THE METACOGNITIVE CONVERSATION: MAKING THINKING VISIBLE

Introduction

What is the metacognitive conversation?

*Metacognition,* simply put, is thinking about thinking. When students and teachers talk together about their thinking as they read, they construct a *metacognitive conversation.* This shared inquiry is at the heart of the Reading Apprenticeship.

Conversations about how one is thinking make the invisible meaning-making process of reading visible by showing how readers ask questions, form images, make analogies, make predictions, and identify areas where they are having trouble and need to use strategies to restore comprehension.

The classroom applications included in this packet give readers ways to engage in the metacognitive conversation by observing and externalizing their thoughts while reading or performing a learning task.

- **Play-Doh Animal Creations** introduces the metacognitive conversation in a non-threatening way.
- **Think-Aloud** gives readers practice observing and verbalizing their thinking process as they read (Davey, B. 1983).
- **Reading strategy lists,** **Talking to the Text** and double and triple entry journals are designed to capture the reading process in writing.

Why use it?

The metacognitive conversation gives:

- Teachers access to their own thinking, so that they can become more aware of the strategies that they use to make meaning as they read;
- Students access to teachers’ thinking, so that students can both learn to think metacognitively and take on new comprehension strategies;
- Students access to other students’ thinking, so that they can see and appropriate a wide variety of comprehension strategies, and have opportunities to model as experts themselves;

For more on the Metacognitive Conversation, see *Reading for Understanding,* pages 22-24.
• Teachers access to students’ thinking, so teachers can see where students need help, and how they are negotiating the demands of different texts; and

• Students access to their own thinking, so that they can each become more aware of their reading processes and wield greater control over their meaning making.

Metacognitive conversations reveal the mental processes that readers use as well as places where comprehension breaks down. By sharing their reading processes with others, students become aware of and begin to extend their comprehension skills, thinking habits, and confidence as readers as they learn about new ways of approaching reading from their teacher and peers. With routine opportunities to analyze their reading processes and engage in metacognitive talk, students learn to monitor their own reading processes and to use strategies flexibly and automatically to restore comprehension when it breaks down. Practiced over time, the metacognitive conversation helps them become more strategic and resourceful readers and to more automatically monitor and control their reading processes.

**When to use it?**

Inquiry activities for analyzing the reading process help readers think metacognitively as they read to support comprehension. Classroom applications such as Think-Aloud, Talking to the Text and double entry journals are designed to be used during reading to help students read for understanding. They pave the way for larger subject area conversations and “beyond” lessons such as Socratic Seminars and interpretive essays by helping students to construct the subject matter knowledge they will need to engage in higher order thinking activities.

Students need to practice engaging in metacognitive conversation frequently in the beginning of the year to develop the habit of making thinking visible, and routinely throughout the year when new or challenging texts (text meaning anything written, no matter what the genre or topic) are introduced. For example, teachers can engage students in metacognitive conversations to:

• Model the meaning-making process with text;

• Practice observing and talking about their thinking processes;

• Provide structure for difficult independent or group work;
Metacognition: Making Thinking Visible

- Model and practice engaging affectively with text;
- Introduce new textbooks, to explore and develop awareness of text structure and text clues;
- Read through a difficult or new type of text in order to familiarize themselves with the demands of the text and to generate helpful comprehension strategies;
- Break down a new process or procedure step by step to both build and check for understanding;
- Read student work in order to peer-edit.

How to use it?

Metacognition and the metacognitive conversation are developed over time through inquiry activities for analyzing reading processes. Teachers might introduce metacognitive thinking at any point by modeling a problem-solving or thinking process using Think-Aloud.

For example:

A math teacher might use Think-Aloud to model predicting a definition for a new term encountered while reading. “What is an irrational number? Well, I remember that pi is an irrational number because its decimals go on forever without any pattern. So I’m thinking that other irrational numbers must have that same property.”

Students can practice metacognition with short passages of text that are key to their understandings of a concept, topic or theme, using Think-Aloud, Talking to the Text, or double and triple entry journals that have metacognitive prompts. These applications are particularly helpful when introducing new pieces of text. Metacognition can also be embedded in Extensive Reading by using the Metacognitive Reading Logs. (See the Extensive Reading packet.)

For students to become aware of their thinking processes and use this awareness to monitor and guide their reading comprehension, they will need frequent opportunities to practice with the support and collaboration of their peers. It is important to be patient, to practice often, and to trust that given time and opportunities to practice this routine, students will
begin to develop the habit of thinking metacognitively. (See “What you Might Expect” at the end of this packet.)

The key to successful metacognitive conversations in the classroom is carefully scaffolded instruction followed by regular, frequent use. Scaffolding is instructional support designed to assist students in accomplishing a task when they are at an impasse. Scaffolds provide enough help to complete the task, but no more than students need. Over time, scaffolded support is gradually faded, or removed, so students do more and more of the task independently (Rose 1995). It is vitally important to the success of the metacognitive conversation in a classroom that social skills supporting frank, honest, and safe conversations be scaffolded, as well as the more cognitive aspects of the process.

**Deepening Metacognitive Conversations**

While the metacognitive conversation is about making thinking visible, the ultimate goal is not simply awareness, but the ability to use insights about reading processes, strategies, and motivations in the service of understanding reading materials. Metacognitive conversations—whether in the form of sharing reading experiences, carrying out Think-Alouds, or writing metacognitive reflections and logs—play a crucial role in helping students to develop insights about reading and to build a repertoire of strategies to overcome obstacles and deepen comprehension. For students (and teachers!) who are not accustomed to noticing, describing, or discussing their mental processes, learning to “think about thinking” and to take control over reading processes can take time, practice, and patience. It is important to give students a clear sense of the goals and benefits of practicing metacognitive thinking so that they can invest the effort needed to make it, as one student said, “just like breathing.”

Prepare to guide students through stages of the metacognitive conversation from **noticing their thinking**, through **focusing on reading** and **taking charge of their reading** processes, to **becoming aware of subject area discourse**. In the beginning, invite students to **notice** and describe their thinking as they carry out hands-on activities (see Play-Doh Animal Creations in this packet) or engage in everyday events (see the Metacognitive Bus, pgs. 57-58 in *Reading for Understanding*). You can ask questions such as “What was going on in your mind?” or “What were you thinking about?” to open up the conversation. As students begin to surface their invisible mental processes, they are likely to offer a variety of non-academically related thoughts, such as, “I’m bored,” “My mind is wandering because I hate reading books like this,” “I am worrying that my hair looks bad.”
Once students have the idea of metacognition, ask them to **focus** their attention on their reading processes. Lay the groundwork for more strategic reading by creating a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable sharing connections they make to their reading, their levels of interest in reading materials, and confusions they may have. Surfacing mental processes in response to reading, even if these consist largely of distractions or confusions at first, is good practice that will lead to more strategic reading with the teacher’s guidance. Questions such as “What did this remind you of?” or “Where did you begin to get confused?” “What is this related to?” and “What helped you understand?” can help focus students’ thinking.

Once students are able to describe their thinking in relation to reading tasks, it is important to deepen the focus of the metacognitive conversation to help students understand and **take charge** of their reading and comprehension. Questions such as the following can help: “How did you clear up that confusion?” “How could you get an overview of what this section says?” “What connections did you make?” “How did you figure that out?” Expect students to offer observations about how well their reading is going and about their comprehension problems, linking these problems to potential remedies.

As students take charge of their reading and comprehension, they have the foundation needed to **become aware** of the discourse in different subject areas. Guiding questions that help develop this awareness include: “What did you notice about the way this text is organized?” “What is the most important concept or question here?” “How does this connect to or conflict with what you already know about this topic?”

While the teacher takes initial responsibility in asking and modeling questions that deepen students’ metacognitive thinking process, over time students should ask more and more of the questions and learn to prompt each other’s and their own thinking. When practiced regularly, metacognitive conversations and routines can improve students’ reading for understanding, deepen their thinking, and help them build the mental habits they need to become increasingly independent and resourceful subject area readers.
Mapping the Metacognitive Conversation

Noticing your thinking
"I'm bored."
"I wish he would stop talking."
"I can't get that argument with my mom out of my head."

Focusing on reading
"I lost focus when they introduced some terms I didn't understand."
"Wait... who is this new character? I'm confused."
"There's a lot of information in this word problem... what am I supposed to do here?"

Taking charge of reading
"I'm going to look at the illustrations and figures to see if they help me understand the key terms."
"I need to figure out what this word problem is asking for... I'll summarize it to see if that helps."

Becoming aware of subject area discourse
"Whose point of view is this? Can/should I trust it?"
"How can I translate this problem into numbers and symbols?"