

# DOUG LEMOV'S FIELD NOTES

Reflections on teaching, literacy, coaching, and practice.

## 05.01.18 TEACH BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE? YES! BUT WHAT TYPE? STEVE CHIGER ON 4 KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE



There are more things in heaven and earth...

*We've had a series of great conversations this year with our colleague **Steve Chiger**, Director of 5-12 Literacy at Uncommon Schools. Topic: Knowledge and how to infuse more of it, more successfully into English lessons. One of the challenges of knowledge of course is that all knowledge is not equal. Some things are more important than others. After one of our conversations Steve sent along some further thoughts—spurred by a unit he was building on Hamlet—in which he reflected brilliantly on the different types of knowledge and their role in the English classroom. We thought it was so useful we asked him to write a guest post summarizing his thoughts. He writes....*

# DOUG LEMOV'S FIELD NOTES

Reflections on teaching, literacy, coaching, and practice.

## Scaffolding an information architecture for Hamlet

Imagine you are a prisoner locked in a faraway tower. Your guard – a sporting type – has made the following enticement to escape: you may ask him one question and take one key from his 10-key ring. 3 keys are gold, 3 are silver, 3 are bronze, and one is made of rusty brass. If you can open your cell, you can freely leave. (The only question you cannot ask is which key opens the cell. Too easy, he harrumphs.)

By now, you're probably trying to recall what you know about jailers' riddles, the kind that appear in sweeping French adventure literature. Where do you start? What's the most important information?

As we built the *Hamlet* unit, it occurred to us that teachers face a similar challenge.

We know that knowledge can supercharge comprehension and analysis. There is good and growing work that speaks to varying the type and difficulty of texts, as well as embedding this information throughout the study of a target text. But we also know not all knowledge is equal. Not even close. If I go out for Thai food, the knowledge that I'm allergic to peanuts is of much higher value than, say, the relative location of Bangkok.

In that spirit, we reasoned there was probably a hierarchy for how we should prioritize embedded non-fiction in our unit. In order:

- Knowledge for **access** – What do students need to access *today's reading*?
- Knowledge for unit **goals** – What do students need to succeed in *this unit*?
- Knowledge for **cohesion** – How can this unit help students build a picture of the world?
- Knowledge for **exposure** – What other related topics might be compelling for study?

**Knowledge for Access** – At the most immediate level of the text, students need to understand the words on the page. With Shakespeare, texts tend to be at their most helpful: often footnoting Elizabethan parlance where it is trickiest. Still, even a well annotated text might still pose a series of problems:

- **Word knowledge** – Are there vocabulary or idiomatic expressions that cannot be inferred from context and which impact meaning?
- **World knowledge** – Some concepts are needed to make sense of a scene. If you don't know anything about how kings get chosen, it's hard to see why Hamlet might be upset with Claudius.
- **Technical literary knowledge** – What's the difference between an aside and a soliloquy? Why might one character speak in prose and another in verse? There's some foundational knowledge about how Elizabethan drama (or any other genre) works that students need as a starting place.
- **Allusions** – Do students know what it means to say that Old King Hamlet compares to Claudius as Hyperion to a satyr? As my Renaissance Drama professor quipped in college, "the more you know, the more jokes you get."



# DOUG LEMOV'S FIELD NOTES

Reflections on teaching, literacy, coaching, and practice.

---

**Knowledge for Unit Goals** – The next most important type of knowledge would likely target what students need to know to best prepare them for the unit’s destination assessment – for example by providing any context that would assist in their ability to interpret a text. Let’s imagine our unit is focused on a common question teachers ask about *Hamlet*: Why does Hamlet delay?

- **Knowledge for interpretation** – Hamlet doesn’t believe the ghost initially, but his response becomes more complicated when we consider that the Elizabethan answer to “Are ghosts real?” depends very much on whether one is a Protestant or Catholic. Hamlet isn’t necessarily hesitating because he’s simply tragically hesitant. He’s been studying at Wittenberg, Martin Luther’s university... so he’s most surely going to have real reservations about whether this ghost can be trusted.

**Knowledge for Cohesion** – Knowledge is most sticky for students when it isn’t isolated facts but incorporated into existing schema – what they know about Shakespeare’s England, what they know about literature, what they know about history and myth. Because this is less urgent for the demands of the immediate unit, it often gets overlooked. But it shouldn’t.

Knowledge for cohesion is what helps us make sure that we have a place to “put” what we learn when we’re reading a text. It prevents embedded non-fiction from becoming isolated experiences and pushes the books we study into the grand, global discourse. Here’s a place where there is considerable choice for a teacher to explore.

- **Historical and Political context** – What was Elizabethan society like? Knowing the rights and roles of women help us better understand Ophelia or Gertrude.
- **Geographic context** – Just where are Denmark and Norway? How far were they from England and each other? (For the typical Elizabethan, is setting the play there the equivalent of Shakespeare saying “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...?”)
- **Authorial context** – What do we know about Shakespeare the writer (esp. if students have read other plays by him)? What motifs does he often use in his writing?
- **Philosophical context** – What ideas were shaping the world as this text is being written? What effect might the Copernican revolution or Renaissance Humanism have had on Shakespeare’s audience or this text?
- **Literary context** – What tradition or genre is Shakespeare writing in / rebelling against? Who had Shakespeare likely read and to whom might he be responding? (For example, how is his play an example of revenge tragedy, and how does it break tradition?)

**Knowledge for Exposure** – It’s important to make sure students are regularly exposed to things that may not be directly linked to the unit goal but are linked to the text we’re teaching. This can be extremely valuable for engagement, but it’s probably less valuable for comprehension and analysis.

# DOUG LEMOV'S FIELD NOTES

Reflections on teaching, literacy, coaching, and practice.

- **Similar topics** – Reading texts about madness (or even watching *The Lion King*) would be germane to Hamlet, but if it isn't driving at broader goals for the unit, it's "nice to have" more than "need to have."
- **Others' theories** – We can read literary criticism on *Hamlet* all day, but these aren't essential to text comprehension. For the most part, they're helpful *after* students have had the chance to read and digest themselves. This becomes an exercise in comprehension post facto, pushing students back into the text to reconsider their own thinking.
  - *Note: One hidden effect of reading other literary criticism during a text is that it points students to lines and moments that often receive the most critical attention. This has mixed effects: yes, it focuses students on rich lines, but it also denies them agency in locating these themselves.*
- **Just-related texts** – General Shakespearean biographies or diagrams of The Globe can add texture and color to students' knowledge, but if they aren't connected to unit inquiries, take care these don't crowd out more urgent topics.

To support the *Hamlet* unit, it felt like those categories captured the types and amounts of information we needed to supply: first came knowledge for **access**, then knowledge for **unit goals**, then for **cohesion**, then for **exposure**. There's no required percentage or order for each category – that depends a bit on the unit and the text. Still, we found it was worth looking at the information in a unit to see if it was lopsided and, if so, where we might put our fingers on the scale.

Back to our tower and the impossible riddle.

Looking carefully around the room, you feel ready with a plan. You ask the guard: what's the combination to the lock? It is, after all, a numeric dial.

Striding triumphantly to freedom, you recall your literary knowledge about stories like this. There's always a moral, and it's often the last sentence. *A little information can go a long way – provided it's the right information.*



background knowledge, hamlet, Knowledge, steve chiger