Inside Metacognitive Inquiry and Conversations

In Reading Apprenticeship®, faculty members refer to metacognitive conversations as “making the invisible visible.” Metacognitive conversations are a means of uncovering the layers of thinking that it takes to make sense and to engage a text fully.

Michael E. Martinez, in *What is Metacognition?*, writes, “metacognition is the monitoring and control of thought.”

Thus, it is a conscious look at our own thinking.

Using metacognition in the classroom requires deliberate discipline and a holistic sense of working a text. We cannot wait for students to discover new ways of reading and advancing their schema. We do not have the time for trial and error in covering such a vast amount of discipline-specific content.

In this light, we have a professional responsibility to demonstrate how we, the discipline-specific experts, make sense of the many types of texts that our fields use, for our students will be judged as competent or not based on their ability to read and apply the knowledge housed within these passages, manuals, and texts. We need a sense of urgency about the value we place on reading and what time we allot to this skill within our classes. Metacognitive conversation is at the heart of Reading Apprenticeship, and it is this combination of reading, thinking, and inquiry within a community of readers that can and does profoundly impact the reading schema, engagement, and attainment of our students.

Most students report that they can read. James M. Lang has written in “Metacognition and Student Learning” that “weaker students typically have poor metacognition; they are grossly overconfident in their level of understanding. They think they have a good understanding when they really have a shallow, fragmented understanding that is composed of both accurate information and misconceptions.” This may explain what is happening when students receive a test or assessment grade that is below their expectation. They note that they have spent a lot time studying, and they do not understand how they can miss so many questions. In other words, students do not know what they don’t know.

Furthermore, we need to understand the importance of reader identity, for many of our college students still feel the sting of shame from previous reading issues and embarrassments. This shame or lack of confidence started long ago in leveled reading groups or classroom events. College classes can help develop stronger
reader identities by having a classroom that fosters collaboration and learning from the processes of all readers within the community of readers.

By helping students articulate and share how they make sense of text through metacognitive conversations, students can improve their self-image as readers as well as build their schemas for handling more difficult and specialized texts. Next, we need to present reading as a task of problem solving, of which there are many voices or ways of engaging the texts and making sense of the text.

Thus, it is through metacognitive conversations that readers can not only become aware of their own reading processes but also that there is a process of reading texts.

Below are a few ways to help begin and sustain the metacognitive conversations in your classroom:

- What skills are needed to engage this text?
- How is the text organized and prioritized? Why would an author or expert in the field present this material in this way?
- What structures are inherent in the text to help you make sense of the content? How do these help you?
- At what point, did you begin to feel overwhelmed with the content? What do you think made you feel that way? How did you proceed?
- When did you begin to feel like an “outsider” to this content?
- What schema helped you persevere in working through this text?
- What do you understand? What concepts or ideas or passages have become barriers for you? How can we overcome these barriers?
- What sections of the reading did you skip? What made you skip this section?
- At what point in the text, did you join your previous knowledge with the new knowledge? What helped make this connection?
- How could I have introduced this text to you to prepare you for the material?
- What did you learn? How does it apply? How did you learn that?
- Open ended sentences like: I wonder if ...; This made me think of...; This connects to...; I question...

For More Information

For more information about Reading Apprenticeship® and this topic, visit the RATs website at http://rtc-rats.org and the RTC Library’s RATs/Reading Apprenticeship LibGuide at http://libguides.rtc.edu/rats. At the LibGuide, click on the RA Routines & Topics drop down menu, and then select the Metacognition option.