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Karen C. Waters
Sacred Heart University

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Strategy Instruction and Lessons Learned in Teaching Higher Level Thinking Skills in an Urban Middle School Classroom

Karen C. Waters

I returned to my former district as a visiting professor to implement "Book Bistro," a literacy project emphasizing classroom conversation as a context for improving higher level thinking in struggling seventh-grade readers. Just a few months earlier, I had retired from public school teaching after 31 years of service, to take a full-time position as a clinical assistant professor within the Department of Education at a nearby university. This university–school partnership permitted a productive and reciprocal collaboration to flourish, and a great opportunity for my continual self-reflection as a practitioner.

On my first day back in the classroom I began with an interactive read-aloud using the semi-autobiographical text, *Thank You, Mr. Falker* (Polacco, 1994), a story about a young girl's struggle to learn how to read. I had dutifully placed sticky notes at natural junctures in the narrative where I had intended to pause and have the students "turn and talk" (Calkins, 2001; Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). Wanting to impart the significance of the jar of honey in the story as a metaphor for the sweetness of knowledge, and hoping to induce conversation, I held up such a jar and asked the students to turn to a partner and talk about their thoughts. Their confusion was obvious as they quietly shook their heads.

Subsequently, when asked to turn and talk during natural breaks in the story, the students just sat silently, not even looking at one another, generally slumped over the desk with one arm outstretched, the other dangling over the side. To my complete surprise, in a classroom where students seemingly had no difficulty discussing the latest hip-hop artists, urban fashion, or their attitudes

about homework, they simply did not utter a sound. Hoping to instill a sense of the theme within the group I asked the class, "Have you ever given up on trying to do something when you didn't think that you could achieve it?" Still, there were no volunteers.

At the conclusion of the reading when I asked the students to explain to a partner the symbol of the jar of honey in the story, I learned that not one student in the class had ever tasted honey. I was presumptuous in expecting them to be able to explain its significance in the story. It was humbling to acknowledge that my years of urban experience were suddenly being challenged. Accompanying this realization was the lesson that a well-articulated theoretical understanding of the pedagogy does not necessarily translate into a model lesson. After the students had left for the day I turned to their teacher in desperation, who informed me that they were, in fact, unaccustomed to talking about what they were learning.

This chapter will consider the critical importance of mediated dialogue in the classroom, not only as a means by which students practice to acquire skills that are mandated through curriculum and legislation, but also as the context for building foundational skills through research-based strategies that enable students to think critically about text while becoming valuable members of a social community. Research states that for effective classroom discourse to occur, it is necessary to establish a supportive atmosphere that pushes student thinking, uses scaffolding as an instructional strategy, anticipates and provides explicit instruction when needed, and challenges and respects the learner (Damico, 2005; Desai & Marsh, 2005; Goldenberg, 1993).

How was I going to help this group of struggling readers when they did not interact with one another in text-based conversation? Franklin (2005) states that "engaging students in oral and written extended responses to reading should not be ephemeral occurrences that dawn and fade only in light of NCLB testing" (p. 48). Before teaching the students the comprehension strategies that would stimulate higher level thinking, I realized that first I had to immerse them in reading, thinking, and talking about a variety of genres. Therefore, a scaffolded framework that treated classroom dialogue as a skill in helping students perceive subtle meanings, resolve controversies, and respect alternative viewpoints must be at the core of the project.

This is the story of one teacher's journey in helping to motivate a group of struggling adolescent readers to advance their reading achievement through strategy-based instruction that gently nudges the student to an elevated state of

thinking. In a context of rich and varied fiction and nonfiction text, intensive instruction, and structured opportunities for students to practice the skills, I offer an explanation and theoretical rationale for each of the identified strategies. Table 9.1 provides an instructional scaffold for the teaching of the strategies before, during, and after reading, and is aligned with both the current and the 2009 NAEP reading frameworks.

Table 9.1 A Instructional Scaffold for Strategies in Teaching Higher Level Thinking

Strategy	Current NAEP Frameworks/ State Frameworks	2009 NAEP Frameworks	Before Reading	During Reading	After Reading
1. Concept of Definition	**Forming a General Understanding** Context Clues Reinforcing and extending vocabulary knowledge and concepts	**Monitoring/ Taking steps to construct appropriate meaning**	A framework for organizing conceptual information in the process of defining a word. Information is organized in terms of three relationships: general category in which the concept belongs, properties of the concept and examples of the concept. Can be used before, during, or after reading.		
2. Discussion Web	**Developing Interpretation**	**Integrate and Interpret** Generalize and draw conclusions based on facts, details, and examples. Support Inferences and conclusions		A graphic organizer that requires students to examine both sides of an issue, draw conclusions through think-pair-share and generate a piece of writing in which opinions are anchored through evidence from the text.	
3. Pointed Reading	rereading	**Monitoring/ Rereading for meaning**		A strategy students used for fluency and accuracy in oral reading	

(continued)

Table 9.1 A Instructional Scaffold for Strategies in Teaching Higher Level Thinking (*continued*)

Strategy	Current NAEP Frameworks/ State Frameworks	2009 NAEP Frameworks	Before Reading	During Reading	After Reading
4. Probable Passage	**Forming a General Understanding** Making Predictions	**Preparing** Previewing Activating Prior Knowledge Setting Purposes for Reading	A story map template used to categorize key words that serve as predictions for characters, setting, problem, outcome, etc.		Can be used as after reading strategy to compare written predictions to actual text.
5. Semantic Feature Analysis	**Making Connections (comparing and contrasting)**	**Critique and Evaluate** Select essential elements for comparisons/ Justify/explain connections		A grid is used to help students analyze similarities and differences among the related concepts. A topic is selected, words related to that category are written across the top of the grid, and features shared by some of the words are listed with a "+" or a "—."	
6. Story Impressions	**Forming a General Understanding** Making Predictions Anticipate story content	**Preparing:** Setting Purposes Activating Prior Knowledge **Integrate and Interpret:** Base predictions on text & background.	Phrases are used to develop an anticipated story prior to the actual reading.		Can be used as after reading strategy to compare written story guesses to actual text.
7. Tea Party	**Forming a General Understanding** Making Predictions Anticipate story content	**Preparing, Integrate and Interpret:** Base predictions on text & background.	Sentences extracted from a reading selection are read when during structured encounter with other students for the purpose of discussing anticipated story content		Can be used as an after reading strategy to compare oral predictions to actual text.

First Steps: Classroom Conversation

Ellen, a veteran teacher with nearly 20 years' experience, graciously offered her classroom as a lab site for project implementation and was intrigued by the concept of classroom discussion as a format for focused and mediated dialogue that might elicit full participation within a discourse community. She viewed our collaboration as an opportunity to enhance her teaching repertoire and gain expertise in her instructional delivery of literacy.

The art of classroom discussion, steeped in dialectic tradition, originates from Socratic dialogue where students were challenged to seek truth through questions that encouraged dissenting perspectives, demanded substantiation, and stimulated moral development. Embedded within that ancient tradition of open-ended questions that required students to extend and elaborate their thinking, classroom discussion has become a goal of artful instruction that has assumed a variety of labels over the years; all are rooted in theories of communication that represent the essence of discourse (Cazden, 2001; Coulter, 2001; Nichols, 2006).

Today, whether referred to as reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), accountable talk (Resnick, 1999), instructional conversations (Goldenberg, 1993), collaborative discussions (Chinn & Anderson, 1998), or comprehension through conversation (Nichols, 2006), high-quality classroom discussion has become a context for shared understanding, negotiated interpretation of text, purposeful talk, and alternate opinions (Nichols, 2006). My hope for this group of seventh-grade readers was that through well-designed lessons, students would see themselves as valuable contributors to a discourse community with opportunities to practice the very skills they would use beyond the classroom.

After my failed initial read-aloud experience, I concluded that the students would require procedural instruction in the art of communication as part of an intensive literacy program of strategy instruction. Ellen and I initiated the concept by modeling discussions of our own that focused on essential themes with which the students could connect using both narrative text and informational text. This way the students would be able to see discourse in action. In addition to teaching skills that would facilitate higher level thinking, we had to establish the ground rules that would govern lively, but respectful conversations (McVittie, 2005).

Using short, informational selections, I taught the students how to employ self-monitoring or fix-up strategies, using *The Comprehension Toolkit* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005) as my inspiration and mentor text. All the students in the class

were reading approximately three to four years below grade level. I encouraged students to articulate the reasons they might have difficulty in making sense of text. As they engaged in the brainstorming process about "why meaning breaks down" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005, p. 17), their teacher wrote down their responses on an anchor chart, which is demonstrated in Figure 9.1 (Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). Subsequently, after a minilesson on the features of nonfiction text, I asked students again to recall some of the elements of informational text, as their teacher charted their responses on a genre chart (see Figure 9.2). Ellen posted the chart on the walls so that the students could reference these elements in the reading and writing process.

I purchased a subscription of *Time for Kids* magazine for the classroom so that the students would have a steady supply of current informational text. They began to discuss the roles of women in India, the historical significance of a woman *and* an African American as candidates in a presidential election, and the differences between the colonial penal system and the United States judicial system today (Masoff, 2000a). They talked about the characters in the graphic novel version of *The Prince and the Pauper* (Clemens, 2005), engaged

Figure 9.1. Anchor Chart

Monitoring Comprehension	
Why Meaning Breaks Down	**Fix-Up Strategies**
Really tired	Reread; ask questions
Text is boring	Keep reading
Brain distraction	Refocus
Lose interest	Try to connect; chunk it out
Can't pronounce a word	Ask questions; use background knowledge
Too hard	

Figure 9.2. Genre Chart

Nonfiction Text	
Features	**Purpose**
Picture	Helps understanding
Caption	Helps you "see" it
Title (entire)	Gives information
Table of contents	Kind of information
Headings	Location of information
Bold-faced print	Main ideas of sections

in higher level thinking in debating the themes of courage and cowardice in *The Red Badge of Courage* (abridged version, Hutchinson, 1998), and compared the layers of meaning in the classic poem "Sympathy" (Dunbar, 1899) with the current rhythm and blues interpretation of "Caged Bird" (Keyes, 2001). The students learned how to interact with a partner in "turning and talking" (Calkins, 2001; Harvey & Goudvis, 2005) during interactive read-alouds with excerpts from *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Boyne, 2006), a powerful story of the holocaust, and *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990), a story whose theme of racial prejudice elicited full participation. In reading about the historical events of American Colonialism students shared opinions about whether the pillory should be resurrected as a form of punishment for lawbreakers (Masoff, 2000a). They debated the fairness of an early American educational system that gave priority to boys' schooling (Masoff, 2000b). They compared colonial practices to current educational inequality in third-world countries and the efforts of UNICEF to change antiquated practices that still give preference to boys (*Time for Kids*, 2005, cited in Harvey & Goudvis, 2005). Gradually, students began to recognize the critical elements of bias, perspective, and unanchored opinion as they readily connected with the themes of their culture unleashed through stories and music about turbulent times in a world fraught with injustice, social inequality, oppression—and death.

Rosenblatt (1978) referred to the reader's aesthetic response, which emanates from the experiences and mental attitude that the reader brings to the text, and is manifested through a course of action following the reading of a selected piece. Sometimes the tender release of feelings that accompanies the reading of a text cannot be foreseen. Occasionally, a spontaneous reaction cannot be suppressed and must simply run its course, and even the wisest teacher is summoned to task in dealing with an unexpected situation engendered through the reading of a text, as the following example will illustrate.

One day the students were engrossed in reading, coding, and discussing a passage in *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990). Then it was time to share their markings with their partner. Andre began to read aloud the words that he coded: "Maniac went over. He shook the old man. It was cold. *'Grayson!'*" (p. 115). Andre stopped reading, and very quietly he murmured to his partner, "This reminds me of my grandfather. I'm sorry. I can't..." and his voice broke. This part of the story clearly hit a raw nerve with him, and he was quite inconsolable for the rest of the reading workshop. At first I wondered what we could have done differently to avert such a strong reaction from this student.

After Andre's initial withdrawal from partner reading, his participation in class discussions gradually increased, as did the quality and amount of his writing. Andre's written response to "Juicy" (Notorious B.I.G., 1994), a piece of contemporary prose, elicited another type of personal reaction:

> The poem is saying how he was when he was nothing. People used to [misjudge] him and his landlord was being mean to him and people thought that he was a fool because he dropped out of school. The thing that surprises me was when he was in high school he dropped out of school but he still made it big. Sometimes I wish I could make it big but not drop out of school. Andre, 2007

Ellen and I attributed this change in Andre to his personal connection with the other students in feeling part of a community that collaborated on projects, shared ideas with an audience, and laughed and learned together. In short, Andre's catharsis was made possible because his teacher had created an environment that supported him not only as a learner but as a valuable member of a learning community.

However, the safety of the classroom would not be enough to sustain student motivation for any length of time. As the weeks wore on, I noticed that students were making only half-hearted attempts to work with me. They were reluctant to participate in classroom conversations that focused on the essential or controversial questions in social studies or literature, or to undertake written tasks that corresponded with discussion topics. Concerned, I spoke with Ellen, who admitted that she, too, had seen evidence of growing apathy, which she attributed to the impoverished living conditions, destitute home situations, absence of one or both parents, and family unemployment. Even though I used books from the glossiest and newest reading programs, I had failed to consult the students about relevance.

I began to struggle with the idea of using hip-hop music and the lyrics of rap songs to engage the students in higher level thinking in the exploration of essential themes from the middle school curriculum, recognizing that this particular genre of music often contained language that was inappropriate for the classroom. I spoke with Ellen, who was also understandably concerned about deviation from the standards, and warned me to proceed with caution. Desai and Marsh (2005) conclude that teachers must be willing to surrender control to inspire and allow for the emergence of student voices; thus, I chose to take a calculated risk that would not invite opposition from the educational hierarchy.

When I began to sprinkle the literacy lessons with carefully selected edited versions of contemporary prose written by musical artists, including Notorious

B.I.G., Tupac Shakur, and Mos Def, my group of struggling readers literally picked up their heads from their desks, found their individual and collective literary voices, engaged in acceptable outlets in speaking out against social injustice through dialogue and writing, shared their own stories, and ultimately bonded with me (Desai & Marsh, 2005). After reading the biographical words from "Me Against the World" (Shakur, 1998), Brice, a troubled young man who had been a reluctant participant, responded to the artist's prose with his own version:

> When all these problems get me/what would happen after I die/ When I die I wonder if I'm going to heaven or hell/when will my problems go away/ the people that have lots of stuff/I steal from the rich and give to the poor/the message that I said/do your work and do good in school.

Fisher, Jackson, and Kinloch's study (2005, as cited in Desai & Marsh, 2005), reveals "the spoken word [rap] provides the teachers and students the opportunity to create meaningful relationships that lead to academic achievement" (p. 72). Until that time Brice had not completed one written assignment since the start of school, and he had been recalcitrant with his partner during strategy instruction. However, when asked to rewrite Tupac's words using his own language, Brice approached this task vigorously and seriously, with a fierce concentration seen in athletes in training. Although Brice was not the only one in the class who had been transformed, he was the most extreme example of the change that Ellen and I witnessed.

By bringing their world into the classroom, the students no longer felt neutralized by an educational system that demanded subordination, or by teachers who submitted to the constraints of an inflexible curriculum and high-stakes assessments. Desai and Marsh (2005) state that by using rap, students "can reflect and articulate their lived experiences while envisioning new possibilities" (p. 72). In using discourse to interpret and analyze the prose of the hip-hop culture, homage was paid to the lives of our students, thereby allowing them to look beyond their current existence to create dreams that transcended the classroom. Is that not really the foundation for creating social transformation?

With renewed enthusiasm for literacy lessons, these struggling adolescent readers allowed me to lead them through the strategies, this time using *their* prose to address curriculum objectives that encouraged them to engage in higher level thinking through reading, talking, and writing. In responding to the lyrics of the artists and the other students through dialogue and writing, students demonstrated an ease and ownership of content that was unique to

them alone. Subsequently, we proceeded with strategy instruction that elevated students' thinking. They talked and wrote about racial discrimination, poverty, and drugs, and ultimately became members of a discourse community (McVittie, 2005), where they were required to cite evidence for an assertion, extend and build upon a previously stated idea, submit alternative viewpoints in a respectful way, and evaluate the merit of an argument. In short, they practiced the behaviors of higher level thinkers.

From Comprehension to Higher Level Thinking

What follows is a blend of evidence-based strategies that were revisited and revised to accommodate the needs of this special group of diverse adolescent students, and to build in higher level thinking skills that would transcend the classroom and serve them throughout their lives. For each of the strategies listed I offer an explanation of purpose and a simple implementation plan including modeling, guided and independent practice, and application where appropriate. The first strategies discussed in this section require the reader to anticipate story content using a schematic of story grammar and limited information. The strategies are Story Impressions, Probable Passage, and Tea Party. Both Probable Passage and Story Impressions entice the reader with bits of significant information and offer a framework for synthesizing the main ideas, drawing logical conclusions, and summarizing the events of a story, all requisite evaluative skills for higher level thinking. I also discuss two strategies that focus on improving fluency—Discussion Web and Pointed Reading.

Story Impressions

I used the Story Impressions (SI; Denner, McGinley, & Brown, 1989) strategy to engage students in appropriate activities to construct meaning before and after reading. In SI the reader uses significant phrases that have been extracted from the text to compose a story while relying on his schema of story grammar to make meaning. A story grammar refers to narrative story structure—the main characters, setting, problem, events, solution, and resolution. The purpose of the strategy is not only to establish purposes for reading as with other prereading strategies, but also to enhance the student's ability to comprehend specific information garnered from the narrative through a series of related clues that pertain to the main idea(s) that have been established at the outset.

Specifically, the SI strategy is used to assist students in anticipating textual content by requiring them to make inferences using bits of related information that have been sequenced into an organizational framework that serves as a macrostructure for constructing meaning.

Modeling. I placed a transparency of phrases from the song lyrics of "Paid in Full" (Eric B. & Rakim, 1987) on the overhead projector while my group of seventh graders was poised with ill-concealed anticipation. I told them that we were going to use these clues to develop written stories that would serve as their predictions. I explained that we would do the first set of phrases together and then they would have an opportunity to engage in composing their own story guess, predictions that are written as a narrative (Denner, McGinley, & Brown, 1989). I modeled the construction of the first sentence by adding words that would expand the phrase into a sentence to show how the event connected with the sequence of the other phrases in the chain. (See Figure 9.3.)

Fig. 9.3. Story Impressions Graphic Organizer
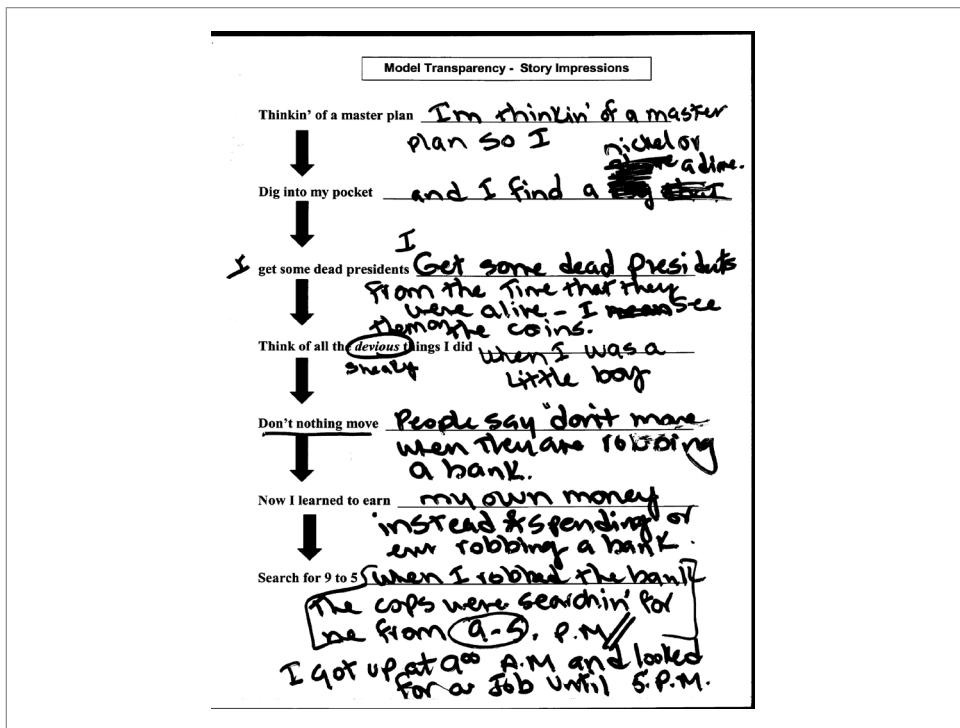
Guided Practice. Subsequently, my students and I collaborated to compose a paragraph from the rest of the phrases, which resulted in the following:

> I'm thinkin' of a master plan so I dig into my pocket/ and I find a nickel or a dime/ I get some dead presidents from the time that they were alive/I see them on the coins/I think of all the devious things I did when I was a little boy/People say "don't nothing move" when they are robbing a bank/Now I learned to earn my own money instead of spending other peoples' money and robbing a bank/

In an effort to resolve divided class opinion, the class offered two conclusions:

> Conclusion 1: When I was robbing the bank, the cops were looking for me from 9–5.
>
> Conclusion 2: I got up at 9:00 a.m. and looked for a job from 9:00–5:00.

I read aloud the composition that we co-constructed before distributing copies of the actual text, an edited excerpt from "Paid in Full" (Eric B. & Rakim, 1987). Students recognized the contemporary prose, an autobiography sung through what Desai and Marsh (2005) refer to as "spoken word" (or rap). Using SI as an after-reading strategy, students compared their written perceptions to the actual text through class discussion where they noted that the contrived story closely resembled the actual text. An example of a prediction confirmed through reading was when David said, "His master plan was not robbing banks—he was going straight. And it must've paid off because he achieved the American dream by earning it."

Application. Confident that they understood the process, I subsequently divided the group into partners, whose task was to generate their own story using phrases from "Caged Bird" (Keyes, 2001)—another culturally relevant piece of prose in which the songwriter compared her life in the public eye to that of a caged bird—in another standards-based lesson to help students compare and contrast contemporary and classical literature. Once again, students used the sequenced phrases to craft what Denner et al. (1989) refer to as a "story guess" about the events in the text. Several students volunteered to perform their written predictions in improvisational freestyle, replete with the hand gesticulations and well-modulated guttural voices that are characteristic of the hip-hop culture. After I distributed the text of "Caged Bird" (Keyes, 2001) students compared their written perceptions to the lyrics and had the opportunity to validate predictions and confirm written story guesses through the reading of the text.

The next day I asked students to make text-to-text comparisons between Paul Lawrence Dunbar's (1899) poem "Sympathy" and Keyes's (2001) "Caged Bird" in yet another lesson with the objective of comparing and contrasting contemporary and classical literature while acknowledging how the reader is influenced by "social, cultural and historical contexts" (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2006, p. 2). In doing so I was able to facilitate student dialogue around themes through literacy lessons that empowered students to speak out against social injustices, preserved the classroom as a refuge for personal confession and testimony, and respected the language of their culture.
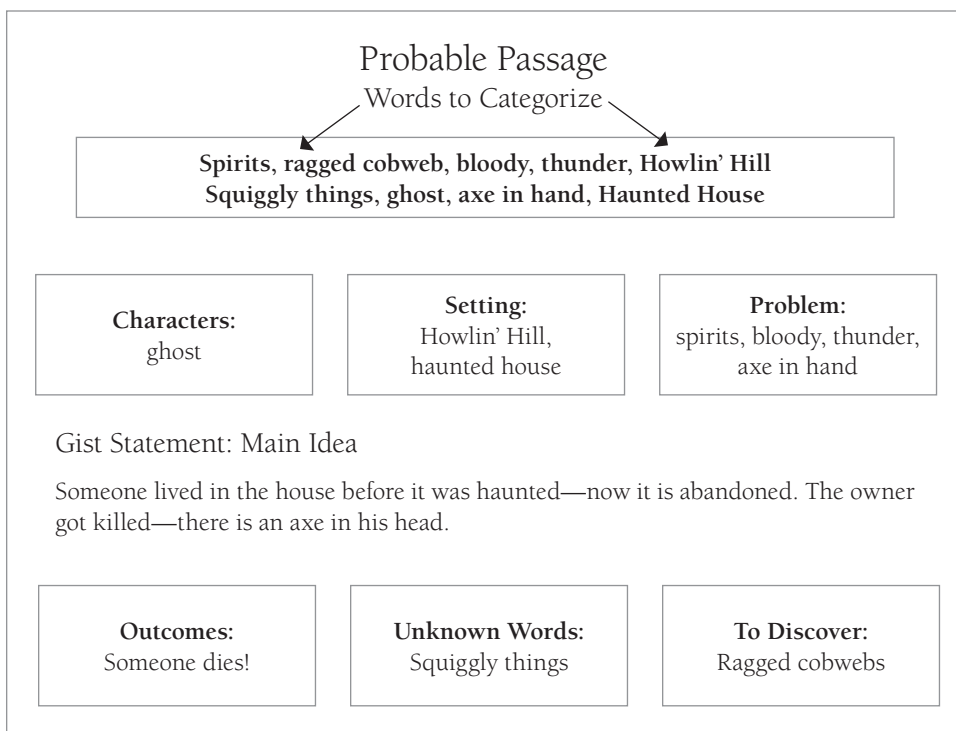
Probable Passage

Probable Passage (Beers, 2003) is a before-reading strategy that encourages the reader to anticipate story content by categorizing a list of keywords according to their perceived function in a story as depicted on a template using story map terminology. Using their schema for narrative story structure and background knowledge of the keywords selected for categorization, students create written predictions in the form of a main idea or "gist statement." Probable Passage can also be used as an after-reading strategy to compare initial perceptions with the actual text.

Modeling. Using keywords from the predictable poem "Haunted" (Silverstein, 1996, p. 94), I placed a transparency on the overhead and asked the students to assist me in placing the keywords in the appropriate categorizes of characters, setting, problem, outcomes. I modeled the placement of *ghost* and *Howlin' Hill* through think-alouds: "I am thinking that the ghost must be the main character because there doesn't seem to be anyone else mentioned and Howlin' Hill has to be the setting because it refers to a place or location."

Guided Practice. After modeling the strategic placement of the words *ghost* and *Howlin' Hill*, the students took a few minutes to complete the rest of the activity in small groups while Ellen and I circulated the room to offer help as needed (see Figure 9.4 for an example of a completed Probable Passage organizer). The students unanimously decided that an *axe in your head* was a problem. After considerable discussion, others realized that they needed more information about *ragged cobwebs*, and concluded that the main idea or gist of the poem was: Someone lived in the house before it was haunted. Now it is abandoned. The owner got killed—there is an axe in his head.

Figure 9.4. Probable Passage

Probable Passage
Words to Categorize

Spirits, ragged cobweb, bloody, thunder, Howlin' Hill
Squiggly things, ghost, axe in hand, Haunted House

Characters: ghost	**Setting:** Howlin' Hill, haunted house	**Problem:** spirits, bloody, thunder, axe in hand

Gist Statement: Main Idea

Someone lived in the house before it was haunted—now it is abandoned. The owner got killed—there is an axe in his head.

Outcomes: Someone dies!	**Unknown Words:** Squiggly things	**To Discover:** Ragged cobwebs

Application. This time I gave each student a copy of the probable passage template, and a choice in selecting lists of words to be categorized in small groups from two hip-hop songs: "Juicy" (Notorious B.I.G., 1994) and "Me Against the World" (Shakur, 1998), the titles of which were not revealed until after the completion of the activity. Giving them choice not only motivated the students to complete the activity, but also heightened their anticipation of the text not chosen. Later, when I presented both hip-hop selections so that the students could validate predictions, Jose said, "Miss, you had to do research so that you could do this activity with us."

I smiled at his acknowledgment. If he had only known how true his statement was! The research to which he referred consisted of lengthy discussions with my then 22-year-old son, an expert on hip-hop music, who served as my personal musical consultant and interpreter for the development of the rap-infused literacy lessons.

Tea Party

Here again the reader is asked to anticipate story content while interacting with his or her classmates using critical bits of information to make sense of text. Ten to 15 phrases or sentences extracted from the text are placed on sentence strips or index cards in this before-reading strategy (Beers, 2003); only those phrases that advance the story line are selected. One sentence strip is distributed to every student in the class, so several sets of phrases may be used so that every student receives a phrase. (For example, two sets of 10 phrases will accommodate 20 students). Students circulate the room for several minutes, interacting with one another as if they were at a tea party, reading the sentence or phrase that has been written on their sentence strip and listening to others read their sentences. Back in cooperative groups the students use the limited pieces of information that they have acquired during the socializing activity to attempt to construct a meaning for the text through discussion. Predictions are written either on an overhead transparency or interactive whiteboard and shared with the class before the teacher provides access to the text.

Modeling. I modeled the Tea Party strategy using approximately seven different phrases from the graphic novel version of *The Prince and the Pauper* (Clemens, 2005) to accommodate the number of students in the class. Each student received one sentence strip on which one of the phrases had been written.

Guided Practice. I directed the students to mingle with one another by reading the phrase on the sentence strip, while Ellen and I circulated the room to make sure that the students used accumulated evidence in discussing their predictions about the story content.

Application. For another lesson I distributed phrases from the edited version of the contemporary hip-hop song "Respiration" (Kweli & Def, 1998), and directed the students to mingle with one another to read their sentence strips aloud and construct meaning from the strategic pieces of information. Students reconvened in cooperative groups to make logical inferences about the text prior to reading it. One of the results was the prediction that "New York is a violent town and even the cops have no heart sometimes," derived from phrases that included the words *the metropolis*, *Shiny Apple*, and *cops*.

Discussion Web

The discussion web (DW) adapted from Alvermann (1991) is both a framework for thinking and writing and a cooperative learning procedure for evaluating alternative viewpoints in coming to consensus about an issue, a question, or a scenario related to a piece of fiction or nonfiction. In discussion web students have opportunities to grapple with issues of morality and societal mores while questioning personal beliefs in an interactive format that encourages the burgeoning of students' ideas and dissenting opinions. As a graphic aid, the completed DW is a tool that represents multiple perspectives on an issue.

In DW, I posed a question that required the students to evaluate the pros and cons of an issue through group discussion. Students read the text using sticky notes to identify the metacognitive strategies (R = reminds me of, T-S = Text to Self, T-T = Text to Text, T-W = Text to World, ? = question, G = gist, E = evidence, BK = Background Knowledge, P = prediction), while forming opinions about the issue, linking new information to background knowledge, discussing their perceptions with a partner, and writing down their thoughts on the DW graphic organizer. Students formed groups of four to arrive at consensus on the issue at hand through discussion and respectful argumentation that could be substantiated through textual evidence and connected to personal experience and background knowledge.

Reporters from each group stated the conclusions that evolved as a result of the consensus-building activity. My role became that of facilitator or scribe and mediator in converting oral conclusions to written statements on a master chart or transparency.

A follow-up to the procedure involved a response-to-literature activity to encourage students to retain their individual voices and safeguard opinion through extended writing, even after partner and group conversations had disbanded. We displayed the student work on the bulletin board so that individual thinking could be celebrated and published

Modeling. I began the lesson by asking the students if boys should play with dolls. Reactions from both the boys and the girls were strong and instantaneous, and in some cases unprintable within the parameters of a scholarly text: "Miss, you've got to be kidding. That's whacked!" I smiled and asked them to keep an open mind as I distributed the text *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972), a simple piece of prose about a boy's desire to have a doll, and his father who responded by giving him trains, basketballs, and tools. Ultimately the grandmother, who sees

the value in preparing William for his eventual role as a father, gives her grandson a doll, despite the father's protestations that William is going to become a "sissy."

Guided Practice. Following the reading of the text I posed the question once more: Should boys play with dolls? I directed them to talk in partners, which was an established routine by this time in our work together, and to write down both the pros and cons of having boys play with dolls on the DW graphic organizer provided.

The next step was to form groups of four and to continue the discussion using the same question, this time coming to consensus on the issue. Upon completion of this next step we came together as a group and constructed a collaborative response that considered both sides to the question (see Figure 9.5). Through group discussion and textual support, the students concluded (albeit, with reservations) that boys should be allowed to play with dolls. I posed another question to them following the completion of the collaborative discussion web: "Was the grandmother right in giving William a doll?"

Figure 9.5. Discussion Web
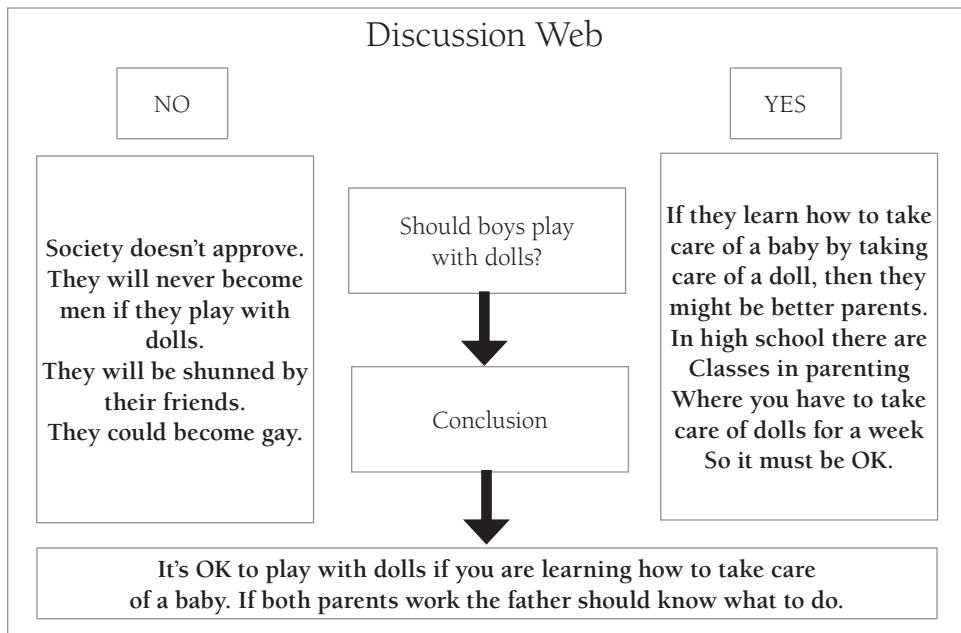
Application. The next day I asked the students to use their previously completed DW graphic organizers to construct individual written responses to the following prompt: What was the father's response to William's grandmother upon learning that she bought William a doll? In extending the DW activity into writing, a context was provided for students' own voices to be heard because the task required them to elaborate and make judgments about the theme, an objective aligned with current NAEP content strands and skills. Thus, regardless of the discussion that occurred during the consensus-building activity of the previous day, students were encouraged to assume individual positions in taking the conversation between William's grandmother and her son to the next level.

Pointed Reading

Here it is appropriate to discuss Pointed Reading (PR; Beers, 2004), a deceptively simple fluency strategy that can be compared with the simpler version of the shared reading approach (Holdaway, 1979) that has enormous implications for fluency training in the middle grades to build comprehension. Fluency not only refers to the "ability to the ability to read accurately and quickly" (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2003, p. 22), but also implies intact efficient decoding skills that enable the reader to derive meaning by making connections between the content of the text and background knowledge.

In my experience, Pointed Reading worked especially well with hip-hop prose, because the byplay between individual expressive interpretation and student selection of the phrases created a suspenseful and positive dynamic within the classroom. Students wondered if many of their peers had selected the same phrases, resulting in a choral response, or if they would be reading alone during the third reading of the text. The strategy was particularly effective as a closure activity for comprehension lessons because the component of oral recitation gave students an opportunity to assimilate the oral and physical behaviors of their favorite rap artists and discover their literary voices. Following the third read, we encouraged individual students to read aloud the part(s) of the text that resonated with them and discuss the reasons for selecting a particular phrase.

Modeling. First reading: The teacher models by reading aloud the text while the students listen and follow along on their own copies.

Guided Practice. Second reading: Students select and highlight six or more phrases with which they connect personally as the teacher reads the text a second time.

Application. Third reading: Students chorally read aloud the portion of the text that they highlighted during the teacher's second reading of the text.

The Transition to Vocabulary Instruction

Using a current research-based supplemental intervention reading program that included a software technology component, the group of struggling middle school readers expanded their knowledge base in reading from a variety of genres on topics including art, natural disasters, world-changing events, survival, sports, and unusual careers, to name a few. To foster independent reading, Ellen agreed that students could self-select books to take home, with the understanding that they would be returned in gently used condition.

Through class discussions, book talks, and students' spontaneous commercials for advertising the best picks, we realized that accurate comprehension of text was frequently compromised when students encountered unfamiliar vocabulary. It was students' inclination to either dismiss unknown words or gather limited information from the context because of their view of dictionary work as one of the more tedious tasks of reading. Although many words can be taught incidentally or through contextual application, the importance of explicit, systematic instruction in vocabulary for developing depth of meaning and improving comprehension has been underscored in the research and in recent legislation (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; NICHD, 2003; Richek, 2005).

Because I was familiar with the axiom that struggling readers tended to read less than independent readers, I knew that we needed to arm our students with the appropriate tools for becoming more self-sufficient. We gave them multiple exposures to difficult words and developed depth of meaning for words having several definitions. We instructed them in morphemic analysis (the study of prefixes, suffixes, and roots), context clues, and word expansion through inflectional or derivational endings (affixes).

We used the Concept of Definition (CD; Schwartz, 1988 as cited in Vacca & Vacca, 1999) and Semantic Feature Analysis (SFA; Vacca & Vacca, 2002) strategies to increase student acquisition of vocabulary. The CD strategy, initially used to capture text-based discussions that resulted in a student-friendly

definition, ultimately provided students with an interactive format for discovering meanings of unfamiliar words using the dictionary and thesaurus.
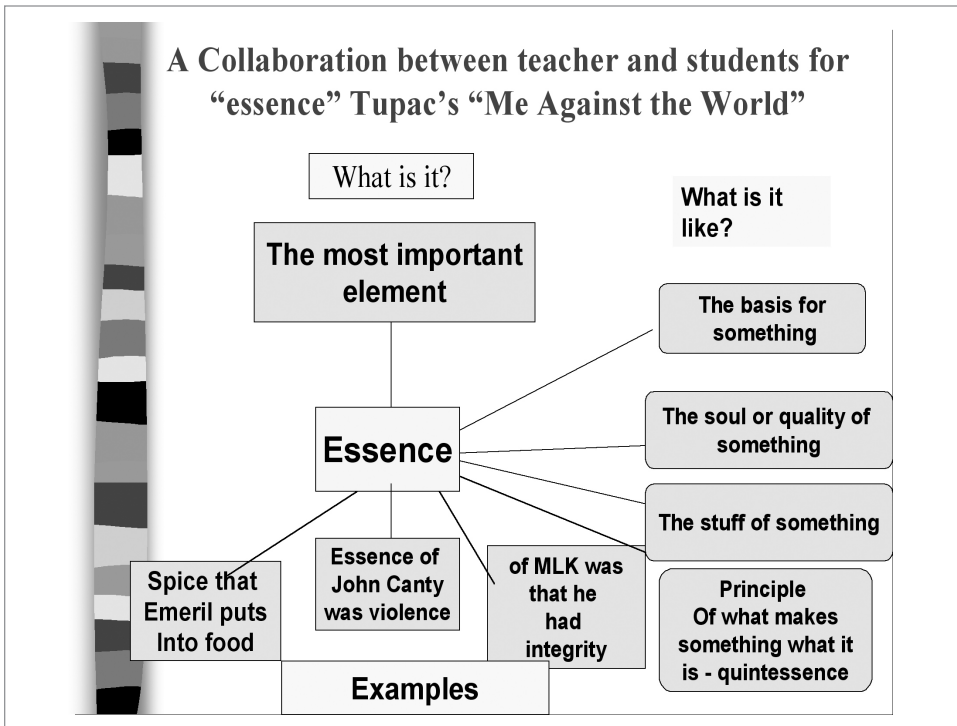
Students became adept at integrating the rules of classroom discourse with the multiple cognitive strategies that required them to think and write critically about text. Evidence of higher level thinking was demonstrated orally and in written form as students rendered conclusions about the author's intent in writing a particular piece of prose, drew parallels between their own lives and the lives of the writers, questioned the intent of the author, and incorporated biographic aspects of their lives into their writing.

Concept of Definition

A vocabulary strategy that empowers students to take charge of their vocabulary, Concept of Definition (CD; Schwartz & Raphael, 1988, as cited in Vacca & Vacca, 1999) is both a process and organizational framework used to illustrate unfamiliar concepts, resulting in a user-friendly definition that is easily understood by the student. The vocabulary word to be defined is placed at the center of the graphic organizer; spaces for identifying the classification, properties, examples, and meaningful comparisons of the new term are categorized under the headings of "What is it?" "What is it like?" and "Examples" Critical to the process is the component of modeling so that students can actively participate in the meaning-making activity while learning how to initiate the strategy independently (See Figure 9.6).

The goal of the CD word map is for students to internalize the process of constructing definitions for unfamiliar vocabulary words and to provide them with a strategy for vocabulary acquisition that can be used independently for figuring out unfamiliar words. Though modeling is initially time-consuming, the strategy offers students a method to work through the process of defining unfamiliar words that can be generalized to the content areas of math, science, and social studies. As students were involved in the process of constructing definitions for words such as *essence*, *hypocrite*, and *stereotype*, they concluded that one word from the dictionary definition might well contain many synonyms and antonyms in the thesaurus. In teaching the CD as a process for learning new vocabulary, students learned a strategy for uncovering the hidden meanings of words, thereby heightening their conceptual awareness of nontechnical vocabulary. The process of crafting definitions stimulated critical think-

Figure 9.6. Concept of Definition

A Collaboration between teacher and students for "essence" Tupac's "Me Against the World"

What is it?

The most important element

What is it like?

Essence

The basis for something

The soul or quality of something

The stuff of something

Spice that Emeril puts Into food

Essence of John Canty was violence

of MLK was that he had integrity

Principle Of what makes something what it is - quintessence

Examples

ing as students evaluated the merit of the synonyms and antonyms that they encountered in choosing which words to include on the CD map.

Vacca and Vacca (2008) caution against misusing the CD word map strategy by having students create definitions for entire lists of words, which is no more efficient than the mundane and antiquated task of writing sentences for vocabulary words. Eventually, students realized the value in being able to use the strategy to decipher the meanings of unfamiliar words in other subjects, and frequently engaged in construction of CD word maps independently.

Modeling. I directed students to read an excerpt from "Me Against the World" (Shakur, 1998) and to underline the vocabulary words with which they were unfamiliar.

Guided Practice. I divided the class into groups of four, giving each group two dictionaries and two thesauruses. After placing the word *essence* in the center

of the transparency of the word map on the overhead projector I asked the students to look the word up in the dictionary, and the following conversation took place:

Student 1 :   [*reading from the dictionary*] The most significant element. I don't get it.

Me: Which word tells you what the term is? Which word is the noun?

Student 1:   ...Er...um...element?

Me: Yes. What's an element?

Student 1:   I know. At least I think I know, but I can't explain.

Student 2 :   [*looking up the word* element] I know. It says here that element is a basic substance. The core of something. I guess that mean what it is made of.

Me: Yes. So if an element is the fundamental part of something then it refers to its qualities or attributes—its essence—the very substance of something. You might refer to the essence of a food.

Student 3:   You mean like when the tiniest crumbs of a chocolate or vanilla cupcake still have the flavor or chocolate or vanilla?

Me: [*nodding*] Something like that. Or the essence of someone's character.

Student 4:   Like John Canty's essence was that he was despicable in the *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Me: Exactly. So what shall I write in this box (pointing to the first box under the category, What is it like?)

Student 1:   You should write the stuff that something is made of...the soul of something.

Student 2:   The basis of something.

Student 5:   The part of something that makes it what it is.

We completed the graphic organizer by identifying examples of *essence*. With the story of *The Prince and the Pauper* still fresh in their minds, students decided to use John Canty's character as an example of the essence of violence. All the students knew Emeril as a well-known chef who developed an *essence*

that was used to enhance the flavor in meal preparation, and therefore chose to use the word *spice* as an example of a type of essence. By the third example, students concluded that if John Canty's character was the essence of violence, then the essence of the character of Martin Luther King, Jr. was integrity. As we worked to complete the CD word map, they realized that they understood the meaning of the phrase *the most important element*, which I wrote as the superordinate category above the focus word of *essence*.

Finally, I showed the students how to construct a student-friendly definition of the word *essence* by transferring the fragmented information from the graphic organizer to a written paragraph; extending and elaborating on the phrases to form sentences that conveyed the meaning of the word. I pointed to the word *essence* in the middle of the word map, then strategically pointed upward toward the "What is it" category. Subsequently, I continued my oral explanation by identifying properties under the category of "What is it like?" Transferring the language from the graphic organizer to a written paragraph, the homespun definition for the word *essence* read as follows:

> Essence is the most important element. It is the basis, the quality or the soul of something. It is the stuff of something, and it is the something that makes it what is, like the small part of something. Examples of essence are the spice that Emeril puts into food. The essence of someone's character could be John Canty's violent nature in *The Prince and the Pauper*. The essence of Martin Luther King, Jr. was his integrity.

Independent Practice. Next, I asked the students to identify another word from either of the texts with which they were unfamiliar. Here they applied the process of constructing meaning using both the dictionary and the thesaurus as Ellen and I circulated through the room, offering help where needed.

Semantic Feature Analysis

Semantic Feature Analysis (SFA; Vacca & Vacca, 1999) was used to help students build vocabulary through semantically similar definitions of previously known words. In SFA, the dictionary and thesaurus are used once again to increase word awareness of synonyms and antonyms in relationship to the characteristics of a person, determined through a character's actions in a story.

Characters, events, concepts, or terminology inherent in content area text are compared and contrasted in the SFA strategy (Vacca & Vacca, 1999), which requires the student to examine the similarities and differences of individual features that are written at the top of a grid. Items to be analyzed are written

on the left side of the grid. Students conclude whether a concept or character illustrates the written feature and indicate their choice by placing either a "yes" or "no" or a plus or minus symbol in each square of the grid to indicate agreement or disagreement, as demonstrated in Figure 9.7. The strategy provides an excellent basis for establishing talking points within small- or large-group discussion and can easily be adapted for writing a comparison essay of the concepts and features of a topic. Finally, it is an interactive vocabulary strategy where the teacher can introduce new terminology through connections to familiar words.

Modeling. Once again using the graphic novel version of *The Prince and the Pauper* (Clemens, 2005), I asked students to list the names of the main characters in the story, which I wrote down on the left side of the grid. Then I asked the students to list a character trait for each of the characters. After talking about the actions and behaviors of the characters in partnerships, I encouraged the students to publicly share their discussions, whereupon they came to consensus in identifying an attribute that was correlated with the character's behavior and placed one in each of the boxes at the top of the grid. They agreed that John Canty was cruel not only because he beat his wife and his son, but because he also killed the gentle priest. We put the word *cruel* at the top of the grid. We proceeded in a similar way until the students chose character traits for each of the characters based upon the character's actions in the story. All attributes were written at the top of the grid.

Guided practice—Day 1. I wanted the students to acquire additional synonyms for the mundane vocabulary words that had already been listed on the

Figure 9.7. Semantic Feature Analysis for *The Prince and the Pauper*

	Cruel bloodthursty	Honorable noble	Generous magnanimous	Kind sympathetic	Teacher enlightened
John Canty	+	–	–	–	–
Tom Canty	–	+	+	+	+
Prince	–	+	+	+	–
Miles Hendon	–	+	+	+	–
Humphrey "Whipping Boy"	–	+	+	+	–
Father Andrew	–	+	+	+	+

grid so I again divided the class into groups of four and distributed thesauruses and dictionaries in a procedure similar to the one used for the CD activity (Schwartz & Raphael, 1985, as cited in Vacca & Vacca, 1999). This time I instructed them to find a synonym for *cruel*, a term that would enable the reader to visualize the extent of John Canty's miserable character. They determined that the word *bloodthirsty* was a synonym for the word *cruel*, so both words were placed in the same box on the grid. Now both words could be referenced for meaning; one familiar term paired with one new vocabulary word. Next, I asked the students to find a synonym for the word *noble*, which generated a list of other words including *moral*, *aristocratic*, and *virtuous*. Students selected the word *honorable* to be placed next to the word *noble* on the grid. We proceeded in this fashion until students were able to select synonyms on their own. The completed grid included at least two synonyms in each box that the students would be able to reference and use interchangeably.

Guided practice—Day 2. After synonyms were listed for each character trait, I continued by having the students determine whether each character possessed the trait that had been established for another. The students concluded that none of the main characters, including Tom Canty, the Prince, Miles Hendon, the whipping boy, or Father Andrew was cruel or bloodthirsty. Determinations were coded using the plus sign to indicate that John Canty was *bloodthirsty* and *cruel*, and minus signs to indicate that these traits could not be attributed to the other characters in the story. I followed this procedure until the students were able to carry out the procedure independently.

Independent Practice. Once students understood the process, I directed them to complete the grid by requiring them to cite evidence for their assertions. They alternated between arguing respectfully within their groups, conceding when they could not prove their statements, and coming to consensus in establishing the presence or absence of an attribute. Ellen and I circulated within the groups to ensure meaningful participation and to eavesdrop on student conversations.

Application. The students were already familiar with the concepts of comparison and contrast so I told them to think of the SFA as a format for analyzing the characters and events through writing. Directing their attention to the first feature written on the grid, I facilitated a discussion of the ways that John Canty proved that he was *cruel* or *bloodthirsty*:

Me: How did John Canty show his cruelty?

Student 1: He killed Father Andrew.

Me: He certainly did. What else did he do?

Student 2: He beat up his son when he came home with nothing in his pocket or any food to eat. He wanted him to steal.

Me: What do you want me to write?

Student 1: There were several examples of John Canty's cruelty in the *Prince and the Pauper*.

Student 2: When his son came home without food or money his father beat him.

Student 3: Don't forget that he killed Father Andrew.

Me: So, what shall I write?

Student 3: Write down that Father Andrew died from the blow that he received from John Canty.

Me: [*after scribing the sentences*] How shall we show the transition from our statement that John Canty is cruel to the pieces of evidence that proved what kind of person he was?

Student 3: We could say, First of all.

Me: Yes, we could. Nice work.

The Link to Writing From Graphic Organizers

Both the CD and SFA were used as springboards for writing because the details, concepts, and events were perceived in a logical sequence that permitted the easy flow of ideas. In CD, the transition to writing occurs with an explanation of the concept and in providing examples of the concept to be defined. In SFA the transformation from oral discussion to print occurred following our conversation about how John Canty demonstrated his cruelty. Subsequently, students constructed their own paragraphs, proving opinions and statements with evidence from the story. An example of a collaborative paragraph about John Canty's character follows:

> John Canty was cruel and volatile in *The Prince and the Pauper*. There were several examples of cruelty in the story. First of all, when his son, Tom, came home without food or money, John beat him. He also beat his wife. He struck Father Andrew, the

gentle priest who taught Tom how to read. Then Father Andrew died. No one else could compare with the despicable character of John Canty.

Lessons Learned

Did students improve their ability to think at higher levels of comprehension? Samples of student work confirmed that questions posed to them pushed their ability to reason rather than summarize; responses were evaluated on a 0–2 scale through student-friendly rubrics that reflected state rubrics for open-ended response to text. If improvements in higher level thinking can be attributed to the quality and quantity of student writing, increased motivation to participate in literacy and literary activities, and eagerness to publish and share original work, then the attitudinal changes indicated that students were well on their way to the internalization of the literacy practices of independent readers.

One English-language learner wrote:

I want to thank you for helping us this year. You taught us how to be better readers and how to make reading easier and fun. You taught us that asking questions is okay—no one will make fun of us because they probably want to ask the same question. That is why I want to thank you and I think I never read more than 8 books before this year.

A Jamaican student whose schooling had oftentimes been interrupted before coming to the United States wrote:

Thank you for everything you have done for me. I must admit I have been learning a lot during the past few months about how to fix up strategies and refocus. I learned why meaning breaks down and what I can do about it. Example: brain distraction. I also learned how to put things into my own words. Thank you for making me a better reader.

Another student commented:

Every time you come to our class I learn something new. I enjoy monitoring comprehension. I liked the *William's Doll* lesson. But the ones that I enjoyed the most were the Rap and Hip Hop Lessons.

And one student wrote this:

Thank you, Mrs. Waters for coming to our class and helping us learn strategies that will help us read better—like the reread strategy...when you read a paragraph or a story and you don't understand it the first time you read it—you keep reading it until you

understand it. You also taught us to never give up when something is too hard you keep trying. You energized me to see what I can do and don't forget about that 2 Pac paper. If you were not there I probably would not know I can write like that in my life…. If you were not here I don't know what I would do to help myself find out more strategies.

By the end of the year student engagement in authentic discussion was a commonplace occurrence in the classroom. Students referenced the criteria charts that were posted on the walls of the room for fix-up strategies in dealing with the stumbling blocks related to structural and morphemic analysis, or meaning, vocabulary, or comprehension, before soliciting the teacher's help. Students' contributions to oral discussion were significant and reflected in the quality and quantity of their writing. Students became more independent as they practiced the strategies that helped them to acquire proficiency in processing multiple genres of text.

The experience of connecting with a group of disenfranchised youngsters with whom I laughed, cried, and yes, learned, is one that I will forever cherish as a cathartic highlight of my career. In using the lyrics, music, and hip-hop culture of our students as opportunities to teach literacy lessons, I helped to create an environment where my students felt they were valued and respected members of an academic and cultural community. Students learned much more than the layers of comprehension strategies that are designed to meet curriculum objectives, especially because instruction tugged at the life experiences that defined students' characters. Strategy instruction, integrated with a socially relevant and responsive curriculum through classic literature, poetry, student news magazines, content-specific books, and hip-hop prose, places students at the confluence of a powerful context for tapping—and honing—students' raw potential in reading and writing.

ACTION PLAN

To try the strategies described in this chapter, use your existing curriculum resources or a unit with which you are familiar and the following template for lesson development that draws from the release of responsibility theory: Modeling, Guided Practice, Application.

Do not underestimate the importance of mediated dialogue in the classroom. Discourse by any name is not only a means by which students practice to acquire skills that are mandated through curriculum and legislation, but is

also the context for building foundational skills that will enable students to become contributing members of a social community.

Classroom experience has taught me that, regardless of the label, classroom talk is the medium by which students become better comprehenders. Classroom discussion is difficult to implement without adequate preparation, and many teachers are reticent to free themselves from the traditional modes that have served them well for so many years.

So, as you begin to try these strategies in the classroom, remember that robust conversation should precede and accompany the implementation of any new strategy. First establish a supportive atmosphere for your students. It is important to encourage discussions about books, magazines, and any reading material that students find interesting. The following is a listing of tips for starting and maintaining positive discussions that lead to deeper comprehension. Pick a topic or text that excites your students; select a strategy to pique interest; and watch the discussion unfold!

- Treat classroom dialogue as a skill that can help students perceive subtle meanings, resolve controversies, and respect alternative viewpoints. Reinforce these points at every opportunity.
- Model effective conversations. Brainstorm with a colleague who may have experience in facilitating classroom discussion.
- Scaffold instruction and provide explicit instruction whenever necessary.
- Immerse students in a variety of genres to discover what interests them.
- Ask open-ended questions to stimulate thinking and encourage students to elaborate on their ideas.
- Be prepared for students to show emotional response.
- Create an environment in which all students respect one another and feel comfortable.
- Be prepared for emotional responses.
- Don't be afraid to use items from popular culture as an entry point. In my experience, rap music provided that entry point; for you it may be a popular movie based on a book, a graphic novel, or even a television adaptation of a classic story.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND REFLECTION

1. Use what you have: Consider the materials, resources, and units of study that are available and familiar to you—ones that you currently use regularly in your classroom. In Book Study with your colleagues, think about the objectives within your local curriculum that drive your daily instruction. Perhaps your annual units on realism, conflict, or the Causes of the American Revolution could use a boost of vitality. Any of these topics might yield rich classroom discussion and a deep sense of meaning. Which of the strategies in this chapter might be adapted for specific classroom use to accomplish familiar objectives that would generate student interest *and* spark conversation that could be extended into the realm of writing?

2. Four for the Price of One: Perhaps each member of your grade-level or curriculum development team could select a different strategy that has specific application to an existing unit or topic of study in your classroom. Develop a lesson plan around the concept that you wish to teach using one of the strategies in the chapter, using either your own template or the lesson plan model provided in the chapter. Each teacher on the team makes a copy of an original lesson plan that is distributed to all the members of the team. The effort isn't duplicated when everyone shares in the workload, and the process provides team members with discussion points for refinement of the process and next steps for implementation.

3. Collaboration and Professional Development Go Hand-in-Hand: Videotape yourself conducting a lesson using one of the strategies in this chapter. The video recording can serve as the basis for shared self-reflection and inquiry through discussion with your colleagues at a subsequent study team meeting. Use the recording to evaluate the extent to which you have maintained integrity to your lesson, the protocol for strategy implementation, and the level of classroom participation. Data obtained from videotapes can be used to shape the course of professional development in enhancing one's practice. I know that this activity sounds somewhat intimidating, but the corpus of research on the effects of collegial interaction in solving problems of practice to enhance one's instructional expertise is profound! For example, I videotaped myself implementing Story Impressions, and I still see room for improvement in providing wait time for students to respond.

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