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Don't Just Think Aloud, Think Along

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When you think aloud to help students grasp a concept, ensure they're thinking *with* you.

After a flawless demonstration by her chemistry teacher, Bree marvels. She asks herself, "How does she know all that?" That's unfortunate. Although dazzled, Bree is no closer to understanding the complex internal decisions the teacher made during the demonstration. And that means she may be no closer to learning the science concepts that undergird the event.

Imagine how the learning might have been accelerated if this chemistry teacher had enhanced the demonstration by thinking aloud in real time, explaining her decisions and alerting Bree and her classmates to indicators of progress to watch for and errors to avoid.

Making Thinking Visible

Thinking is invisible. Our cognitive processes become apparent to others only when we speak or write. Many concepts and skills we teach are abstract; sharing thinking with students allows them to glimpse the inner workings of our brains as we process and act upon abstract information. The research world calls this a "think aloud." Because we worry that this term focuses exclusively on the teacher, whereas students should also be thinking, we use the phrase "think along."

Think-aloud protocols have been used in research because they provide insight into decision making. They can be performed either concurrently or retrospectively. With concurrent think alouds, a person voices his or her thoughts while performing a task. Retrospective think alouds can be done while viewing a video recording of a task or event. The person thinking aloud remarks on what he or she was experiencing during this event.

In both cases, the focus is on the person doing the thinking. We agree that a teacher should share his or her thinking with students. But it's equally important to ensure that students are thinking along with their teacher, not simply being entertained by hearing the teacher's account of her pondering.

Plan Your Think Along

Classroom teachers engage in think alongs to slow down cognitive processes so that novices can witness them unfold. Although think alongs have an air of spontaneity, the best of them are carefully planned. Off-the-cuff think alongs tend to be unfocused and can leave students more confused. Resist the urge to clutter your think alongs with too many divergent ideas.

Our 2008 book with Dianne Lapp, *In a Reading State of Mind* (International Reading Association), gives guidelines for planning a think along. Here's how our guidelines might help a teacher plan a robust think along about the writing strategy of repetition for emphasis (using a passage from Orwell's *Animal Farm*):

- *Name the strategy, skill, or task.* "I'm going to think out loud about the repetition I noticed in this passage."
- *State the purpose of the strategy, skill, or task.* "Good speakers and writers often repeat a key idea or two again and again. It makes the message stick."
- *Explain when an author or speaker would use this strategy.* "So when would repetition be effective? The first thing that got me noticing there was going to be some repetition coming was the first line of the first paragraph: 'And remember, comrades.' Major [the character who inspires the animals' rebellion] is signaling to the other animals that something important is coming next."
- *Use analogies to link prior knowledge to new learning.* "It's like when a politician gives a speech at a rally. They have a slogan that they repeat over and over so you remember it long after the speech is over."
- *Demonstrate how the skill, strategy, or task is completed.* "I'm going to show you the repetition of a key idea I saw in the first paragraph. First Major says to 'Never listen to' Then he says, 'It is all lies.' At the end of the paragraph he says, 'All men are enemies. All animals are comrades.' Three times he repeats the same idea: Don't listen to Man. He can't be trusted. All men are the enemy."
- *Alert learners to errors to avoid.* "Speakers can use repetition pretty effectively, but I know I have to be on the lookout for how a repeated message can change. It's like the telephone game when you whisper a message to one person, who whispers it to another; by the time it gets back to the first person, the message is completely different. So first this character says never listen to humans, but the message changes. It shifts to 'all men are the enemy.' I want to be careful to not just listen to the repetition, but also pay attention to how he's changing the message."
- *Assess the use of the skill.* "I'm going to make a note in the margin that there is some repetition happening, and I'm going to highlight those sentences where I saw it happening so I can come back to the original sentences to compare various messages if other characters in this chapter deliver a similar message. I want to be able to see if the message has stayed the same or has changed."

Use First-Person Language

Think alongs are delivered using first-person language to mirror one's own internal dialogue. "I" statements can feel awkward at first, but they contribute to a think along's effectiveness by triggering empathetic listening on the part of the student. The use of "I" statements invites students into the thinking process in ways that second-person directives don't. Consider the difference between these statements:

- First-person: "When I read this term, I'm confused so I scan back up to the bolded definition in the previous paragraph to remind myself what it means."
- Second-person: "When you run into an unfamiliar term, remember to scan back up and reread the bolded definition."

The first example gives students insight into the use of a comprehension strategy as it's employed during the act of reading. The second, while good advice, uncouples the strategy from the decision to use it. Novice learners need to know *when* to apply strategies.

Think alongs give learners a glimpse inside the mind of an expert—you—as you engage in deep cognitive and metacognitive processes to make meaning and resolve problems. They allow students to try on those cognitive processes. Turning your thinking into commentary can shed light on your decisions and prevent students from believing you just "know stuff."

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