

Metacognitive Conversation

Making Thinking Visible

The most important thing I do is begin an ongoing metacognitive conversation about making sense of text. Initially, I model, articulating my own processes as a reader as I read aloud. My students and I begin looking at specific places in the text where we have problems understanding, where we have to slow down, where we are uncertain. We talk about what we might do to figure things out; we test various strategies. We talk about whether or not a particular strategy worked and, if so, what we understand as a result. A lighter tone develops as reading becomes less of a mystery and more of a project that we work on together in class.

—Gayle Cribb, high school history teacher

AT THE HEART of the Reading Apprenticeship classroom is metacognitive conversation: an inquiry into how readers make sense of text. The conversation is both internal, as individual readers observe their own minds in actions, and external, when readers discuss what they are noticing, what they are stumped by, and how they are solving reading problems. In a Reading Apprenticeship classroom, metacognitive conversation about reading is an integrated, ongoing topic of study in a discipline: *How* do we read U.S. history, or biology, or calculus, or Shakespeare?

As teacher Gayle Cribb describes, she and her students become very curious about how their minds are working as they read history. Gayle models by articulating her own reading processes, describing her observations about where she needs to figure something out as well as what she does to resolve confusions. Her students take up this investigation, applying it to their own reading processes and discussing what they are learning, sometimes in pairs or small groups, and sometimes as a class.

In Gayle's experience, metacognitive conversation serves to demystify the reading process for her students. When students learn to be metacognitive about the mental and affective processes they are going through as they read, as they hear and observe how their peers and teacher work through challenging texts, they begin to notice when and where their concentration lapses or their

comprehension breaks down. From there, they learn to be strategic about using cognitive tools to refocus or solve reading problems, becoming active agents of their own learning. Through such talk, members of a classroom community naturally make their thinking visible to each other—available for reflection, reappraisal, and appropriation by others.

Reading Happens in Your Mind

You just stop and be like, “Hey, what does it mean? Wait, let me think. How does it work? What is this sentence trying to tell me.” I don’t think I’ve always done that. I think maybe this year, you could say.

—Hani, grade 10 student

The speaker, Hani, has just reached the point of realizing that when she reads, sentences are trying to tell her something. Hani is not anomalous. A surprisingly large number of students have never realized that reading is not the same as tracking and saying the words on a page. Comments such as the following reveal just how common it is for students to be unaware that text is supposed to have meaning. They relate “reading” with their experience of learning to read in the primary grades—decoding.

“Well, it’s simple. Reading is saying the words you see when you look at a page.” (grade 9)

“My sister is a good reader because she can pronounce everything, even if it’s hard words or big words. She can pronounce it.” (grade 10)

“I think of myself as an ‘average’ reader. I am pretty good at sounding out my words. It just might take me longer than others.” (community college)

Even students who sense a disconnect between “reading” the words and understanding the text don’t necessarily know what to do about it.

“You know sleepwalking? I can move my eyes to the end of the page but not remember anything I read. Like sleepreading.” (grade 9)

“I was busy reading. I don’t know what it was about.” (grade 9)

Metacognitive conversation is a revelation for these students, an introduction to their own and others’ thinking processes. But the value of metacognitive conversation extends to more experienced readers as well—to all readers, in fact. Metacognition makes it possible to take control when reading, to approach increasingly complex texts and a growing range of specialized genres with a sense of efficacy.

BOX 4.1

Exploring Students' Concepts of Reading

PURPOSE

Students will have different ideas of what it means to read. When these beliefs are surfaced and recorded for the whole class, they are available for revision or refinement later, as students learn more about the reading process.

PROCEDURE

- Record on chart paper (and save) students' brainstorming ideas about what it means to be a "good reader." Prompt students as needed:
 - How can you tell if someone is a good reader?
 - Who is someone you consider a good reader? Why?
 - What do you have to do to read science well? Math? Literature? History?
- Do not challenge or "edit" students' ideas. Record all ideas, in students' own words.
- Later, invite students to refer to this initial list and revise or elaborate on their early ideas about reading. For example the class may modify an early idea that "good readers read fast" into a more complex understanding that "good readers ~~read fast~~ change reading speed depending on how difficult the text is for them and how much they know about the topic."

When introducing metacognitive conversation, teachers may want to invite students to surface their initial beliefs about reading, perhaps by exploring what they think reading is. Students' sometimes simple understandings or misconceptions are then available for revision over time, as students gain more experience investigating their reading process. (Box 4.1 describes an activity to help students surface their concepts and beliefs about reading.)

Introducing Metacognition

When you read, there should be a little voice in your head like the storyteller is saying it. And if there's not, then you're just looking at the words.

—LaKeisha, grade 9 student

Students quickly pick up on the concept of metacognition, or thinking about thinking. LaKeisha's academic literacy teacher introduced metacognition in September, and within days LaKeisha was not only using metacognition daily but also explaining it to others. She had learned how to look inside her mind and observe her own thinking processes.

Students' responsiveness to the idea of their own thinking is thrilling for teachers as well. Monica Figueroa, a middle school social studies teacher, was delighted with the way her students took to the practice of thinking about their thinking:

The very first benefit [of Reading Apprenticeship], that I really saw early on, was metacognition, the idea of having them actually think about what they were thinking. It was just so great to me, to have them actually participate in their own brains. That their brains do these miraculous things and they can actually control that! Paying attention to the wheels in their head—knowing that they have wheels—I see the pride growing in them.

Anyone who has worked with adolescents knows that they can be intensely self-absorbed, consumed with questions of individual identity and of their place within their peer group and the world. When we first developed Reading Apprenticeship, we realized that we could use this self-interest to get students thinking about their own reading processes. We thought of this self-absorption as our ally: Why wouldn't adolescent students naturally be motivated to uncover how and what they thought as they read, and to want to compare their thoughts and thinking processes with those of their friends?

Over the years, we have found that most adults have the same fascination with the usually hidden inner workings of their own minds and the minds of others.

Thinking About Thinking

In the previous chapter, we describe an activity in which teachers model thinking aloud as they try to read texts that students bring into class to "stump" them. These are texts the students read comfortably in their lives outside of school, such as computer manuals or song lyrics. In addition to showing students that reading competence is not an absolute state (which their teacher enjoys and they do not, for example), the activity introduces students to a particular kind of metacognitive conversation, the Think Aloud.

Teachers often follow up this initial exposure to thinking about thinking by involving students in a Think Aloud experience that does not involve reading at all, one that allows students to focus almost entirely on metacognition. Such tasks with lower cognitive demands tend to put students at ease with sharing their thinking. (Box 4.2 presents an example of how to introduce students to thinking aloud.) Teachers have invented many other examples appropriate for their contexts and content, including having students think aloud while observing a science experiment.