Connections: Investigating Reality and Language Arts

The Model introduced in *Connections: Investigating Reality* [1]*(CIR)* allows learners to apply its insights and organizing scheme across the whole realm of knowledge. Below are some additional investigations in the field of language arts, illustrating the range of possibilities. Comments for teachers or mentors are marked "**TN**"

Investigation: Literature

> ***Choose a story or account written at a different time and/or place from the present (for example, a work of fiction written in 19th century America or England). As you read it, find and list clues that identify significant parts of the environment and demography (e.g. population density) where the story or account takes place. List ways of acting that differ from those usually followed in present-day America.***
>
> ***Which of these ways of acting probably grew out of the environment (e.g. use of horses and horse-drawn vehicles)? Which ways of acting likely grew out of shared ideas that were different from those in present-day America? Identify the possible shared ideas that "explain" those differing ways of acting.***

TN: This approach allows use of existing classroom resources, such as passages from standard literature textbooks. Using the *CIR* Model categories for analysis—environment, demography, patterns of action, shared ideas—adds a crucial layer of active learning.

Similar analytical exercises may be used with any available literature and other documents, art, or artifacts from *any* source in *any* historical period. Making sense of the creative products of members of a society requires an understanding of the culture of that society. Analysis using the Model categories developed in *CIR* provides "windows" into that culture. There are, of course, universal elements in art and literature that touch people across societal boundaries, but appreciation of any product of human creation is enhanced by an understanding of its cultural context.

The activity, of course, will proceed more smoothly with some pieces of literature than with others. As with virtually all such activities, organizing learners into small groups for shared investigation will likely enhance the learning experience. Using the *CIR* Model framework adds depth and clarity to what's learned, provides mental organizers, and increases analytical thinking skills. It can be repeated over and over, using contrasting stories, biographies or other sources.

As students become adept at identifying the Model elements in each selection of literature, we suggest adding questions about probable relationships between the four categories. For example, "You've identified the population density where this story takes place. How does this affect ways of working and making a living? What effect would population density and kinds of work have on attitudes of these people toward government?"

[1] http://www.marionbrady.com/CIR.asp

Investigation: "Fog index" patterns

Some writing is easy to read and understand; some is difficult. Many people would find it hard to understand an article in *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*. An article in a magazine for kids is certain to be easy.

Long words and long sentences make reading more difficult. Several ways have been developed to measure "readability." One fairly simple way of calculating this is called the "fog index." Here's an Internet link to a step-by-step procedure for calculating "fog indices:"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunning_fog_index

Choose three pieces of writing and calculate the "fog index" for each: (1) The first paragraph or two from a front-page article in a local newspaper, (2) a similar-sized sample of writing from a book or magazine you think is "difficult," and (3) a sample from your own writing. Include enough sentences to add to about 100 total words in each of the three samples.

TN: Some teacher/mentor guidance in learning the process of calculating fog indices may be required. Printing out the procedure as a handout, and working through a couple of examples with the class or group will be helpful.[2]

(Additional questions): If a writer has a hidden goal of wanting to impress other people with his or her knowledge, what effect might this have on the fog index? If a sample of writing has a low fog index, is it sure to be easy to understand? Explain. Could a very low fog index cause problems? If so, what kind?

[2] The original link we gave for this had a garbled procedure. Sorry!

Investigation: Clarity in translation

TN: This investigation is an "active-mode" communications skill exercise. It relates most closely to the Model component of "environment," increasing the ability of learners to both see, and describe what they see, verbally and graphically.

In high school English classes taught by Marion Brady early in his career, he removed the housing from the classroom's manual pencil sharpener, and asked learners to generate a written description. He then read several of the descriptions aloud to the class, and, as he read each one, drew a picture on the blackboard based on the words. As might be expected, resemblances between the drawings and the actual pencil sharpener were minimal—and the lesson was memorable. This exercise is derived from that experience.

The cognitive process of "translation" converts information from one form to another. Describing a visualized (or imagined) scene in words is an example. One language arts skill related to clarity is *precision* in performing this translation. This investigation exercises that skill, and the opposite skill of translating words into images, in a version of the old parlor game called, variously, "Chinese whispers," "gossip," "telephone," etc.

A page of abstract diagrams follows. Print out the page, making enough copies so that when they're cut apart, each learner will have one diagram. Use care in passing out the diagrams, so learners aren't likely to see a diagram they'll be reading about later.

In the first part of the investigation, each learner translates her or his diagram into words. In the second part, each learner is given a written description of a diagram prepared by another student, and attempts to recreate the original diagram based **only** on that description. (This will work best if learners aren't told about the second step in advance. Make sure no student gets a written description of a figure she or he has previously seen, and that descriptions and diagrams are labeled with the figure's number.)

Neither translation in this exercise is easy. Comparing the final results with the original figures will indicate problems in translation. Learners, working in small groups, then analyze each set of descriptions and drawings to find reasons for translation errors. The analysis should include determining the extent to which errors are due to inaccurate or incomplete descriptions (first translation), or due to inaccurate graphic interpretation of the writing (second translation).

If the activity is repeated, with each learner starting with a new diagram, a marked difference in the descriptions, and a significant improvement in accuracy of final diagrams is likely.

Applying what's learned to describing real world scenes and events is a logical extension. Describing *events*, of course, requires learners to use all four main categories of the Model.

(Howard Brady, September 2011)

Link to webpage describing *Connections: Investigating Reality:*
http://www.marionbrady.com/CIR.asp

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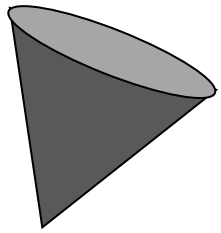

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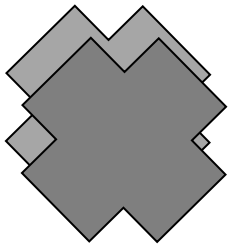

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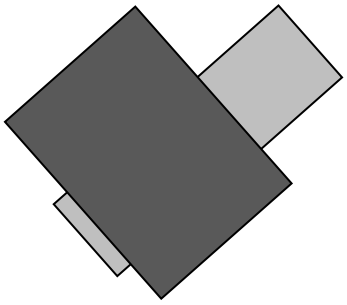

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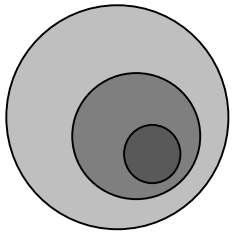

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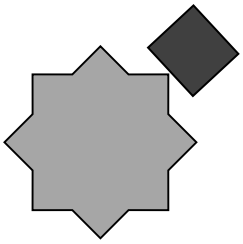

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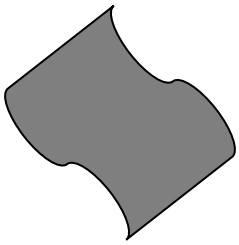

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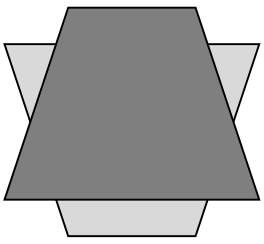
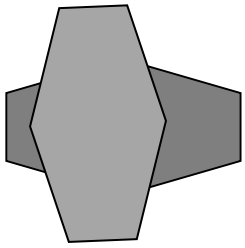
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