Metacognitive Conversations

Like so many other terms, the definition of literacy has changed over the years. Today, we understand literacy to include learning and thinking across all subject areas.

One of the most productive things we faculty can do is to use metacognitive conversations and reflective exercises and routines to help students build their academic literacy skills. We know that often students are inexperienced readers with complex texts that delve into the more academic and disciplinary ways of thinking.

Reading Apprenticeship® classrooms help students struggle to make meaning, and this struggle becomes a “normal” part of their classroom routine via modeling, apprenticing, and practice. Metacognitive conversations help students figure out why they are challenged by the material and identify how to take on these texts through individual, small group, and whole group discussions and conversation. When your classroom uses metacognition, inquiry, collaboration, and practice then students are able to use new approaches for taking on the text. Once the faculty and the student understand where his or her strengths and weaknesses lie, then they can move on to help them develop the reading and thinking skills of their discipline through practice and collaboration.

Getting Metacognitive Conversations Started

Sometimes faculty members say that they are unsure how to start having metacognitive conversations. Ask open-ended questions and then wait. Don’t rush to fill the silence in your classroom. This is part of the “struggle.” Here are a few open-ended questions:

- What is something that you noticed?
- Why is this topic central to our discipline?
- What experience do you have with ....?
- What was the muddiest point for you in this text?
- Do you have some ideas why...?
- What do you make of that?
- How did you interpret ...?

If some of your more vocal students get off track, then use the text to pull them back to the topic:

- What did you see that makes you think like this?
Sustaining Metacognitive Conversations

We have all had classrooms where students just stop engaging. There are some ways of prompting further thinking on a subject and showcasing metacognitive conversations. Try to get the students to jump start a conversation with these ideas:

- Let’s turn to a partner and just briefly share what’s on your mind.
- People seem to feel pretty strongly about this. Let’s step back and talk to a neighbor about....
- I am going to throw the idea of ____ out to the group. Turn to a partner and tell that person what you are thinking.

Then to garner more engagement, use inquiry to get the students to use their textual knowledge to discuss the material:

- Can we look at this information another way?
- How important do you think this section is for the unit’s content?
- Is this level of detail necessary to ____ in our field or is it background info? Express your ideas about ....
- What happens if we do not know this information in our field?
- Let’s look at the organization of this unit to decide why this part is critical for us to master. What did you discover?

Overall, when inquiry-based approaches and metacognitive conversations are built into how materials are presented in classrooms, then we encourage students to use metacognitive and collaborative problem solving in taking on challenging texts and the use of higher level thinking skills. So when we move away from teaching the text, and into the realm of thinking and collaborating about texts, we are promoting literacy in its current definition and apprenticing our readers.

For more information about using metacognitive conversations in your classroom, go to the RA/RATs LibGuide at http://libguides.rtc.edu/rats, click on the RA Routines & Topics tab and select Metacognition from the drop-down menu.

Resources for Learning More about RA

- The RTC Library’s RA/RATs LibGuide will remain available indefinitely at http://libguides.rtc.edu/rats.
- The RATs website http://www rtc-rats.org and its online files will available at least until 09/01/2013.
- Info about WestEd’s online RA course is available at http://www.wested.org/cs/ra/view/serv/158
- Feel free to email Michele Lesmeister (mlesmeister@rtc.edu) with questions about RA.