Improving Comprehension with Think-Aloud Strategies

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This book is the first in a series entitled *Action Strategies for Readers*. The premise behind it is simple: the most important thing we can teach our students is how to learn. Or put another way, the most powerful thing we can teach is strategic knowledge, a knowledge of the procedures people use to learn, to think, to read, and to write. The most effective way to introduce students to how to use these tools is to model them in the contexts of meaningful tasks and then to assist students in their own use of these strategies.

For our purposes, this means that to help our students to become expert readers, we must model the strategies of expert readers using authentic texts—novels, short stories, non-fiction books, newspaper articles, arguments, and Internet sites—and then support students in taking on these expert stances for themselves as they read independently.

Though this idea may seem obvious, it stands in direct contrast to the theories and practices that dominate most of American curriculum, instruction, and testing. Reviews of American education show that we spend most of our time teaching students information, filling them with declarative knowledge (the *what*), instead of assisting them to enact new and more proficient ways of reading, problem solving, and making meaning (the *how*).

This is unfortunate, as the research clearly shows that when students are asked to learn information without actively using procedures to construct understanding, they usually end up forgetting the *what*—the content. Never having learned the how, they are put squarely behind the eight ball and do not know how to learn on their own.

The Action Strategies series will attempt to help turn this deep-seated trend around. With each book, I’ll show you how to help students learn *ways of reading*. Some of these ways, called general-process strategies, can be applied to any type of text or content they encounter. Other strategies, known as task or text specific processes, are necessary to comprehending particular text conventions or genres. As our students read and solve problems and inquire using these strategies, they will of course also deeply learn content.

Each book in this series will introduce a family of teaching strategies for assisting stu-
CHAPTER 1

SEEING READING: Making Strategic Knowledge Visible and Available to Students

The think-aloud technique supports readers as they hit the sometimes-rough currents of the more difficult kinds of texts they face in upper elementary and middle school.
WHAT IS A THINK-ALOUD?

It was our first overnight whitewater canoe trip. My partner was my younger daughter, Jasmine, who at age eight is already a “hammerhead,” whitewater parlance for a gutsy and proficient canoeist.

As we neared Little Falls on the St. Croix River we could hear the thunderous rumble of cascading rapids and see the water vapor rising from the horizon line of the river. These class III rapids would provide a real challenge to our abilities as a canoe team.

We pulled over to the western bank so we could scout out possible routes. I asked Jasmine to tell me her plans for this canoe run. I needed to see if she understood how to successfully approach this new challenge and to have the opportunity to correct or help her if she did not. It was also important because we needed to agree on what to do so we could work together.

“Okay, Pappy,” she started, taking a deep breath, “I think we should go river left.” I followed her pointing finger. “And hit the V between those two big rocks. We’ll be okay till we hit those pillow rocks down below. I’ll give you a right draw and you sweep on the left to get around them. Hmmm… Once we get around that we need to hit that lower V. I think we should eddy out behind the big rock and then peel out into the main current. Then it’s easy and we have fun the rest of the way down!”

She looked at me to see what I thought.

“Mmmm. Good thinking,” I agreed. “That strategy would work.” Jasmine was using the language, commands, and strategies of canoeing to map out a good plan. By having her think-aloud, I was able to access and judge her ideas… and intervene in ways that might help.

“But that’s pretty technical and there’s not too much room for error. I think there is an easier way,” I suggested.

“You mean over here on river right?”

“Yes,” I nodded.

“It looks easy below, but what about the pillow rocks right here?” she asked, throwing a rock into the first drop of the river right below us where barely submerged rocks formed a wall all the way across the current.

“If we have enough momentum we’ll make that drop to the right of this rock, punch over the wall of rocks, draw left around the big rock below, and then head to the main current and be golden. What do you think? What route would be best?”