

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Analyzing Complex Text Video Transcript

Student:

The river doesn't only, like, symbolize, like, freedom for Huck, but it also symbolizes freedom for Jim as well. So and he's also trying to help Jim, as you can see.

Ethan:

There's a couple of other instances like the huge raft for logs going down river...

Michelle Brenner:

My main objective today when I'm teaching *Huck Finn* is being able to go back to the text and figure out what's important. We talk about analysis from the beginning of the year and I always try to explain to them it's about taking apart all the pieces of the puzzle and figuring out how they fit back together again. Because they're really good at summarizing, but analysis takes a little bit more risk and a little bit more of their own opinions, and they have to be able to risk being wrong and being able to understand that it's not as simple as "the river is freedom." It's more complex than that.

You guys have a card, right? The first thing you need to do is take your note card and figure out whether or not it happened on the shore and then you'll be in this pod back here, or the river, and then you'll be in that pod up there.

Every student has a note card with an episode on it and so they know I need to know about this episode when we get into the larger groups and then the large class discussion.

What you're going to do is you're going to take your cards and you're going to put them up on the front boards. We need to put them in order of which episode happened first to which episode happened last.

In *Huckleberry Finn* there's two major settings: the river and the shore. And so I think it's one way that we can start to teach them to analyze, to break them into those two pieces and help them think about, you know, what's this piece have to do with that piece?

Next, find your episode in the book. And you're going to find two quotations that help us understand why your part of the story is important. And then you're going to write them right up here underneath it.

Tori:

Whenever we say something, they'll tell us look back in the text. And so we have to go searching and search for the page number, and then after we find the text we have to further explain how our evidence relates to our point.

Brenner:

What quotations could you find?

Student:

"So the king went all through the crowd with his hat swabbing his eyes, blessing the people and praising them, and thanking them for being so good to the poor pirates away off there."

Brenner:

I think that's a great one. Why is that a good one?

So when they look at all the different things that happened on the river and they look at all the different things that happened on the shore, they can see what changes over time. Then they get a more nuanced idea about the river and the shore than just freedom and civilization.

You've got all of this information, right? Now it's time to make sense of it. We know that the shore has something to do with civilization, but not just civilization, what is it telling us about civilization, all right? Be ready in about five minutes to talk back to the class.

If they're going to be asked to discuss something, I always want to give them time to discuss it in a smaller group first.

Student:

Like I kind of think it's the civilization which affects them, makes the people who are naturally good, make them do some bad stuff.

Student:

Every time he don't like something he runs to the river.

Brenner:

That's true, that's true. What doesn't he like there?

Student:

He doesn't like civilization, he doesn't like the clothes. Miss Watson tried to dress him up.

Brenner:

When I walk around the classroom mostly what I'm looking for is that they're really pushing the boundaries of those questions, that they're not just going for the simple answer.

It's just kind of confining, right?

Students:

Yeah.

Student:

And even though he says that the king and the duke are like the worst people of humankind, basically, in the middle of the text, he still would rather be with them than on the shore, which is pretty weird.

Brenner:

They can talk about their discussion questions together, look back at the text, figure out not only what they think their answer is, but be able to support their answer with the text. That way they feel confident by the time that they get to the large group discussion to be able to say, "You know, this was my question, and I feel like I can speak confidently on that question."

Student:

And I think like maybe living free, you can't live free all your life because it gets boring, and I guess you miss your family and stuff. So I think maybe he didn't miss his family and just wanted to go back to the shore.

Brenner:

Can they live on the river forever?

Students:

No.

Brenner:

No.

Obviously literacy is important in an English class. And in a cultural studies course it helps them understand that being able to read and understand complex text doesn't just happen in an English class, but that it happens in

other disciplines as well. They can use the skills that they use from, you know, a fiction lesson like Huck Finn in order to analyze a different type of text.

Student:

So when he is on the river, it's just nature, with himself, and Jim, his close friend. So then it's what transcendentalists wanted -- focus on yourself and nature.

Brenner:

Today as we were talking, the kids already got to transcendentalists without me even having to bring them up. We just took the discussion from there.

Student:

On the river, it's like transcendentalism, but if you look at the shore, it's kind of like realism.

Student:

Though there was that one instance on the really big raft with all those rafters on it, when the old man was just telling the story about the haunted barrel. That brought back some elements of dark romanticism because it just shows that like how on the inside we all have that dark place that we just don't want to think about, I mean you know, within ourselves.

Tori:

When I listen to other people in my group or in my class, then I think about, okay, they're coming from this perspective. I may need to think about it that way. Or add onto my idea about what they've said.

Student:

So I think that's like what Mark Twain says. Even if, like, you're in that state of happiness, you still have to face the facts that there are things that are happening around you.

Brenner:

All right, why don't we start with the river group? You said you were ready!

Students:

Yeah.

Brenner:

All right, so tell me what is the river, what is Twain trying to tell us by using the setting of the river?

Student:

On the river he starts learning no one is, like, over him and no one is, like, saying, "Oh, you should do this, you should do that." And he can make decisions for himself.

Brenner:

Is there anything bad about the river?

Ethan:

There are some bad things on the river, but nowhere near as much as on the shore.

Brenner:

So Ethan, what do you think that Twain's trying to tell us with those bad things?

Ethan:

Too much freedom. I mean, having that much freedom can allow some bad things to happen – like just lawlessness and such. I mean it can't be a perfect world ever.

Brenner:

Lawlessness like the raftsmen?

Ethan:

Mm-hmm.

Brenner:

Definitely. How about the land group?

Student:

I kind of like made this little analogy. Like, I thought maybe the shore symbolizes prison, or jail, or whatnot. Because in prison you go there for bad things, and I guess like... the widow, Miss Watson, trying to civilize him, that's like him going to jail, but really it's not going to jail. It's actually teaching him lessons and stuff, but he doesn't like it there.

Brenner:

There's a lot of right answers out there. What counts is if you can support your answer with evidence from the text and say, "Okay, I think this might be it. I can tell you why I think that's why it might be it because of A, B, and C that I found in the text."

Student:

What she said about the whole jail thing, it's kind of like when he goes to the shore, it's his one phone call a day. Because... because like, you know, he's getting away from the widow and Miss Watson to his dad, and then after his dad, he goes to Jim, and then like after Jim, you know, it's...

Brenner:

He kind of gets passed from one group to the other. And that's actually a great transition to tomorrow's lesson because we're going to talk about how he develops and grows with each interaction that he has, right?

After class they're going to have to compare their knowledge that they gained today with their previous knowledge of the transcendentalists and that movement. And so that way I can check their understanding so that I know that not only, you know, the feedback that I get from the louder kids in class, I can know that every quiet kid also understood what we were doing today, too.