would entail a longer implementation, perhaps even a semester or an ongoing exercise with periodic evaluation. Moreover, the sample of students should be increased in further studies to examine group dynamics and additional adaptations to the Framework for a larger group setting. Ideally, the researchers would like to expand the Framework implementation to a whole group dynamic in *Panther LIFE* where the higher-functioning students would assist the lower-functioning students leading to a greater understanding and application of the concepts.

In conclusion, further implementation and research is necessary to explore if reading comprehension levels of students with ID would improve over time as well as to continue evaluating the HPST Framework in diverse implementation settings. Due to the nature of the population sampled in this study, a comparative study between multiple implementations of the Framework across diverse populations may also be required.

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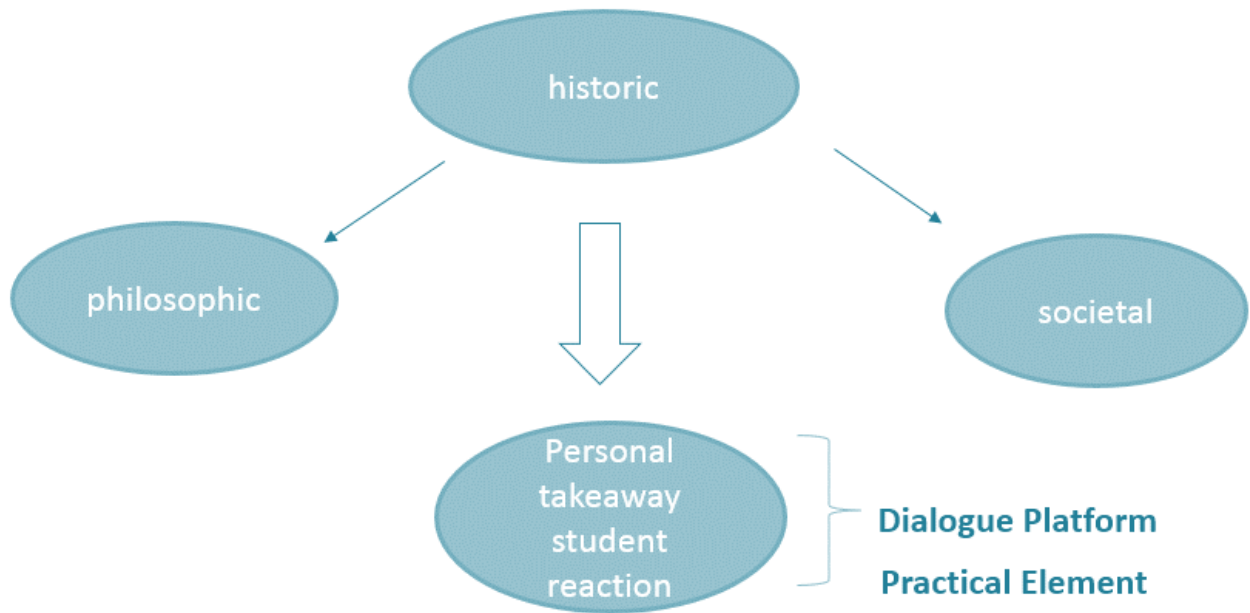
**Figure 1.** Interactive Level



**Text**

**Author**

**Figure 2.** Analytic Level



**Figure 3.** Detailed Representation of Focus Group Sessions

**DAY 1: INTRODUCTION TO BOOK AND AUTHOR**

**Hook:** Show picture of author.

**Probe:** Do you know who this is? What do we know about him?

**Author Background: Who is Richard Blanco?**

- Born in Spain
- Cuban descent
- Cuban parents
- Grew up in Miami
- Writer
- Poet
- Attended FIU – Grad 1991
- Read at inauguration for Barack Obama
- Has won many awards : Poetry prizes, Literary Awards, International Latino Award
- Lives in Maine and Boston
- Professional Life: Teacher – Georgetown University, American University
- Personal Life: Travels, has a partner

**Personal Takeaway:** What else can you find out about Richard Blanco?

Students search on iPad/technology for interesting pieces of information and fill in short worksheet.

**DAY 2: INITIAL BOOK READING/TERMS**

**Hook:** Show Video Clip – “Steamboat Willie”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qS87dfF4WSA>

**Introduction:** Excerpt of text – traveling to Disney World.

**Probe:** Who has been to Disney World? What do you think of when you think of Disney?

**Reading:** Pages 74-95

Students follow along on iPad or book as we read together.

**Reflection on Terms and Concepts Worksheet:**

Suburbs p.78

Chevrolet p.80

Gringa p.83

Magic Kingdom p.84

Monorail p.92

Paradise p.93

Castle p.93

**Personal Takeaway:** What words stood out to you and why?

**DAY 3: SECOND BOOK READING/REFLECTION**

**Hook:** Who has gone on a road trip/vacation? How did you feel? What was the car ride like?

**Transition:** Let’s think about how we felt on our trips while we follow along with the book.

**Reading:** Pages 74-95

Students follow along on iPad or book as we read together.

**Probe:** How was this road trip different from your experience?

**Transition:** Richard Blanco’s family immigrated from Cuba – he mentions this during this part of the book. What is immigration? How could someone immigrate from Cuba to US? Boat?



Plane?

Why do you think they left?

**Personal Takeaway:** This time imagine if your road trip was a permanent move. How would you feel? What would you miss?

**Figure 4.** Sample Graphic Organizer

Meet: Richard Blanco

Place of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Interesting Facts:

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**Figure 5.** Terms and Concepts List

*The Prince of Los Cocuyos*  
Terms and Concepts List

WORD	WHAT YOU THINK OF
Suburbs (page 78)	
Chevrolet (page 80)	
Gringa (page 83)	
Magic Kingdom (page 84)	
Monorail (page 92)	
Paradise (page 93)	
Castle (page 93)	