The Reading Connection

"does this make sense?" vs. "whatever!"
Cogitating on metacognition

by Jordan Fabish

Metacognition is intellectual self-examination that informs the thinker of the processes of comprehension synapsing through his or her own mind—and not only awareness of these processes, but also their conscious monitoring and manipulation. Metacognition is asking the question “Does this make sense?” and figuring out what it takes to get to “Yes.” We have learned that skilled readers naturally monitor their own comprehension, and that we can assist new or struggling readers in their quest for comprehension by teaching them metacognitive strategies.

Since metacognition is self-monitoring, one person can hardly tell another exactly what thoughts will lead to learning, but research has given us an array of possibilities, thus allowing instruction. As well, our own self-awareness, shared through modeling and think-alouds, may be the best way to help our students develop or acquire the habit of metacognition.

I recently had a sort of metacognitive “happening” I could not ignore. I always cut out the Barry Tunick/Sylvia Bursztyn Sunday “Puzzler” from the L. A. Times and work on it all week, about 10 to 15 luxurious minutes a day. (I never compare my crossword performance with my mother-in-law’s. What takes me a week takes her 45 minutes, and she works in ink!) Last month, with every puzzle, I found I was thinking about ME. Me, me, me—what I was thinking and what I knew and why I enjoyed this process and what made it successful and how it related to reading—all of which I have decided to call metacognition, not narcissism. Not exactly an article, this personal essay documents what I self-observed during my Metacognitive Month in hopes that the process and/or the results will reinforce our commitment to balanced instruction and will serve as learning tools for our students, as well.

PHYSICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Under a good light, I can still read without glasses, but I must say that print gets foggier every week and I don’t think there is a good light anywhere in this house! When I start filling in 86 across with the answer to 66 across, I know it’s time to get my glasses or find better light. And last week when I had a touch of some nauseating intestinal virus, forget it—I couldn’t think at all.

The mind-body connection is real, and we should be mindful of it as we attempt diagnosis and remediation of our students’ reading difficulties. Advancing education through improved exercise, nutrition, and correction of physical impediments is a life’s work beyond the bailiwick of most classroom teachers, but giving our students the information they need to monitor their own health is very possible, and most schools provide resources to address nutrition and exercise and to evaluate simple visual and auditory disorders.

COMPLEXITY

Almost a microcosm of the reading process, filling in a crossword feels as complex. Sometimes I can fill in a word because BINGO! — I just know it. In my “metacognitive state,” I understood that, emotionally, I need several of these “absolute” answers or the puzzle is just too discouraging. More frequently, though, I depend on myriad, subtler clues. Beginning readers, knowing few sight words yet, also depend on a passel of complex (not just context) clues, and so do older readers who are moving into
more difficult text. No matter how thoroughly we break down the reading process in order to try to teach it, we need to remember that putting those parts back together is COMPLICATED!

GRAPHHEMIC, SEMANTIC, AND SYNTACTIC KNOWLEDGE

The act of reading teaches us an astonishing number of things about how language works, and a few of them are revealed when one does a crossword puzzle. It may sound like stating the obvious, but I realized that if I happened to have the pattern

S ___ A _____.

I had only a few choices for the letter that followed the S. While it might be another vowel to make EA or OA (a coupling we see often) or IA (as in "sciatica"—that we see rarely), the letter following S likely had to form a familiar blend: SP, SL, SH, ST, SW, SC, SK, SM, SN. If the clue asked for the most something-or-other, the answer would end with the superlative EST or IEST, while more something-or-other would need the comparative ER. Plurals would probably end in S or I and past-tenses in ED. U's usually followed Q's (unless the answer were "IRAQIS," as in "Samarra citizens"). Adverbs had a good chance of ending with LY; adjectives with Y or OUS.

Try out your own list, detailing everything you know about language! The number of patterns that have soaked in over the years will amaze you, and when expanded to include semantic and syntactical patterns involved in comprehension . . . mind boggling! But, of course, if these patterns HAVE NOT soaked in, that, too, boggles the mind. Not everyone shares the interest we reading instructors all seem to have in the beauty, organization, and intricacies of language. When we make our students aware of letter and language patterns, whether by direct instruction or by sharing our thought processes, we ultimately help them build comprehension.

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

I am a big zero in geography; it wasn't emphasized in school, and in life I'm usually lost! Devoid of this background knowledge, most geography clues stump me until I prime the pump with other letters or even look up the locations (I think of it as research, not cheating!). On the other hand, I've lived long enough in California and have studied enough French and music to make good guesses at Spanish, French, and music words. And I've done enough crossword puzzles to have learned that Herman Melville wrote Typee and Omoo, as well as Moby Dick. Even prior knowledge trivia, like the Greek alphabet I memorized in tenth grade, helps me find the right word.

More indirectly, there are names of teams and sports figures hiding in my brain that I didn't know I knew, but which I can pull to the surface because I have heard these names as I have walked through life.

The activation of prior knowledge, comparing the unknown to the known, is the only way to answer the question "Does this make sense?" As educators, building and activating prior knowledge is our constant calling. The encouraging news we can bring to our students is that if they pay attention to life, they WILL acquire the prior knowledge they need to build on, and, even more importantly, they are not helpless to establish prior knowledge when it is lacking. Pair a curious mind with resources!

RESOURCES

When there isn't any prior knowledge to draw from, I delight in finding answers via other means—the unabridged dictionary, the atlas, my best friend the thesaurus, my real friends: Heather and Pat for sports names, Tammy and Marilyn for opera questions, David and Jan for “brain drains” (i.e., they know me so well they can sometimes remember what I forgot, if that makes any sense), LIBRARIANS—a
good librarian can find anything! Of course, there is the independent-work Internet, and it can find just about anything, too, but I prefer consulting my knowledgeable friends first.

Speaking of friends, I have another one, Jeanne, whose profession as director of nurses for a home health-care business has always been rife with stress and responsibility. “How do you manage? And why do you seem to enjoy it?” I have asked, wringing my hands just to hear about some of her typical days. Her mild and cheerful answer: “I’m a problem-solver. That’s what I like to do.” Aha. Attitude: the answer to life and to learning.

**ATTITUDE**

One of the textbook essays in my community college “Reading Development” course briefly recounts the life of Benjamin Franklin, whose advice on healthy living remarkably mirrors current medical opinion. During class discussion, when we come to the line, “Franklin slept soundly in his four score plus four years,” I ask my students why they think the author used these words instead of just saying he was 84. They respond:

“To confuse us!”

“To give us a hard time.”

“To trick us!”

“To show off.”

“No, to make us think.” (The most positive remark.)

Although it has been the same every semester, their negativity always stuns me. While I have been enjoying how, with just a few words, the author deftly swept his readers into Franklin’s antique world, often via a connection with Lincoln’s familiar and beloved “Gettysburg Address,” my students have been feeling victimized. These are students who invariably get to “Whatever” before they ever get to “Does this make sense?” Were they raised in families whose de facto motto was “Whatever”? Do they have an inborn tendency to feel defeated? Have they spent so many years at the low end of the curve that their best defense is “Whatever”? Regardless of the reason, they tend not to be problem-solvers.

Just as both reading and doing a crossword puzzle require making predictions and experimentation, they also require the courage to do so—the courage to be curious instead of apathetic, to be a problem-solver instead of a victim, to be willing to learn what you don’t know, to try again in the face of what looks like a dead end. Only by revisiting the reading or the puzzle with regularity can one experience that mysterious thrill where one day you are stuck, and a day later words ping into your brain like popping corn. In our classrooms, we work tirelessly at establishing appropriate levels of interest, instruction, and learning-style, but I am convinced that our greatest challenge is motivating students of all ages toward the consistently courageous position of “Does this make sense?” instead of “Whatever.” (Sounds like the next article, eh?)

If nothing else, my crossword accounting reminded me to keep modeling the thinking process, reminded me I can never take for granted my students’ courage or comprehension, reminded me that my job is to give them the metacognitive tools to acquire both qualities.

**Faculty Footnotes**
By Kathi Bartle Angus

The Reading Department granted 101 MS degrees on June 1. Over 70 of our students participated in the College of Education ceremony in the gym. Each was "hooded" by Reading Department Chair Ash Bishop as Acting Chair JoAnn Carter-Wells announced names. Faculty Emeriti Ruth May Siegrist also joined the podium party. Our second Capistrano Unified cohort was part of this group. Two Edwin Carr Fellows were named from Reading. Catherine Sherburne and Jessica Rutan were selected as candidates who will make a significant difference in reading education in the future.

REG and the Reading faculty again hosted a reception immediately following graduation. REG members, Jan Bagwell, Jan Court-Keller, Jan Lee, JoAnne Greenbaum, Donna Padgett, and Toni Chambers, made sure that the reception was a success. Four new graduates were recognized as Outstanding Graduates for their academic performance and leadership as students in the program. Congratulations are extended to Susan Newcomb, Jennifer Madigan, Sharee Pfaff, and Ilona Takakura. The REG scholarship was awarded to Susan Newcomb.

Ash Bishop officially returned from his sabbatical on June 10. JoAnn Carter-Wells completed her semester as Acting Chair. She accomplished several goals during the semester including: a streamlined records system; revamped student information packets; and an updated department website. Thank you JoAnn!

CSUF Reading Department faculty continues a long tradition of scholarship. Congratulations to the following Reading faculty for their recent publications: Dr Anthony Manzo in Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, May, 2003; Dr. Brenda Spencer in The Reading Teacher, May, 2003; and Kathi Bartle Angus and JoAnne Greenbaum in The Journal of College Reading and Learning, Spring, 2003.

Tutors needed: REG is assisting the Reading Department in updating the tutoring list. If you are interested in being included on a list of Reading Department Alumni who provide private tutoring email the following information to Kathi Bartle Angus (kangus@fullerton.edu): name, address, phone number, grade levels, instructional areas, and location (your home, client's home, or office).

---

**Hancock Fund**

The Hancock Fund was established to honor Dr. Deborah Osen Hancock for her contributions to the field of reading and specifically to the Reading Department. The fund is solely for use by the CSUF Reading Clinic. Over the years, the fund has supplied books and technology for use by clinicians and students. REG would like to thank all of our members for their generous contributions to the Hancock Fund and remind our membership that a donation at renewal time is a wonderful way to honor Dr. Hancock and her support of the Reading Clinic.

---

**Reading Educators Guild Newsletter Staff**

Editor: Jan Court-Keller

Faculty Footnotes: Kathi Bartle Angus
The Reading Connection: Jordan Fabish

If you would like to have something published in the REG Newsletter, please contact the REG staff at kellermrs@hotmail.com.