I live in Maine, just a few hours from the French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec. My family often ventures up to Quebec City (the only walled medieval city in North America) for a weekend trip to go skiing or just to relax in the old world atmosphere.

On one occasion, my daughters invited a friend to come along: Nick, who had just learned to read. Like many emergent readers, Nick was psyched about his growing competence as a reader. As a result, he was reading everything he could lay his eyes on: street signs, informational signage, the banners, placards and advertisements hanging from roadside shops.

It was getting pretty obnoxious as he continuously pointed at signs and called out “Moose! Next Five Miles!” and “Entering Greenville!” Luckily, as we passed through Jackman, Maine, Nick fell asleep.

He didn’t wake up until we were well into Quebec. After rubbing his eyes, he sat upright to resume his reading. Of course, now everything was in French! He stumbled on a few words, gulped, and told us, “I think I forgot how to read while I was asleep!”

Of course, we all had a good laugh and explained Nick’s problem to him. He hadn’t forgotten how to read at all; it was the language situation and rules of reading that had changed. Even the icons on the signs were different. There would be a lot to learn before he could successfully read and comprehend French.

Since then, I’ve reflected on Nick’s experience and think that it provides an excellent, if slightly belabored, analogy to what happens to many struggling middle school readers. They may very well have learned “how to read” as required in elementary schools. They may be excited, confident, and even fairly competent readers. But then the reading situation changes, and so do the texts, the demands that these texts place on readers, and the tasks students are supposed to do with their reading. Suddenly, students no longer know the rules or possess the competence to successfully complete reading tasks. It may feel like they have just woken up from a long Rip Van Winkle sleep and found the world changed. They have suddenly lost their capacities as successful readers, and along with it their confidence and excitement. Though there are certainly many reasons why readers struggle at the middle level, I think the increasing demands of the texts they are asked to read, and the lack of assistance provided to help them meet these demands are major reasons for their struggle.

Nick’s story reminds me of many experiences that I’ve had with students. I remember Stephanie, a seventh-grade girl who loved to read Nancy Drew and the Lurlene McDaniel stories. She read a lot of formulaic fiction and enjoyed it immensely. But she was struggling with the reading assigned in her classes. She did not understand the textbooks in social studies or science. During an integrated inquiry unit on human psychology, I asked the class to read and compare two arguments about the effects of heredity and environment on human behavior. Both articles were short, pointed, and displayed different points of view. I wanted the students to read the two arguments and figure
out which argument was most compelling, and what that author had done to convince them that her position was the superior one.

Stephanie came up to me after class, tears in her eyes, and whispered, “I used to think I was a really good reader. But now I’ve found out that I’m not.” After a brief pause she asked, “I’m not helpless. But I think I need help.”

Stephanie’s problem was not that she was a poor reader, the problem was that she was being faced with new kinds of texts—textbooks, arguments, satires, etc.—and new kinds of tasks—reading to critically evaluate an author’s argument or reading to construct and write her own arguments—that she didn’t know how to do and that no one, including me, was helping her to do.

Nick’s and Stephanie’s pleas for help, like most pleas, seem to be frustrated cries for competence and belonging. I feel great poignancy in dealing with struggling readers because they know that they are being excluded from the literacy club—that they are outsiders, denied access to the secrets and pleasures and power of what Frank Smith (1978) calls “the club of all clubs.”

**What’s the Problem?**

We often fall short of helping struggling adolescent readers for several reasons, two of which I will address here: 1) we have underestimated the demands that particular texts place on readers, and 2) we do not actively provide the expert strategies of dealing with more complex texts to our students nor do we assist them in their use of these strategies.

Reading is a complex communal activity that has rules and socially agreed upon conventions for making meaning. Authors and the particular texts they write share expectations with readers about how they want to be read. We are expected by authors, texts, and other readers to notice, attend, and interpret particular textual codes in particular ways. Like any club, the reading club requires that we possess certain abilities and follow certain rules (see Culler, 1975; Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998).

For example, if we are reading an argument, we are expected to know that there will be a claim or thesis that stakes out the author’s position on some issue. Then we are expected to find and judge the evidence that supports the claim, and to evaluate the warrants that explain how the evidence leads to the claim. There are many other things we are expected to do, too, such as articulate possible reservations to the argument and consider whether these are or could be addressed. These are just the basics of reading argument.

If you want to play the game, you have to know the rules. Fred Hamel and Michael Smith (1997) summarize so much about reading and how we can teach it to help struggling readers. In short, we have to know the rules of the reading game.

The reader of an argument must:

- Identify the claim. Ask, “What does the author want us to believe or do?”
- Identify the evidence. Ask, “What makes you say so? What data is provided in support of the claim?”
- Identify the warrant. Ask, “So what? How does the warrant explain the connection of the data to the claim? Do I accept the warrant as convincing? Do I share the value expressed? If not, I will want backing.”
- Identify and evaluate the warrant’s backing, if needed. “How Do I Know?”
- Identify reservations to the argument. Ask, “What about . . . ?”
- Evaluate whether reservations are or could be responded to.
- Decide whether I accept the argument and how this should affect my future thinking and behavior.

(Michael Smith, 1998)

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**Figure 1.** Text-specific demands of reading argument

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to notice and meet the rule-bound expectations. Then we have to teach these strategies to kids.

As kids enter middle school, even the narratives they read are often subverted by irony, by unreliable narrators, by inverted story lines, and many other sets of conventions that require them to read in new ways. Plus they face a host of non-narrative text structures that require new interpretive moves. Since texts are conventional (i.e., they work in agreed upon but non-natural ways), kids need to be taught how to recognize text-types and use the strategies that are required to read them. Otherwise, like many of our students, they will struggle. This struggle can lead to the well-documented decline in reading interest, time spent reading, and reading achievement that many students suffer once they reach the middle school years.

So, what should we do? I think the first step is for teachers to adopt theories and practices that will help us to develop our students into more expert readers. Many of the theories and practices used most widely in schools actually work against this purpose.

Overcoming Our Biggest Problems: Re-Envisioning Teaching and Reading

I work extensively with preservice and inservice teachers on ways of helping reluctant readers. I usually end up telling them that they have a very big problem—at least one that I know about! That problem is that they themselves are expert readers. They love to read and are good at it—qualities that the kids who most need their help do not share. Furthermore, they are so good that their expert reading processes are automatic. They are not aware of all the strategies they use as they make meaning, and this means that they will not be able to share their expertise with students.

An additional problem is that many teachers equate teaching with telling. Even more progressive teachers may possess a different but equally problematic view of teaching: that teaching is creating a nurturing environment for exploration. All students, but particularly those who are most disenfranchised as readers, benefit from what I call a “two-sided learning-centered model” of teaching reading (see Wilhelm, Baker and Dube, 2001). This approach involves students and teachers reading texts together, with teachers lending their expert ways of meeting the demands of the particular text to the student. In this way, students learn the codes and conventions that govern textual meaning. This kind of work can be done in a variety of ways, but I think it is best done in contexts where the teacher and students are working together to answer a compelling inquiry question or explore a thematic issue of importance to all of them.

This kind of teaching allows us to define teaching as assisting people to more competent performances in real problem-solving, meaning-making situations. It means we teach a new strategy in this way: first, the teacher models the strategy in a purposeful situation, and the students observe. Then the teacher models the strategy, and the students help implement it, perhaps by identifying conventional features that signal the need for a particular strategy, perhaps by applying the strategy itself. Then students take over the use of the strategy in a real text and purposeful reading situation, and the teacher helps as needed. Finally, students independently use the strategy. If they have trouble, the teacher can move them back on this continuum by helping them, or by modeling it and soliciting student help. This kind of teaching is inspired by the work of the famous Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1934, 1956, 1978) and is widely and successfully used in many elementary school programs like Reading Recovery and Guided Reading.

This process of situated learning in which expertise is given over to students is in direct con-
Most of my struggling readers see reading and textuality as foreign—separate and apart from their own lives and concerns. They also see authors as mythic figures and unquestionable authorities.

The two-sided “learning-centered” learning theory is entirely consistent with transactional reader response literary theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) that posits that reading is a dialectic between a reader and a text that results in meaning, which Rosenblatt calls the “poem.” When we know what to do to converse with a particular text, it can teach us new things about reading and offer us new perspectives about life issues.

To this end, I developed and make extensive use in my teaching of the theory of engagement (Wilhelm, 1997), which attempts to articulate the many stances and strategies that expert readers need to have in their repertoire as they transact with texts. The theory of engagement specifies ten dimensions of response that expert readers use to evoke textual worlds, elaborate on them, evaluate them, and use them. These dimensions include evaluating one’s own reading, evaluating the construction of the text, and conversing with the author, the intelligence that constructed the text (Wilhelm, 1997).

Another useful theory of reading that is consistent with transactional theory is that of authorial reading, as described in the very useful book Authorizing Readers (Rabinowitz and Smith, 1998). This theory defines reading as including a conversation with the “intelligence that made the text” and attempts to define what textual expectations are made on readers by different text types. This theory further illuminates how we might help students meet these expectations for the purpose of promoting students’ conversation with texts and the authors who created them. The theory of authorial reading asks, “What does this text mean for the audience it was written for, and how do I feel about that?” Readers are asked to grant the text and its author respect by reading the text as it asks to be read, that is, responding as expected to all textual coding. But then it further asks that once the likely meaning of a text has been respectfully constructed, that we decide to what degree we will accept or resist the vision and ideas presented by the text. Authorial reading thus includes authors and their texts in the conversations and debates about essential issues, and ensures that their views will be granted initial respect and consideration in terms of the social project being pursued.

I found in my classroom research with students that my most expert readers did consider the author, her message, how she had constructed a text to communicate that message, and what that message should mean for the way we live (Wilhelm, 1997). I see a consideration of the author as totally consistent with transactional theories, because it emphasizes what a reader has to do to engage the text, the author, and the larger task (such as the issue or social project being pursued together in class) in meaningful ways. I also see this kind of reading as essential to democracy because such reading requires us to converse with and respect other points of view. But this kind of reading requires us to know how texts work, and how to read to make them work for us.

Most of my struggling readers see reading and textuality as foreign—separate and apart from their own lives and concerns. They also see authors as mythic figures and unquestionable authorities. When authors, their purposes, and the way they achieve their purposes through textual constructions are introduced into the class, the process of reading can be made less mysterious, and negotiating meaning about significant issues becomes the central classroom project. Motivation then blooms as reading becomes personally purposeful and socially significant. Learning how to read in new
ways serves the end of making meaning about essential problems central to students’ lives.

Let’s now turn to the problem of how to know what it is that readers must do as they read and “transact” with particular texts. How can we make our own reading strategies in these situations visible and available to our students?

**Teaching Kids What to Do**

Jonathan Culler (1975) argues that:

We do not judge students simply on what they know about a given work; we presume to evaluate their skill and progress as readers, and that presumption ought to indicate our confidence in the existence of public and generalizable operations of reading. (quoted in Hillocks and Smith, 1988, 44)

If there are “public and generalizable operations of reading” (particular interpretive moves or steps), then this is what we should be teaching our students. Otherwise, we must admit that we are teaching texts, not teaching reading. Like the teacher-centered instructor, we are teaching declarative knowledge, not assisting students to take on expert procedures of knowing and acting that they can transfer and use to be successful with texts in the future.

I’m convinced that our job is less about teaching books than it is about teaching processes with which to approach and make meaning with the world’s texts.

As they enter upper elementary and middle school grades, our students are moving away from an almost exclusive preoccupation with narrative text to the reading of a wide variety of sophisticated literary and informational genres that place special demands on readers. Since these “task specific” or “text specific” demands (Smagorinsky and Smith, 1992) go well beyond general processes of reading (like summarizing, predicting, monitoring, and questioning) and students are not taught how to recognize and respond to these special demands, many middle and high school students find themselves lost in the sauce, and like Stephanie, feeling terribly frustrated and incompetent when met by their new reading challenges.

The most recent National Assessments of Educational Progress (see Campbell, et. al., 1998, for a review) show that high school students are very adept at decoding words and ascertaining the literal level meanings of text. However, they do very poorly on more sophisticated tasks, such as making inferences and drawing conclusions about text. In fact, only a very small percentage of students at the twelfth-grade level can identify and support an author’s generalization—the thematic statement or point—from a piece of writing. This means that even though students have the ability to decode text at the local level, they do not have the ability to infer, critique, make meaning, converse with authors, or think with and about the texts they have read. This is quite an indictment of the lack of support student readers receive as they enter the middle and upper grades. It also indicates that students cannot converse about what they read, or use their reading as an object or tool with which to think. If students cannot think about or with the texts they read, then my own major purpose for teaching has not been achieved.

**Guiding Student Reading: One Way**

I’ve argued that students need to be actively assisted and prompted to develop sets of reading strategies that they can use to make meaning and to solve difficulties they might encounter, both in general, and with specific kinds of texts.

There are several general processes of reading that researchers and theorists agree every reader uses nearly every time. If your students don’t use these strategies like setting purposes, activating and bringing life experience to the text,
summarizing/bringing meaning forward throughout the text, questioning, monitoring comprehension, and correcting mistakes, then these are the things you must teach them (see Figure 2). But, however necessary these strategies are, they are insufficient to address and comprehend texts that require more specialized strategies, and these texts include arguments, ironic monologues, fables, satires, lyric poetry, and many others (compare Figure 1 to Figure 2 to see some differences). In these cases, which include most of the texts middle and high school students are asked to read, students must be helped to cultivate the appropriate task-specific processes before they can apply them on their own.

There are many ways to guide students to develop and take on new kinds of strategic reading knowledge. Techniques such as frontloading, drama and visualization strategies, symbolic story representation, questioning, directed reading and thinking activities, inquiry projects, hypermedia and video design, and the sequencing of texts and activities so kids build strategies text by text and activity by activity are all very powerful and useful (see Wilhelm, 1997; Wilhelm and Edmiston, 1998; Wilhelm and Friedemann, 1998; Wilhelm, Baker and Dube, 2001).

For the purposes of this article, I would like to explore the use of one particular technique, that of think-alouds (also known as “protocols”) as a way of actively giving contextualized strategic knowledge over to students. As I do so, I’ll describe a small teacher research project using think-alouds.

A “protocol,” more popularly known as a “think-aloud,” is simply a reporting out of what one is thinking when engaged in the process of completing a task. It is a report of online processing, as it happens, in the midst of an activity. Think-alouds in the research literature require informants to speak aloud into a tape recorder. In my classroom, I simply have students write down what they are thinking, feeling, noticing, seeing, and doing as they read. Though I sometimes have them “talk” their think-alouds to each other, the written protocols are more useful, in that they provide an immediate record of internal reading activity that can be shared, evaluated, and worked on. In this project, I worked with students to articulate the demands of particular texts so that we could build heuristics, or sets of problem-solving strategies, for addressing the expectations of various kinds of texts.

These students were involved in a study of civil rights and social justice. When I asked them how they would like to study this issue, they expressed the desire to study “bullies,” and wanted to explore why people are bullies and what you can do about them.

It is of great importance to design units of study around student interests and current knowledge. Cognitive science shows us that kids can only read and learn about what they already know something about. They can only proceed to the new from the base of the known. It is also clear that readers need a personally relevant purpose for their reading (see Pichert and Anderson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1976). Though my students may not have all known much about, nor cared a lot about, the civil rights movement in America, they all had experience with and cared about the issue of bullying. It was my job, then, to humanely develop new interests and abilities by starting with their current interests, knowledge, and abilities.

Once we had agreed on the topic, we front-loaded our reading by activating our appropriate background knowledge about the topic, and by building other kinds of knowledge that we would need to bring forward and apply to our reading. We used an opinionaire about power and its use that the students responded to (I based this on models offered by Kahn, et. al., 1984, and

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Figure 2. General processes of reading

- Access background knowledge and connect to text
- Bring information forward through the text (summarize)
- Visualize
- Predict
- Ask questions
- Monitor comprehension and use fix-up strategies to clarify something
Smagorinsky, 1987). They then also asked high school students, parents, and teachers to respond to the opinionnaire. We tabulated the results and discussed the different points of view that had been expressed. In this way, we articulated what we believed about issues of power, its use and misuse. We also became familiar with other points of view about these issues. I told the students that we would return to the opinionnaire throughout the unit to gauge how authors, characters, and people we read about might respond to the opinionnaire statements like “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (see Figure 3). To do so, we would have to understand the meaning that authors were communicating to us through particular text structures, and would have to apply this textual evidence to our decision making.

Meanwhile, we set about finding readings about bullies and bullying. We collected and read three kinds of texts—narrative stories, ironic poems, and arguments (the arguments being both in traditional written formats and electronic hypermedia formats). Some bullies who we read about were historical and included dictators, tyrants, and megalomaniacs like Hitler. Some bullies were fictional characters like Mr. Simms in the book Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry! We tried to stick mostly with short texts, though, so we could read several texts of each type, and could read about a lot of different bullies. In this way, we could both build procedural knowledge about strategies necessary for reading different kinds of texts, and we could construct our own declarative understandings about bullies as we tried to compare them and ways of dealing with them.

I copied each of these texts, or representative excerpts from them, on the left hand side of legal size sheets of paper. The right hand side was left clean for students to complete their think-alouds, (i.e., for them to write down everything they were thinking, feeling, seeing, noticing, or doing as they read).

I began the study with the stories, since these were the most accessible and closest to the kids’ experience. We focused on strategies for finding an author’s generalization or main idea in a story. I started by modeling my own think-aloud. Then I asked the students to help me complete a think-aloud of another text of the same type. I paused near textual cues they should notice and had them underline them and explain how they noticed the cue and what they were supposed to do with it (e.g., make an inference, build an understanding of character, connect to other pieces of information). With the third story, students read in groups, underlining the cues and completing a group think-aloud. Finally, students completed an individual reading and think-aloud. They then shared their written think-alouds with each other.

Throughout this work, we identified and named the strategies we used as a recorder created a poster that described our heuristic—or set of strategies for finding the main ideas expressed through this kind of text. This heuristic was refined as we encountered other texts and the resulting poster was put on the wall.

As an example, when we were reading Walter Dean Myers’s novel Monster, several students struggled with the inference load. I used think-alouds with this text to model the inference making I was doing.

Directions: In the space, indicate whether you agree (A), disagree (D), or are unsure (U) of the truth of the following statements.

Before Reading After reading: How would the author respond?

1. “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”
2. People in powerful positions generally act in the best interest of others.
3. Everyone in power uses it for personal advantage in some way.
4. Intellectual power will always defeat physical or mechanical power, eventually.
5. It is never right to hurt or kill another person.
6. You should never compromise your ideas and beliefs.
7. You have the right to act in your own self-interest. No one else will take care of you and your family but you.

(Based on Kahn, et al., 1984, and Smagorinsky, 1987)

Figure 3. Students answered Opinionnaire questions and then solicited answers from others in order to activate background knowledge and build new knowledge.
The students recorded a list of inference clues and strategies (see Figure 4).

I then performed a think-aloud by reading aloud but pausing where an inference needed to be made. Students chimed in to “help” me make the inference, and identified what they had done and why.

After moving through the “I Do/You Watch” and “I Do/You Help” stages of instruction with inferencing, I asked students to work together on a think-aloud, circling inference clues in the text and writing out their inferences in a notebook held next to the book.

Finally, when I felt particular students were ready, I asked them to do an individual think-aloud focusing on inferencing. Figure 5 offers a look at one student’s think-aloud based on Monster.

In this think-aloud transcript, Chad does several of the things that I had modeled and identified as moves that good inferencers regularly make: he tries to literally comprehend, infers local level connections, elaborates on the story world, and searches for larger patterns of meaning related to the story. My assessment is that the think-aloud instruction is working, and Chad is able to name what he must do to infer, is able to do it, and is able to make his reading processes visible, available, and accountable to himself and to me. In other words, he knows what he is doing. Now I can get him to help others, or I can concentrate on continuing to help him see complex implied relationships, which he seems to just be coming to understand.

In general, when completing individually written “think-alouds,” students read the text in question, and recorded their mental activity as they read it. When done, I asked them to reread their comments and identify the way they read this piece. Was it primarily visual? Did they ask a lot of questions? Did they make connections to their own life? What was the major kind of thing they seemed to be doing? Then I asked them to look at the particular kinds of moves they made. What kinds of questions did they ask? What kinds of pictures did they see and how did they attend to and make meaning of these images? How well did they apply our heuristic? Was this the kind of activity the author would expect? How do we know?

The protocols and their responses to these questions were then shared in small groups. When they were done, kids asked the following questions:

- What did I learn about how I read from this activity?
- What did I learn about myself from this activity?
- What did I learn about someone else and how they read from this activity?
- What did I learn about reading this particular kind of text from this activity?
- What is a strategy I will try next time I read this kind of text? Why might this help me?

The think-alouds allowed the students to see what I did as an expert reader to converse with an author of a story about her generalization or theme about bullying, hazing, or some similar issue. The think-alouds also helped me to lend the strategies I used to my students. When my students completed their think-alouds, they made their own reading visible so that their peers and I could help them develop and apply the strategies from our heuristic. Finally, the think-alouds they did indi-

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**Figure 4.** Students’ final inference list

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**Expert Readers** comprehend the words, make inferences based on literal details, and identify the clues upon which they have based their inferences by:

- **Predicting** - by comprehending literal details and building on these to predict future action
- **Elaborating** - by “filling out” and adding details to the literal text
- **Filling gaps** - by noticing and filling gaps in the story with relevant meaning
- **Seeing simple relationships** - by noticing, connecting, and interpreting simple relationships by connecting and interpreting a few (2, 3, 4) pieces of information that occur close together in the text.
- **Seeing complex patterns** - by noticing, connecting, and interpreting complicated relationships by seeing a pattern from a large number of details that occur in different places throughout a text.
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Wilhelm | Getting Kids into the Reading Game

Individually demonstrated their prowess with the new strategies or showed me where they still needed help. The think-alouds made their reading strategies visible, and their comprehension and interpretations accountable to the text, author, and community of readers of which we are all a part.

We extended the unit by reading poetry and concluded the unit by reading the arguments and identifying strategies for finding and evaluating claims, evidence, warrants, backing, and other features of arguments. We then compared arguments in a Web-based environment to that in a traditional print-based format. We discovered that though the demands were similar, the electronic environment invited us to “link” to other texts or Web sites that would support the author’s argument, something that my students thought was powerful but sometimes sneaky, since we found no links to Web sites with opposing viewpoints.

The point of using think-alouds with each kind of text type was to make visible what textual cues we were supposed to notice, and what we were supposed to do with or how we could interpret what we noticed. We built heuristics for future use and emphasized that we should learn ways of reading that we could apply to future texts. Our

Figure 5. Chad’s think-aloud

(thinking aloud) OK, I know Miss Petrocelli is Steve’s lawyer and she is trying to help him. And she is cross-examining Bobo, who said Steve helped with the robbery. So she must be trying to help Steve. But I don’t see how yet. Well, she can’t come right out and say it so I guess I’ll have to make one of them there inferences!

(reading) Petrocelli: You said you received a sign from Mr. Harmon. Can you tell me what the sign was?

(thinking aloud) This is a script and we talked about that . . . so I have to think about what it looks like, with her all dressed up in a suit, probably grey, standing in front of the jury and talking to Bobo. He’s huge, I’m thinking, and wearing that orange coverall thing prisoners wear.

(reading) Bobo: He was supposed to tell us if there was anybody in the drugstore. He didn’t say nothing so we figured it was all right.

(thinking aloud) Ah, so Steve didn’t do anything. He didn’t give a sign! She is trying to show that just because he was there didn’t mean he was involved. I think . . .

(reading) Petrocelli: Can you tell me how it was that you were arrested?

(thinking aloud) Maybe she’s trying to trick him . . .

(reading) Bobo: I sold the cigarettes to this guy . . .

(thinking aloud) He must mean the cigarettes he stole at the store where he killed the guy. Otherwise how would it be connected?

(reading) . . . his name is Bolden, Golden, something like that.

(thinking aloud) He can’t even remember the name of the guy who did him in!

(reading) Then he sold some to a white boy and then the white boy dropped a dime on him . . .

(thinking aloud) What does that mean?

(reading) . . . and he dropped it on me. Once it got going it was 4-1-1, 9-1-1, 7-1-1. I guess they were dropping dimes with 800 numbers too.

(thinking aloud) I get it! ‘Drop a dime’ means call someone, tell someone, narc on someone! This Bobo is pretty funny. He’s got funny ways of saying things.

(reading) Petrocelli: Can you explain to the jury how you were busted?

   Bobo: Man, this lame-looking brother with an attaché case come up to me and said he wanted to cop some rocks. I was so knocked out by this bourgie dude that I slept the real deal . . . .

(thinking aloud) What does ‘lame’ mean? And what does an attaché case have to do with it? And bourgie. He ‘slept the real deal.’ Oh! He didn’t see he was getting set up!!! Ah, uh, oh! Yes. I am da man! I see what is going on. Ms. P is showing how dense Bobo is, how he doesn’t know what is going on, how he is like totally unreliable. So we can’t believe what he says about Steve. I think that is it. I am the Inference man!
heuristics were clearly not exhaustive. However, they did provide a starting point of strategies to use in particular situations with particular text types, and the point was made that different texts required different kinds of reading strategies.

Many at-risk students are particularly alienated by school until teachers value what they already know . . . and help them put those skills to work . . . .

Students like Stephanie found this particularly useful. At the end of the study, she wrote, “I like think-alouds. They help me see what I do and could do when I read. I really like seeing what other people do when they read a kind of poem or something because then I can borrow what they do and use it myself.”

Wrapping It Up

We know that teacher-centered instruction in the form of lecture and recitation is predominant in American education (see, for example, reviews by Applebee, 1993; or Hillocks, 1999). This situation persists despite the compelling research that shows demonstrably greater gains for students learning in an inquiry environment in which they are helped to know how to do things (Hillocks, 1986, 1995; Nystrand, 1997). The unit I partially described above was designed to inquire into the procedures of how we read different texts, and also to inquire into declarative knowledge about bullies—what motivates them, how to deal with them effectively, etc.

Learning how to do things is especially important for at-risk students. Many at-risk students are particularly alienated by school until teachers value what they already know (hence our focus on bullies, which was something they know and care about, as a starting point for getting after issues of civil rights) and help them put those skills to work as they become active inquirers and doers in the context of challenging collaborative projects (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen, 1993; Heath and McLaughlin, 1993). We’ve found the same results in our own smaller teacher-research studies (e.g., Wilhelm, 1997; Wilhelm and Friedemann, 1998).

In the context of our bully unit, students proceeded to connect the issues with bullying to that of civil rights issues of the past and current history, and concluded their unit study with social action projects and public service campaigns designed to help inform us about or address civil rights issues in our school and town.

In this article, I’ve asked what it is that we most want for our students, and what our student readers will need to succeed at meeting these goals? What do readers need to overcome their struggles to develop greater capacities and tastes?

What we’ve found is that readers need a personally relevant and socially significant purpose. Readers need an understanding of the demands of the text they are reading and the strategies they must use to meet these demands. Readers need assistance to take on strategies and stances as they read new kinds of texts. They need practice, and perhaps lots of it, until they have achieved a new level of competence. They need real-world opportunities and reasons to apply what they have learned.

As Freire (1970) describes, we want to help our students become better readers so they can “read the world,” and maybe, ultimately, begin to “write the world” as well, transforming it through democratic conversation and work into something new and better for themselves and for others. When students are actively taught to more competently read for important real-world purposes, they will be more motivated, they will become more competent, they will willingly converse with authors and others about the knowledge made available through texts, and they will be able to undertake the important kinds of democratic work—intellectual, moral, and physical—that reading, at its very best, can help us to do.
[EDITOR'S NOTE: For more detailed information on how to help students with the think-aloud process, please see Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube's book Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy. See review on p. 68.]

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NCTE is seeking a new editor of English Journal. In July 2003, the term of the present editor, Virginia Monseau, will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received no later than October 31, 2001. Letters should include the applicant’s vision for the journal, and be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one sample of published writing, and at least one letter of general support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials which cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee in April 2002 will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2003. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be addressed to Margaret Chambers, English Journal Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Questions regarding any aspect of the editorship should be directed to Margaret Chambers, Managing Editor for Journals: mchambers@ncte.org, (217) 278-3623.

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