

Polar Opposites: A Strategy for Guiding Students' Critical Reading and Discussion

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When students display genuine interest in critically discussing a topic, content teaching becomes particularly rewarding. But reading assignments, however provocative, do not automatically lead to stimulating class discussion. Students are much more accustomed to someone else, namely the teacher, doing their critical reading for them.

The ideal classroom environment is one in which all students receive instruction that leads them to engage actively in critical reading. Polar Opposites assists the teacher in orchestrating a critical discussion (Bean and Baldwin, 2007). The following discussion and demonstration of Polar Opposites reveals how it is designed to guide students toward participation in critical reading and discussion of expository and narrative selections. Before introducing Polar Opposites, we want to briefly discuss critical reading.

Definitions of critical reading abound, but we prefer the straightforward assertion that critical reading involves analytic thinking in order to evaluate of what is read. Indeed, this statement encompasses many of the critical reading skills students need to develop. These include detecting author viewpoint, distinguishing fact from opinion, and assessing propaganda. Moreover, this view closely parallels an interactive view of the reading process. Reading is seen as a contract between author and reader, in which the reader constructs meaning by the use of prior knowledge and the clues provided in a text.)

Thus, students need to acquire a sense that meaning, especially accurate meaning, is not the exclusive province of a text author.

Polar Opposites

Polar Opposites is an adaptation of the semantic differential scale for measuring attitudes toward reading and other topics. After reading a selection, students are asked to react to a particular character or piece of information along contrasting dimensions such as “happy” versus “sad,” or “likely” versus “unlikely.” These unambiguous ratings then provide a concrete basis for discussing the text selection and supporting one’s rating by referring back to examples in the text.

Three steps are involved in devising a Polar Opposites lesson:

Step One

After a careful reading of the selection, develop four or five polar opposite items with five lines between the positive and negative poles. For example:

Some managers are . . .

Open Minded_____Dogmatic

Step Two

After students have read or listened to a selection, have them place a check mark (✓) on the space they feel is most representative of the character or information being discussed.

Step Three

Have students defend their rating by referring to specific examples or sections of the text selection. Polar Opposites gives even the most reticent students some basis for participating in a discussion.

The following Polar Opposites lesson demonstrates the strategy with informative expository text.

Sample Polar Opposites Lesson

Directions: After you have read the selection, consider each item below. Place a check mark (✓) closest to the word that reflects your view. We will base our discussion of the selection on these items.

The Great Gecko Gang

Lizards can be amazing in many different ways. And the group of lizards called geckos may be the most amazing of all.

There are over 660 kinds of geckos, and they can be found on every continent except Antarctica. They live in jungles, deserts, swamps—usually where it’s warm year round.

Of all the world’s lizards, geckos are the only ones with a voice. Some chirp, some croak, some squeak, and one even barks like a dog. Scientists aren’t sure why geckos make noises. Maybe it’s to tell other geckos to stay out of their territory.

In parts of the tropics, people may have geckos as “house guests.” At night they come out to gobble up insect pests that gather near lights.

Geckos have been getting around very well for millions of years. And most seem to be surviving just fine in a world full of people.

1. Most people feel geckos are...
cute_____pests
2. Gecko tee shirts and other gift products are...
attractive_____faddish
3. Geckos are_____creatures.
complex_____simple

In a class discussion following students’ rating of the three statements, we would expect that the first one might receive a negative response from people who have been awakened by the sharp chirping of a gecko. Similarly, those students who simply don’t like lizards and other unusual creatures might rate them closer to the “pests” label. However, it’s equally possible that geckos could receive a “cute” rating from students based on their familiarity with gecko tee shirts or an interest in scientifically studying unusual creatures. The important part of this process is not the actual rating but a student’s (or small group of students’) defense of the position chosen. That is, *why* did a student view geckos as “pests” if that is how a student responded to this item.

The last item might serve as a springboard to cooperative projects aimed a further researching gecko behavior and functioning. For example, this article indicates that “scientists aren’t sure why geckos make noises.” Yet it is entirely possible that gecko

researchers somewhere have some data to show why they produce the clicking and chirping sounds that sometimes irritate people. Thus, Polar Opposites can provide the impetus for further study and writing projects that extend and evaluate information provided by a single source.

Polar Opposites and Ambiguous Text

Text that contains glittering generalities and vague language lends itself to critical scrutiny with Polar Opposites. The following geography passage illustrates the development of polar opposite items designed to probe ambiguous language.

Directions: A captain who sailed the South Pacific recorded these words in his log. Use the Polar Opposites statements that follow to describe your view of Timmini. Place a check mark (✓) on the space closest to the word you feel describes your view.

Monday, May 3, 1989. Still anchored in Ballah Bay, Timmini. Data about Timmini: Approximately 2,400 inhabitants. Approximately 1000 miles from its nearest neighbor, Hawaii. Sunshine averages about 360 days per year, average temperature 90 degrees F. Wind blows every day from Northeast to Southwest, average velocity 20 miles per hour.

1. Timmini is . . .
populated_____unpopulated
accessible_____isolated
2. Timmini's climate is . . .
gentle_____harsh

The passage uses vague terms such as “approximately” and “average.” Yet the data about Timmini suggest that it is relatively unpopulated and quite isolated. Its climate might be harsh to some people and ideal for others. It appears to be a hot, windy atoll, isolated from the rest of the world.

Polar Opposites can be used to stimulate writing, especially when it is in response to vague text like the Timmini passage. For example, you could advise students to act in the role of a Timmini travel agent, espousing its many charms to a tourist clientele. Or, if they viewed Timmini in a negative light, they might act in the role of a rival island resort. They could write advertising copy highlighting their resort's superior offerings.

Regardless of which view students hold about Timmini, they must refer to the passage to defend their rating on each Polar Opposites item. They must focus on the author's use of language with a critical eye for accuracy.

Polar Opposites and Narratives

Polar Opposites works equally well with narrative selections. It is an especially effective strategy for literature that contains characters and relationships that can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, a story seemingly assigned in every existing twelfth grade English class, is just such a story. The story takes place during the “Roaring 20's” and has four major characters. Nick Carraway is the narrator, an individual who matures throughout the story. Jay Gatsby is the character the story revolves around. He is wealthy, having gained his money through unsavory means, and is infatuated (this may be too weak a term) with Daisy Fay Buchanan and all she represents. Daisy is a member of the established wealthy who has

charm but lacks substance. Tom Buchanan is Daisy's husband. He lacks integrity and idealism.

At the end of the story Daisy Buchanan accidentally kills Myrtle, her husband's mistress, in an automobile accident and Tom Buchanan convinces Myrtle's father that Gatsby is at fault. Gatsby is killed by Myrtle's father and the story ends with the Buchanans' life not sufficiently changed while Nick Carraway becomes disillusioned with eastern society and the "established wealthy" that live there. He moves back to the stability and values of the midwest.

The Great Gatsby is a powerful, complex story. Polar Opposites can be effectively applied to a class discussion in a carefully developed instructional sequence that moves from fairly obvious foundational information in the story to higher level thematic criticism.

Step One

After students have read the story, or an appropriate section of the story, present them with a series of polar opposites for *The Great Gatsby*. The following would be good examples that deal with major characters in the story:

1. Nick Carraway was a(n) person.

dishonest

1

2

3

4

honest

5

2. Daisy Fay Buchanan was of Gatsby's affection.

unworthy

1

2

3

4

worthy

5

3. Nick Carraway Jay Gatsby.

despised

1

2

3

4

respected

5

4. Gatsby was

selfish

1

2

3

4

giving

5

5. It was for Henry Gatz to be proud of his son.

inappropriate

1

2

3

4

appropriate

5

Step Two

Do the first polar opposite for the students. Indicate that you would probably circle number four because, from the first chapter, Carraway attempted to be non-judgmental and honest in how he views others. In fact, on the first page he states that he was born with a sense of the "fundamental decencies." All through the story he is generally honest in his view of his interactions with others. However, you would not circle number five because at the end of the story Nick knows that it is Daisy Fay Buchanan who drove the car that killed Myrtle Wilson and he did not report this to the authorities.

Explain to students that each time they complete a polar opposite they must be able to support the number they circled. In this way, students gain knowledge of the polar opposite process.

Step Three

Complete the second polar opposite together as a class. The class will probably have mixed views about Gatsby and Daisy. Guide the students to find appropriate support for both sides of the argument. Lead them to see that what is important is not necessarily the number that is circled but the support that is supplied. This support can come from the text **and** prior knowledge. During the group discussion phase, it is important to call on a variety of students. One of the strengths of Polar Opposites is that students have a concrete basis for discussion. They gain a great deal from the learning strategies of their classmates. They often discover more effective procedures for gathering knowledge than those they had previously employed. One effective strategy in group discussion, if not overused, is to have individual students read aloud evidence they found in the selection to support their decisions.

Step Four

Do the third and fourth opposites in cooperative groups. Give special praise to those groups locating strong support for agreed upon assumptions.

Step Five

Have students complete the remaining polar opposites independently. As they complete their responses, check to see that they have all responded by putting a check in a reasonable location. It is this step that commits students to the selection they are reading. Toward this end, provide students with plenty of time to think about their responses. They need to understand that they must base their decision on support located within the story. They need time to reflect on what they have read, and even to search back through the selection for evidence that supports their response.

Step Six

As students become more sophisticated in their use of Polar opposites, the strategy can be used in a critical, evaluative manner. Polar opposites such as the following can help students examine literature in a more critical manner.

The Great Gatsby had a plot.

believable				unbelievable
1	2	3	4	5
<i>The Great Gatsby</i> paralleled Fitzgerald's own life.				
does				does not
1	2	3	4	5

As always, the essential step in the process is that students support their decisions with evidence presented in the story, as well as with the prior knowledge they bring to the selection. If students function effectively at this level they are truly becoming critical readers.

In summary, Polar Opposites for narrative and expository selections can be an excellent means of engaging students in critical discussion. It guides students to naturally seek support for judgments they have made about key characters, content, or concepts within a written selection.

References

Bean, T. W., Readence, J. E., & Baldwin, R. S. (2007). *Content area reading: An integrated approach* (9th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.