

# WHAT THINK-ALOUNDS CAN DO FOR STUDENTS: OPENING THE WINDOW ON READING STRATEGIES

The power of think-alouds was revealed to me when I was researching for *You Gotta BE the Book* (Teachers College Press, 1997). Hoping to better understand what accounted for the difference between expert and at-risk adolescent readers, I designed a study to examine these two kinds of readers. I discovered that the expert readers continuously and simultaneously used *ten different dimensions* of interpretive strategies and response strategies during any particular reading of narratives (see box opposite). These strategies included general reading

## BOOK NOTES

### For More on Engaged Reading

*You Gotta BE the Book: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents* (Wilhelm, 1997, Teachers College Press) lays out the theory of engagement and describes how expert adolescent readers engage with texts by making use of ten dimensions of response that include various meaning-making stances and strategies. The book also describes how unengaged readers can be helped to take on these expert stances and strategies through various instructional interventions such as drama and visual art.

processes but went well beyond these to include many text- and task-specific processes particular to reading narrative. The kids who had intense difficulties with reading, on the other hand, couldn't identify or use a single interpretive response strategy. With this evidence before me, I asked: How can I help these poor readers? Where do I start? Knowing from the expert readers that *visualizing* and *participating in textual worlds* were two dimensions of response that were necessary to achieving response on other, more reflective dimensions, I chose these two strategies as a starting point. Using think-alouds, visual art, symbolic story representation, and drama, I helped the poorer readers to visualize while they read and to participate in a story world—to experience it as a character, for example. Once this basic level of response was achieved, the students were better able to use more reflective strategies, such as inferring and elaborating.

### Illuminating the Importance of Visualizing

Visualizing, I discovered, was perhaps the most obvious characteristic of student response to any kind of text, so much so that I've written that "Reading is Seeing" and that visualizing should be added to the general processes. I've

also devoted a section to helping kids visualize through think-alouds in Chapter 5.

From these students, I noticed as well that readers of narrative have the particular challenge of visualizing characters, settings, and events. Students who did not intensely visualize and participate in “story worlds” did not engage with the text in other dimensions. In other words, if we don’t help kids to visualize settings, characters, and action, then they will not be able to reflect on story action, the ways the story was constructed, what the story means, the author’s purpose and perspective, and a lot of other things that expert readers of narrative do.

The point is that even reading a narrative has task-specific demands, as exhibited in the box below. (Reading informational texts also requires visualization, a kind—albeit a different kind—of a mental model.)

## Interdependent Dimensions of Literary Response for Reading Narrative

### ENTERING THE STORY WORLD

- Willingness to enter a story world.
- Entering the story world through interest in story action (and interest in character, setting, author, and other reasons).

### IMAGINING THE STORY WORLD

- Seeing the story world: visualizing settings, situations, and characters.
- Relating to characters: becoming, empathizing with, and observing characters.

### EXTENDING AND CONNECTING TO THE STORY WORLD

- Elaborating on the story world: noticing and inferring, embellishing and adding details, perhaps even creating new situations and episodes.
- Connecting: bringing and relating literature to one’s life.

### REFLECTING ON THE EXPERIENCED STORY WORLD

- Reflecting on the significance of events (theme) and behavior (judging characters).
- Noticing and reflecting on the constructedness of text, including the author’s use of literary conventions, and why the author has constructed the text that way.
- Recognizing reading as a transaction; includes recognizing and conversing with author, her meaning, and her vision.
- Evaluating the author and the self as a reader; includes articulating understanding of one’s own reading processes as part of that relationship.