

Thinking Aloud

The detailed process of making our thinking public by showing students how we construct meaning is called "think aloud" (Davey 1983). The think-aloud shows kids how skillful readers think—how we activate our background knowledge, ask questions, draw conclusions. Steph demonstrated one way to think aloud during her *Up North at the Cabin* mini-lesson. She simply showed students what she was thinking as she read and wrote a comment or two leaving tracks of her thinking. Think-alouds are central to comprehension instruction. It is often by seeing us model our thinking that kids are best able to understand what they need to do as independent readers.

Some think-alouds demonstrate all aspects of the inner conversation we have as we read—our reactions, our questions, our connections, and so on. Others are strategy specific. When we teach kids to wonder and ask questions initially, we focus mostly on the questions we have and the thinking behind them so our students know when, why, and how we ask questions. As a matter of fact whenever we launch a new strategy, we make very explicit the kind of thinking that underlies it.

Too often, we model for our kids without letting them in on the purpose of our demonstration. To counter that, before we begin the lesson, we ask our kids to watch us carefully as we model our thinking and notice what we do as readers. After our demonstration, we ask them to share what they noticed us doing. This focuses their attention, gives them an opportunity to participate, and increases their engagement.

Tips for Thinking Aloud

Share aspects of the inner conversation. To give kids an understanding of how we monitor ongoing comprehension, we share the many thoughts, reactions, connections, confusions, questions that crop up as we read. "In this book, *Gleam and Glow*, I think it would be really scary to have your dad off fighting in a war somewhere like the father in this story is doing." We also share how our attention can flag and our thoughts can stray from the text so that kids will see how we get ourselves back on track. We jot down our thoughts on sticky notes or in the margins to leave tracks of our thinking and stay on top of meaning.

Share how we activate and connect background knowledge. We show kids how we merge what we already know with new information we encounter as we read. "I knew that sharks have big teeth, but they are even bigger than I thought they were. Wow!" We also show how our thinking changes as we read. "I always thought that sharks like to eat people, but now I know that they are very picky eaters."

Share our questions. We demonstrate how questions engage us in thinking about the text, how we read with a question in mind noting that some are answered in the text and others are not. We might ask one question and then show how it leads to others. "Why are the sea otters disappearing? Is there not enough food? Is a predator killing them? Is the water polluted?" In this way, we demonstrate how our questions can lead to a line of thinking that we can follow as we read.

Share our inferences. We model how we can infer in a variety of ways. We share how we infer the meaning of unfamiliar words and concepts using the context. We show how we infer themes in fiction. We show how we use illustrations, photos, and features to draw conclusions in nonfiction. "It says the radio guys on the Titanic were weary. I'm inferring it means they were tired because the next sentence says they had been up all night."

Verbalize confusing points and demonstrate fix-up strategies. We monitor ongoing comprehension and show our reaction when meaning breaks down. "Huh? I don't get this part. This doesn't make sense." And we also show how we use fix-up strategies like rereading or reading on to clarify confusion. After rereading, we might say, "Oh now I get it. I missed that the first time I read."

Share how we sort and sift information to determine important ideas. We can't remember all of the details when we read. So we model how we pick out the information we want to remember. "Boy, there are a lot of details here about photosynthesis. But what's really important is how plants use sunlight to make their food. I can tell that because the writer talks a lot about the sunlight and its relationship to plants."

Sharing Our Own Literacy

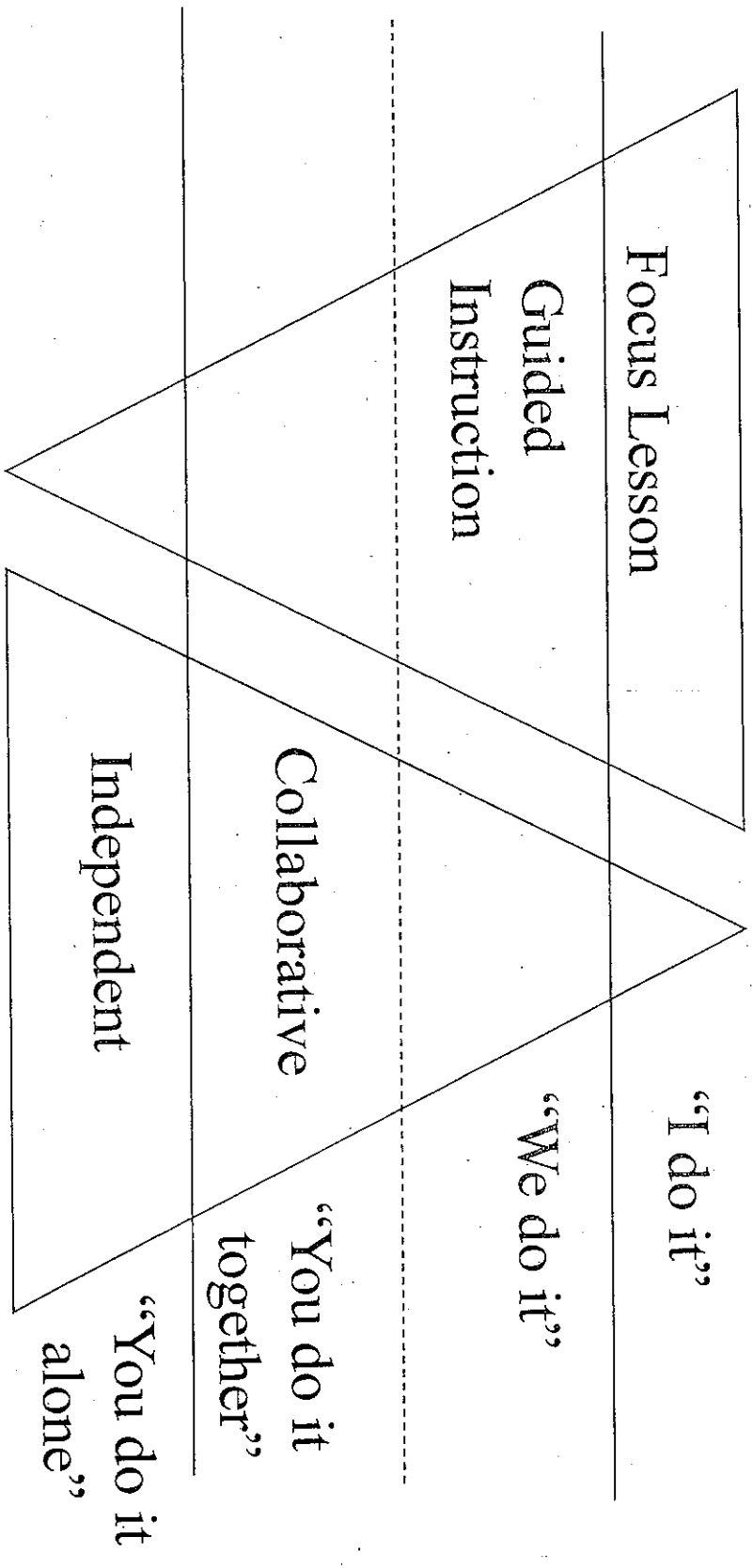
For many years, Don Graves has said that those of us who teach reading must be readers ourselves. As readers, we experience the hoops and hurdles as well as the joys and insights that come with reading; and we can share the struggles as well as the victories with our students. When teachers model their own reading process using their own reading material, kids take note.

When Steph's son, Alex, was in the first grade, he received reading support from Laura Benson, the school reading specialist. Alex, it seemed, was far more interested in discussing ideas and thinking than he was in learning to decode words. A thoughtful teacher, Laura understood the role that interest plays in reading, and she conceived ways to hook Alex on the written as well as the spoken word. A voracious reader to this day, Alex credits the day in first grade when Laura brought in an excerpt from Pat Conroy's *Prince of Tides* as the day reading became important to him. No one had ever shared adult text with him before, and he's never forgotten it.

We bring in magazines, book club books, newspaper articles, essays, and poetry, all sorts of adult real-world reading material to share with kids and model our own reading process. We might have a lot of questions about a new novel so we read a paragraph and show that even though we are proficient readers we still have questions when we read. If we have trouble staying on track with meaning in an article on a topic that is not of great interest to us, we show kids how we refocus our thinking to understand it. We also share books that we are totally passionate about so that our kids can see the importance of reading in our daily lives.

As the custodians of reading instruction, teachers must be readers first. Of all professionals who read, teachers must top the list. Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann drive this point home in their book *Mosaic of Thought* (1997). They remind us that we need to understand reading comprehension strategies ourselves and notice how they play out in our own reading before we can successfully teach them to children.

TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY



STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

A Structure for Instruction that Works

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Writing About Reading

Many of us remember how we highlighted our texts with abandon, went back to study for the test, were blinded by yellow, and had no idea why we highlighted in the first place. Active literacy, by its very definition, requires readers to merge their thinking with the information. Annotating in the margins and jotting thinking on sticky notes gives readers a place to hold their thinking and work through it as well. Recently we came across a document that Harvard University makes available to freshmen to prepare them for academic life. "Interrogating Texts: 6 Reading Habits to Develop in Your First Year at Harvard"

describes how students are expected to read while at Harvard. The suggestions include previewing, annotating, summarizing and analyzing, looking for patterns, contextualizing, and comparing and contrasting. All these techniques contribute to thoughtful reading. But we wanted particularly to share what Harvard says about annotating here, because we have a feeling it may sound very familiar.

From start to finish, make your reading of any text thinking-intensive.

- *First of all: throw away the highlighter in favor of a pen or pencil. Highlighting can actually distract from the business of learning and dilute your comprehension. It only seems like an active reading strategy; in actual fact, it can lull you into a dangerous passivity.*
- *Mark up the margins of your text with WORDS: ideas that occur to you, notes about things that seem important to you, reminders of how issues in a text may connect with class discussion or course themes. This kind of interaction keeps you conscious of the REASON you are reading and the PURPOSES your instructor has in mind. Later in the term, when you are reviewing for a test or project, your marginalia will be useful memory triggers.*
- *Develop your own symbol system: asterisk a key idea, for example, or use an exclamation point for the surprising, absurd, bizarre. . . . Like your marginalia, your hieroglyphs can help you reconstruct the important observations that you made at an earlier time. And they will be indispensable when you return to a text later in the term, in search of a passage, an idea for a topic, or while preparing for an exam or project.*
- *Get in the habit of hearing yourself ask questions—"what does this mean?" "why is he or she drawing that conclusion?" "why is the class reading this text?" etc. Write the questions down (in your margins, at the beginning or end of the reading, in a notebook, or elsewhere). They are reminders of the unfinished business you still have with a text: something to ask during class discussion, or to come to terms with on your own, once you've had a chance to digest the material further, or have done further reading. (Harvard College Library 2007)*

Highlighting can actually "lull you into a dangerous passivity." Who knew?! The people who wrote this document could have read the book you are holding in your hands! But we doubt it. What we do suspect is that they read the research on reading comprehension. Just as teachers all over the country know, kids need to think when they read and jot that thinking down in order to construct meaning and better understand. To read this article in full, head to http://hcl.harvard.edu/research/guides/lamont_handouts/interrogatingtexts.html.

Whereas talk is likely the most immediate way to respond to reading, writing allows readers to really work out their thinking in relation to the text. Most skillful adult readers have developed a way of marking important parts of the text they encounter. When readers jot notes while reading, leaving tracks of their thinking, they are able to clarify confusion, record their questions, answer questions, notice the craft, and so forth.

Text coding. We use text codes as a shorthand way to capture our thinking as we read. We develop a variety of codes with our students, and they go on to create their own. Text coding keeps the reading process interactive and reminds us that reading is active thinking. We often post them in our classroom on an anchor chart for handy reference, using an asterisk for a key idea, an exclamation point for surprising information, and so on. Kids add their own codes on a regular basis; for example, S for *Shocking* was a code that Jake came up with when reading a piece about hurricanes. We don't hand out a canned list of text codes, because kids are unlikely to use them if they have no ownership. We co-construct an anchor chart of the codes and find that kids are much more interested in using them after having helped create them. Some codes that students and teachers have created follow, but this is by no means a complete list.

- R, reminds me of
- T-T, Text to text connection
- L, New learning
- ?, Question
- *, Key idea
- ✱, A lightbulb for new idea
- !, Surprising information
- I, Inference

A word of caution here. Occasionally students will mention that coding text while reading interferes with their train of thought. If that is the case, we suggest that the student read through a section first and then take a few moments to record thoughts and questions on sticky notes. The purpose of text coding is to enhance our students' understanding, not to break their concentration and disrupt meaning.

Margin notes. It's not enough to simply code the text with an R or highlight in yellow. Highlighting all on its own is not active reading. Readers need to mark up the margins of text with words, to remind themselves why they highlighted or underlined. So along with the text codes, highlighting, bracketing, circling, and underlining, we teach kids to make brief margin notes that explain the thinking behind those codes, what was actually going on in their heads when they coded the text.

Sticky notes. Since we can't always write directly on the text, we are grateful for the mistake that resulted in the invention of sticky notes. Stickies are ubiquitous in classrooms today to help kids hold their thinking while reading. And we can't think of a better use of them. To keep track of thinking when reading, kids can write short notes or even use some of the above codes on their sticky notes. Over time we've noticed that where kids might write only a sentence or two on a full piece of paper, they will scrunch many ideas on to a small sticky note. Go figure! What matters here is that these notes give kids an easy, accessible way to monitor their comprehension and leave a record that helps us assess their understanding.

Can be used as formative assessment!

Teachers sometimes ask us, What do you do with all the sticky notes? And our instant answer is that we read them, or at least most of them. From reading them, we can learn about what our kids know, what they have learned, and about their reading process. Sticky notes also guide us as we plan future instruction. We encourage kids to place them in their reading notebooks to inform parent conferences and evaluation efforts. Additionally, these brief notes can give students ideas for longer written responses and may even become a time line of their thinking and a record of their evolution of thought.

Think sheets. We use a variety of scaffolds and forms so that kids can think about their ideas and record their own responses and opinions. Think sheets include graphic organizers, double- and triple-column forms, response starters, webs, mind maps, and more. We make a distinction between fill-in-the-blank worksheets, those staples of traditional schooling that keep kids busy, and think sheets. Any form that encourages kids to construct meaning, write down their thinking, and merge it with the new information meets our definition of a think sheet. Think sheets are open-ended forms that invite students to think deeply and widely about their own questions, opinions, reactions, inferences, connections. In addition, these scaffolds allow kids to work out their thinking through writing during and after reading.

Response journals, lit logs, notebooks, wonder books, and more. We never tire of reading these entries because they give kids lots of latitude for creating their own responses. And we are always curious to know what kids will think of next. They write, draw, sketch, paste in artifacts, and so forth as they explore their thinking in relation to reading. Their entries can often spur longer, more extensive writing, such as poems, stories, and essays. Check out Aimee Buckner's *Notebook Know-How* (2005) to get a good idea of ways to inspire your kids to respond in notebooks.

Other responses. Artistic, dramatic, musical, numerical, scientific, historical, economic. You get the idea. If we only stick to oral and written responses, that future Georgia O'Keeffe or Leonardo DiCaprio may never emerge. We work with kids to develop the broadest spectrum of meaningful responses. But *meaningful* is the key word here. We want to remember to keep these responses authentic and not have kids responding just for the sake of it.