

Identify Effective Reading Entry Points to Guide Students Toward Whole-Book Reading: Illuminating The Ordinary World to Achieve the Sublimation from Perception to Rationality

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Abstract: Regarding whole-book reading, the newly revised General Senior High School Chinese Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020) lists “Whole-Book Reading and Discussion” as the first among the 18 learning task groups, highlighting its undeniable importance. However, in the information age, fast-food-style reading, superficial reading, and fragmented reading have become the norm for many students. Such cursory reading is detrimental to cultivating students’ holistic awareness, failing to expand their reading horizons or help them build experience in reading whole books. In contrast, whole-book reading is crucial for grasping the essence of classic works. The key to whole-book reading lies in making students willing to read, enjoy reading, and delve deeply into the text. Teachers can facilitate the smooth progress of whole-book reading by delivering excellent introduction classes, conducting appreciation sessions, carefully designing tasks, and organizing guided inquiry and exchange activities. Only when students find joy in reading can core competencies be truly realized.

Keywords: Whole-book reading; Reading expectation; The Ordinary World; Strategies; Effectiveness

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1. Introduction

The General Senior High School Chinese Curriculum Standards ^[1] clearly state that whole-book reading and discussion aim to expand reading horizons, build experience in reading whole books, develop personalized reading methods, and enhance reading and appreciation abilities. Lu Yao’s *The Ordinary World* is a novel that many people read repeatedly. Despite its length of over one million characters, *The Ordinary World* has a charm that makes readers unable to put it down ^[2]. The book focuses on the lives and fates of ordinary people during the great social transformation from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. The changes in northern Shaanxi rural areas over more than a decade, the struggle stories of the two brothers Sun Shaoping and Sun Shao’an, and the ups and

downs of characters from families like the Suns, Tians, and Jins leave a deep impression. From these ordinary yet endearing characters, we see the resilience and vitality of life, as well as the richness and beauty of the world. Beyond emotional resonance, the book's explorations of era, rural life, love, struggle, suffering, and growth are thought-provoking. Senior high school students are in a critical period of forming their worldviews, outlooks on life, and values. The warmth and unwavering upward spirit conveyed in *The Ordinary World* can comfort and inspire young readers, providing strong spiritual support for high school students. It is believed that after reading, students will perceive the unyielding faith in characters like Sun Shaoping, Sun Shao'an, and Tian Runye, who emerge from hardships with unwavering resolve^[3]. The main characters in *The Ordinary World* play a positive role in shaping students' three outlooks. As the last group using the old textbook, we have more flexibility in choosing materials for whole-book reading. At the end of the first semester of Grade Two, when planning the second semester's curriculum, our teaching team selected *The Ordinary World*, which is related to the optional novel course, as the material for whole-book reading. One of the holiday assignments was to read *The Ordinary World* first, laying the groundwork for improving the quality of whole-book reading in the next semester.

2. Deliver an excellent book recommendation class to build students' reading expectations

The Ordinary World is a masterpiece that Lu Yao spent six years writing, almost devoting his life to it. It is highly recommended for senior high school students. Due to the classic nature of this work and its inspiring effect on students who are about to enter the third year of senior high school, *The Ordinary World* was chosen as the whole-book reading material for the second semester of the second year of senior high school. Vacations are prime time for reading. If students' strong interest in reading is not aroused, their vacation reading will basically be a mere formality. To make students read actively and voluntarily, it is essential to deliver an excellent recommendation class before the vacation to build their reading expectations. Before the vacation, two students who were deeply touched after reading the book were asked to write sincere recommendation speeches based on their reading experiences during the weekend. They were encouraged to find good perspectives and use PPTs to arouse their classmates' interest in reading. The personal testimonies of peers have a certain driving effect, but teachers still need to find other angles to recommend the book and fuel students' reading enthusiasm. As a "die-hard fan" of *The Ordinary World*, I shared the gains and influences the book brought to me. This study also cited statistical data showing that it has been the most borrowed book in university libraries over the past 30 years to prove its popularity among college students. In addition, the study quoted comments from celebrities to trigger their strong interest in reading. Students' reading expectations are crucial. In many cases, the key to deciding whether to read a book lies in the effectiveness of the recommendation. Obviously, the one-class session aroused the interest of most students. Before the vacation, some students asked about the book's edition, and some even contacted their parents to place orders online immediately. With reading expectations, the reading of the whole book has a good start and a high-quality follow-up.

3. Appreciation and analysis: guiding students' focus in reading

Students' holiday reading is a process of overall perception. Some students have finished reading all three books, while others are still in progress. From what I know, this first reading is more of a browse, a skimming focused on grasping the plot. Although they may be touched, it might only stay at a perceptual level; without depth, there

will be no profound impression. I decided to first hold an appreciation and analysis class to demonstrate and guide students from skimming to intensive reading.

The old People's Education Press textbook included an excerpt from *Ordinary World* entitled "Visiting a Guest" ^[4]. The excerpt mainly tells the story of Sun Shaoping, who was in extreme poverty when he first entered high school, receiving an invitation from Tian Runye to visit her second uncle's home—her uncle was the director of the Revolutionary Committee at that time. This made Sun Shaoping, who had a strong sense of self-respect in his adolescence, reluctant to accept the invitation. He thought about how he couldn't even afford the third-grade cafeteria dishes and was wearing tattered, ill-fitting clothes, which further strengthened his resolve not to go. I printed out this excerpt for the students and asked them to find the sentences describing Sun Shaoping before, during, and after the visit, to feel his psychological changes. I prompted them: "If you were Sun Shaoping, would you feel as anxious and uneasy as he did after receiving the invitation? Would he feel the same way if he were visiting Hao Hongmei's home?" The students found the relevant sentences, summarized his psychological changes, and responded enthusiastically to the two hypothetical questions, stating their reasons. Being around the same age made it easier for students to understand Sun Shaoping's nervousness and awkwardness—this expression of inferiority yet self-respect was the result of the gap in social status and family background. Appreciating the text, learning to summarize, and being willing to express and communicate are also key abilities in language construction that need to be cultivated. This visit, which filled him with alarm and embarrassment, also became a precious life experience for him. Later, when Sun Shaoping went to visit Gu Yangmin, who came from an affluent family, he was much more composed. The second thinking task followed: "How can one get rid of life's predicaments and inferiority?" After the students thought about it, they generally reached a consensus: to become better, enrich one's life experience, and associate more with excellent people. Students have also begun to reflect on their own lives. However, vague thoughts always lack a down-to-earth sense of reality. The third question served as evidence: "In the excerpt, Sun Shaoping was nervous and inferior during the visit. Does the text mention moments when he was not inferior? If so, what made him feel that way?" The students quickly located the sixth paragraph: "Because he had read many books, many people loved to listen to him tell stories from the books. This made Sun Shaoping very happy, feeling that he was not inferior to others in everything." Some students added: Sun Shaoping won first place in a table tennis competition, played basketball well, later acted in a play, and even went to Huangyuan Prefecture with Tian Xiaoxia to participate in a revolutionary story speech contest. Although his material conditions did not change, these strengths were enough to help him overcome the awkwardness he felt when he first entered school. After gaining more life experience, he served as a labor monitor and a league branch committee member in the class, and was more active than his ordinary classmates. The whole class began to respect him. These additions show how important "reading" and "experience" are in overcoming inferiority and building self-confidence. Through the books he read, Sun Shaoping concluded: "Even the lives of great people are full of suffering, let alone ordinary people?" He had a sense of pride in the face of suffering, and his strong spiritual pursuit made him confident and noble.

Taking this opportunity, the study guided students to establish an outlook on life that does not resent suffering or feel inferior because of poverty. The environmental descriptions that students often overlook are also a key focus of appreciation. In excellent works, descriptions of scenery and plot complement each other. The desolation of the mountains during the Waking of Insects, the overwhelming yellow gales before Qingming Festival, and the fresh greenery on the streets and riverbanks afterward—all these set off Sun Shaoping's situation and psychology. After the visit, Sun Shaoping felt the warm wind and smelled the fresh scent of mud and grass; readers seemed to feel relaxed and happy for him. Good scenery descriptions always add luster to a

work. Character psychology, language summarization, role reversal, plot connection, value shaping, and the role of scenery—these are all aspects that students tend to overlook. Through guided appreciation, we set an example for students' intensive reading, guide their focus in reading, help them savor the essence, improve their reading and appreciation abilities, and open up a path for their growth through reading^[5].

4. Taking sorting out important characters as a clue to highlight the integrity of reading content

It is necessary for whole-book reading to use individual points to drive the overall understanding, radiate through the entire book, and establish a sense of integrity. How can we enable students to grasp the entire book without feeling bored? I think selecting an excerpt that includes all important characters is a good approach, and Visiting^[6] is an excellent choice. List the key characters: Sun Shaoping, Sun Shaoan, Tian Runye, and Tian Xiaoxia, and ask students to create a resume-style mind map on an A3 paper with a well-planned layout, briefly writing down the important experiences of these characters. These four characters can cover the more important figures in the book. This task must be based on reading the entire book, as students will create the mind map according to the content of the whole book. Most students can complete it in the reading class a week later, and some works are particularly outstanding. Students will re-read the novel to sort out the information, summarize the important experiences, and deliberate on the wording. Due to the limited space, they have to delete some experiences and retain the most important ones. This process not only requires students to have an overall grasp of the novel but also exercises their abilities of sorting, summarizing, distinguishing, comparing, and expressing accurately. Some students' mind maps are quite designed, reflecting the uniqueness of their thinking and aesthetics. In short, sorting out the experiences of important characters is a particularly effective task. It improves students' abilities in cross-reading, intensive reading, sorting, summarizing, and expressing, and better embodies the "wholeness" in whole-book reading.

5. Using inquiry and communication as a breakthrough to enhance the effectiveness of reading strategies

Whole-book reading not only focuses on the integrity of the work's content but also emphasizes the effectiveness of inquiry and communication, as well as the quality of in-depth content exploration^[7]. Inquiry and communication are driven by specific tasks, and attention should also be paid to the gradient of task levels, so that students are willing to complete the tasks, deeply understand the work, and form their own unique insights into it. For inquiry and communication, the study arranged 3 class hours. In the first class hour, the focus was on reading and sharing. Students recited classic passages and could read them in role within groups; they could also talk about the characters or scenes that touched them the most and explain the reasons. Some students chose classic passages that were also the ones that touched them. For example, in the first chapter, Sun Shaoping deliberately delayed getting his meal until the end to avoid possible ridicule from others. The recitation, combined with the explanation of the reasons, made people both sad and genuinely understand a young man's self-esteem. The ancient Kyrgyz song from *The White Ship* that Sun Shaoping and Tian Xiaoxia recited during their first meeting on Sparrow Mountain is also a favorite among students^[8]; The throbbing of youth is always green and beautiful. To prevent puppy love, I timely guided them that this vague love was based on their shared interest in reading and their drive to pursue progress, attracting each other. The vitality of life lies in constantly moving forward. If

Sun Shaoping had been content with the status quo or slacked off while working as a laborer, he would not have won Tian Xiaoxia's favor.

Therefore, a beautiful relationship is about mutual appreciation, understanding, achievement, and growing together. Tian Xiaoxia sacrificed herself to save others in the flood, yet Shaoping still kept their appointment alone. His inner monologue has become a regret in the hearts of many; Tian Runye returned to Li Xiangqian, who had lost his legs^[9], and Runye's kindness was moving. The time for reading and sharing in one class was insufficient, and the students were still very enthusiastic. Interest is the best teacher, so while their enthusiasm was still high, I assigned the task for the second class hour: in groups, discuss the character you most admire or have the deepest impression of in *The Ordinary World*. Some groups made PPTs and even intercepted clips from the TV drama adaptation of *The Ordinary World*^[10]. Cross-media appreciation is a favorite way for students, and in class, they spoke freely, creating a good atmosphere. The third class hour: students could choose one of the two tasks to complete. Task 1: Write about "Who in the Ordinary World do you most want to be like? Why?" Task 2: Create a scenario: Find your ideal life partner or close friend in *The Ordinary World*, write a monologue, and deliver it on your birthday^[11]. These two tasks in the third class hour aim to let students stand from the overall perspective of the whole book, learn to appreciate characters, explore the shining points in them, complete the dialogue between people and the book, and between people and themselves, while also integrating students' reading and writing.

Judging from the implementation results, these three class hours were very efficient. They not only aroused enthusiasm for inquiry and communication but also exercised students' abilities to read and comprehend, read and appreciate, and read and write, greatly improving the effectiveness of reading^[12].

6. Taking thematic research as an interest point and focusing on the process of reading exploration

Students always have blind spots in their reading and thinking. Teachers need to list out the overlooked areas, and students can also add to them. Finally, in the form of a special topic, the research theme is determined according to the interests of the group. I have listed themes such as "the influence and change of the great era on people's destiny," "the role of environmental description in *The Ordinary World*," "if Xiaoxia had not sacrificed, who would make Sun Shaoping happier, Huiying sister-in-law or Tian Xiaoxia," "interpretation of the life attitudes of characters in *The Ordinary World* in the face of hardships and difficulties," "my view on the good and evil of human nature in the work," and "exploration of customs and folk customs in Shuangshui Village." These themes will lead the whole-book reading to go deeper and sublimate students' thinking^[13].

The most prominent spiritual charm of *The Ordinary World* is inspiration. The courage of ordinary people to fight against hardships and their drive to forge ahead on the road of life are the spiritual motivations that young students need^[14]. The fiery youth is infinitely beautiful, and the struggling youth is also a good medicine to resist the mediocrity of life. Only by reading the whole book, intensive reading, and exploration can we better obtain spiritual nourishment from this work. An effective reading entry point is the key to guiding students to read in depth. How to make this book shine on "ordinary life" requires enthusiasm for reading and appropriate reading strategies. In addition to skimming, it is also necessary to demonstrate the key points of intensive reading and appreciation in class. Through sharing, communication and activity exploration, students can not only stay on the surface of the plot but also have rational cognition and thinking. The combination of reading, writing and thinking can enable students to go deep into the text and form their unique insights. When reading the whole

book, we should not only see the whole but also perceive the parts. Only by combining the two can we grasp the essence of the book and improve students' reading and appreciation ability^[15].

7. Conclusion

Through practical exploration of entry points for reading "The Ordinary World", the study observe that this tiered reading guidance not only achieves a sublimation from emotional resonance with "Sun Shaoping's growth trajectory" to critical analysis of "the urban-rural dual structure" and further to the value reconstruction of "the philosophy of suffering", but also confirms the teaching value of reading the entire book. It serves not only as a process of cultivating literary literacy but also as a path to realizing life education.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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