

Approaching Authentic Peer Review

The author describes using think-aloud protocol strategies across literacy instruction to improve peer review and help students develop critical skills that inform revision of their own texts. Specific classroom practices are described in detail.

Peer review remains a challenging practice for teachers and students at all levels. I remember, when I first taught high school, attempting many different versions of peer review, including detailed prompts, modeling, and different routines for different drafts; I also experimented with peer review in class, as homework, and with different sizes of groups.¹ When I entered graduate school and began teaching college composition, I thought I had finally hit on an approach that worked, one that I called a “read-aloud protocol” based on Karen Schriver’s reader-protocol teaching (“Revising”). I loved it: students found it worthwhile and made good revisions based on the feedback they received, and colleagues, when they heard about it, tried it and liked it.

While I still employ the method, which I will describe in greater length later, I have begun to see weaknesses in the ways I have used it in my college classrooms. The tools that students have used for peer review have differed from those they used for their other reading in the class, and they continued to respond to each other’s papers with some eye toward “fixing” them rather than as readers trying to understand them. As I have been trying to make the writing assignments students do for me more authentic (see, for example, Conner and Moulton; Kixmiller; Lindblom), I hoped for more consistently authentic, “readerly” responses. I wanted students to engage in authentic writing to master the complex decisions authors must confront when they compose for real audiences. That decision-making could benefit most from “real” reader feedback, not feedback aimed—however helpfully—at correcting the paper.

I began to see the problem as less related to what peer-review strategy I used and more to the place of peer review in the ongoing literacy curriculum. If students are to respond to each other’s drafts as they would to published texts, they need practice responding to published texts as they would each other’s drafts. Because of its emphasis on reading strategies and metacognition, the read-aloud protocol strategy provides an especially good example of a way to build such practice into the ongoing literacy curriculum. Some scholars writing about improving students’ reading and integrating reading and writing instruction suggest using think-aloud techniques to teach students reading comprehension skills (e.g., Beers; Olson; Wilhelm). Using think-alouds to teach reading comprehension and then the read-aloud protocol technique (which is based on think-alouds) for peer review has two major benefits for students: because students practice thinking aloud with published texts before they do so with each other’s texts, they build the habit of thinking aloud to understand rather than to “fix”; and, because students return during peer review to explicit reading strategies, they become more strategic readers.

Imagine a Unit in a High School Classroom

Here I outline a sequence of instruction teachers might incorporate into a literature unit, in which students read a novel or play and write an essay. In this sequence, the unit would include not only imaginative literature but also essays of the kind that students will produce, and the unit would

include a sequence of think-aloud activities throughout. Assume, for instance, we use Kenneth Lindblom's suggestion that students "Write a letter from the Friar to Romeo's and Juliet's parents, exhorting them to allow Romeo and Juliet to marry" (107). Students read not only Shakespeare's play

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during the unit but also persuasive letters of various sorts, both personal and professional. I use op-ed pieces, letters to the editor, and published letters for this purpose. I might even compose one or more of my own as samples. The sequence I describe moves in stages: the teacher thinking

aloud while reading, students thinking aloud in front of the whole class and then in small groups, students taking notes of each other thinking aloud in pairs, and the read-aloud peer-review workshop. This process gives students plenty of practice both with reading strategies and thinking aloud.

Teacher Thinks Aloud

Over the course of the unit, the students read and write a variety of persuasive letters/essays, making connections between the persuasive strategies used by the authors of those letters and those used by characters in the play, in particular the Friar. For the first of the letters, I read it to the class and think aloud how I make sense of the letter and what it makes me think about the issue. I might notice, for instance, the way the author describes the issue, the language the author uses to connect to the reader, and what these strategies lead me to think about the issue. I ask students to share additional insights they come to as I read the letter and how those strategies relate to those we see in the play.

As both Carol Booth Olson and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm suggest, after modeling my thinking process as I read aloud, I list a few of the strategies I used to make sense of the letter on the board—strategies such as tapping prior knowledge, making connections, asking questions, making predictions, and summarizing (Olson 30)—and connect the strategies with the comments I made that relate to them. This explicit labeling of strategies matches the steps of Wilhelm's description of explicit in-

struction, modeling the strategy and guiding student practice (13–14). Across the unit, I guide students through at least a few of these letters as a class, with students calling out their ideas as I stop and ask for their thoughts.

Students Think Aloud

Once I have modeled thinking aloud for students and we have practiced as a whole group, I ask a "volunteer" (I might arrange beforehand for a particularly strong reader to volunteer) to continue in front of the whole class, then assign students to think aloud in small groups of four or five, rotating the thinking aloud among the members of the groups. Because some students will still have difficulty practicing the reading strategies I have modeled and articulating their thoughts, I also provide students a list of sentence starters they could use while reading aloud:

I think she's saying . . .

This means . . .

I expect the next thing to be . . .

What I need now is . . .

What I want next is . . .

I'm confused by . . .

I don't know . . .

The main point of this seems to be . . .

The argument up to here is . . .

At this point, I understand . . .

It sounds like . . .

Where is . . .

This pattern, of the teacher modeling and the students taking over the processing for each other, matches a well-researched strategy for improving student reading called reciprocal teaching (Palincsar and Brown; Rosenshine and Meister).

Following the small-group work, I have students pair up, with one student taking notes of the other's comments, then switching. Although this step is not part of the reciprocal teaching process, it adds to it in important ways. By taking notes of each other's comments, students are recording additional examples of wordings to use when articu-

lating their thoughts and reinforcing the process of moving external speech to internal thought processes (see Wilhelm's discussion of Vygotsky). The practice of taking notes of think-alouds from published texts also helps to prepare students for taking notes when it is their own writing readers are thinking their ways through.

It is important that students read and explicitly process the kinds of writing they will be doing themselves for two reasons. First, their experience with published letters will help them understand how the genre works and make it easier for them to write persuasive letters. Because these letters have been published in various venues, the experience may also lend authenticity to the writing task for students. Second, because these letters are "finished," and because neither of the students is the author of the letter, students are less inclined to read to "fix" them. Reading the same form of essay and thinking aloud to make meaning will help students to transfer that meaning-making reading to their peers' papers.

Read-Aloud Protocol Workshop

Once students have composed their letters and revised them once, into a somewhat polished draft, they are ready to engage in the read-aloud protocol workshop. I generally try to have students review each other's papers twice—once with an early draft, to which they respond only in terms of ideas, and the second time with the read-aloud protocol. Because of the close attention readers pay to language and style as well as ideas, this peer-review strategy works better with these more polished drafts than with drafts the authors know are rough.

Before we use this technique for the first time, I distribute a handout that includes a description of the protocol, a detailed explanation of the roles and duties of the reader and author, and sample protocols—two from Karen Schriver's article describing a use of think-alouds to teach students to diagnose problem areas in texts ("Teaching"), and one that I conducted on an essay a colleague was preparing for publication. We read the handout aloud, and I role-play one or more of the protocols, sometimes additionally modeling the read-aloud process with a student paper. In the sequence I describe here, students will also have experienced the method by re-

sponding to published texts. The general instructions may be found in fig. 1.

On the day of the peer-review session, I ask students to bring two copies of their drafts to class—one on which they will keep a record of the readers' comments and one clean copy (so each new reader can approach the text fresh)—and to form pairs with someone who *has not yet read* their drafts. I reinforce the roles of readers and writers, emphasizing again that readers are making sense of the essays, not fixing them. Students sit in pairs, side by side (to help the readers pretend the author is not there), decide who will be reader first, and begin. While they are working, I move around the room, stooping down beside each pair to listen in. The first time students attempt this kind of peer review, I often have to interrupt students who have read too much text without pausing or who have commented, "That makes sense." When I hear that, I interrupt with, "What makes sense? What do you understand?" Once the student answers, I ask more questions to prompt the reader to explore what he or she thinks about the piece.

I usually only need to intercede in any pair once; after that, students have a clearer sense of what it feels like to think aloud. Once I infer from my monitoring that students are working hard to speak their thoughts aloud and not just rushing through each other's papers, I also stop pressing them to pause after each sentence. While the initial emphasis on thinking through the text aloud after each sentence helps students remember to do so, most students I have worked with seem to develop a more natural rhythm of reading aloud and summarizing/predicting/questioning/responding aloud fairly quickly, sometimes even within the first session of peer review. In the sequence I describe here, students may have already developed such individual rhythms before we reach the peer review stage, and the direction to stop after each sentence may no longer be necessary.²

As students will have practiced this kind of reading aloud with published texts in the sequence I describe here, I expect to need to intercede less in the future, though some students may need the reminder to treat each other's texts as they have the published texts. Depending on how much time we have, I may tell students to stop and switch after half an hour or allow them to complete their read-throughs. I like to

FIGURE 1. Read-Aloud Protocol Directions

How it works:

You will work in pairs. In each pair, students will take turns being the reader. *Only the reader talks* until he or she has finished reading the paper, at which time the reader and writer can discuss the paper and then switch.

The reader:

You will read the paper aloud and stop after every sentence and at the end of each paragraph. At the end of each sentence, say at least what you think the sentence means, how it relates to what you've read before, and what you expect to come next. At the end of each paragraph, sum up where you are in the argument so far. You may find it necessary or helpful to stop more often than every sentence as you think about particular words and phrases that evoke associations for you. Feel free, as well, to reread sentences or parts of sentences aloud as you try to make sense of them. You have two jobs:

1. to actively try to make sense of what the writer is communicating in the paper and
2. to think aloud as you read.

Although we do not generally stop ourselves to make sense of our reading as we go along, and we do not generally try to understand our reading as we read aloud, you will get used to it.

Hints:

1. Keep these questions in mind as you read:
 - What is the issue the paper addresses?
 - What is the author saying about this issue?
 - What is the author saying in this sentence/paragraph?

How does this sentence/paragraph add on to what has come before?

What does this sentence/paragraph suggest about what will come next?

What questions does this word/sentence/paragraph raise for me?

Does the author answer those questions right away?

2. Here are a few ways that you might start sentences as you make sense of what you're reading (see the sentence starters on p. 82).
3. Pretend the author is not there. You are not talking to the author; you are speaking aloud your own thoughts. Try making your comments in the third person rather than the second person: "I see what she means by this" rather than "I see what you mean by this." Once you have finished your reading aloud, you may discuss overall insights and questions with the author.
4. You do not need to solve any problems you find in the text or suggest revisions to the author. Your job is to try to make sense of the text in front of you as best you can and to speak aloud your process of doing so.

The writer:

You have to go over your draft at the same time as the reader and take notes on what the reader says. Write down any places the reader finds confusing. Write down how the reader interprets what you wrote. Write down any questions the reader has. *You may not answer the reader's questions. You may not speak until the reader is finished.* Once the reader has finished, you will have an opportunity to talk more globally about the paper.

allow the authors to hear at least two read-alouds, so they have a sense of what interpretations are unique to a reader and what are shared understandings.

Teaching Revision

For students to make the best use of the feedback they receive from think-alouds (or any peer review), they need to see models of writers using the feedback to revise. I have used the overhead projector to show students a passage with feedback, and we revise it together as a class, making explicit the relationship between the feedback and the decisions we make as authors. Importantly, sometimes those decisions involve ignoring some feedback, as it may

not be relevant to the author's purpose or audience. In one instance, I remember a reader questioning whether a term required explanation; the author ultimately decided that it did not for his particular audience.

Students may also benefit from reading a transcript of an author making use of think-aloud feedback or watching a video of an author thinking aloud while using feedback to revise. In Barbara M. Sitko's article describing the use of a type of think-aloud feedback for peer review, she provides a transcript of the think-aloud of the writer attempting to address the feedback provided by a reader. In this transcript, the writer decides to bring ideas from later in the essay into this first

paragraph, "diagnos[ing] a different kind of problem from those considered by the students in the previous excerpts [based on traditional feedback]," one that is more rhetorical than textual (177). In this case, the problem is one of "an arrangement of ideas that seems offensive to his reader" (177), and the writer responds by rearranging those ideas. Seeing such a transcript may provide additional support (beyond the class session) for some students to use feedback effectively.

Benefits for Students

While the read-aloud protocol technique by itself offers some benefits to students, the technique as part of a sequence of instruction including think-alouds of published texts offers more. According to Schriver ("Teaching"), whose reader-protocol teaching inspired the read-aloud protocol, reading think-alouds of readers making sense of texts can improve students' ability to pinpoint and diagnose aspects of a text that would cause readers difficulty. She begins with texts produced and "published" outside of the classroom context and with think-aloud protocols of readers from the intended audiences of the pieces. Working with upper-division college students in advanced composition classes, Schriver designed a series of ten lessons based on reader protocols of "problematic" texts in which students read the texts, predicted the "words, phrases, sentences, sections . . . that they felt would cause a lay reader trouble in understanding the text," and explained what problem would be caused for the reader by the text (189). Students then read think-aloud protocols of readers trying to make sense of the text (189). By the end of the ten lessons, students in the experimental group improved in their ability to predict text sections that would cause readers difficulty and "diagnose" the problems those text segments would cause.

As Schriver herself mentions, though, her study did not examine whether students actually improved in their production of texts that responded to readers or in their revision of their own texts to address potential reader concerns. It is in these aspects of student performance that the sequence I describe may help students improve. Because they have experienced the distance that Schriver describes in reading published texts and

then applied the same strategies to the texts they are working to revise, students become more proficient not only at recognizing problematic text sections but also at improving them.

Returning to the think-aloud strategies they have used while reading has additional benefits for students. As readers, it reinforces the strategies, providing students practice in a different context, which will help them transfer their use of these strategies into everyday reading activities. As writers, the practice helps them associate their texts more strongly with the published texts. Hearing their writing read in the same way they have heard published writing read can reinforce students' sense of authorship, that they are writing to communicate and must consider how their decisions affect readers. When I use this strategy with college students, they begin to talk about their writing much more frequently in terms of decision-making and the responses they hope to effect in readers.

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Critiques of Think-Alouds: What Does "Authentic" Mean?

Despite the benefits that Schriver has found from the use of think-aloud protocols and the success I have had with the technique as a peer-review strategy, critiques of the think-aloud protocol as a tool for research into cognition raise questions about how authentic students are being when they think aloud about the sense they are making of texts. Arguments about "reactivity"—whether thinking aloud actually changes what readers do when they read—may seem most important. James F. Stratman and Liz Hamp-Lyons, for instance, found that those who thought aloud as they considered revisions to a text not only made a different number of changes to the text but also made different kinds of changes, suggesting that think-alouds do change the underlying cognitive processes being studied.

This concern is less of a problem in a teaching situation. In the case of the think-aloud work that students do during both the reading described and the peer-review process, it is clear that part of my aim is to help students more consciously master

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reading strategies. I want them to become more strategic in their reading practices and to more actively engage with the texts they read. In the directions for the read-aloud protocol, for instance, I emphasize that I want students to stop at least after every sentence, which is far more often than readers typically pause to consciously process the meaning of the texts they are reading. Recent research on peer review, though, in which the researchers observed where readers' eyes stop as they read, suggests that readers stop to process unconsciously far more frequently than at every sentence, but few of those pauses rise to the level of receiving conscious attention (Paulson, Alexander, and Armstrong).

While it may be that stopping so frequently leads to a contrived reading performance,³ and it certainly feels unnatural to students at first, I have found that requiring students to stop so frequently is necessary to get them into the habit of articulating their thoughts as they read, and I gradually loosen up the every-sentence requirement as students improve in their read-aloud feedback. I also provide students guidance (and, in the sequence described, practice) in focusing their thinking and comments on understanding the piece and responding to the place of what they have just read in the overall text. While their reading and responses to each other's texts, therefore, will not be authentic in the sense of being exactly the responses that would go through their heads if they were reading silently, they will be authentic in the sense of being focused on meaning making.

Final Thoughts

I have outlined a sequence of instruction I suggest will lead to students providing readerly feedback on peers' writing, using an adaptation of Schriver's reader-protocol teaching that I call a read-aloud protocol. More importantly, however, I have suggested that writing teachers bring together strands of discussion about peer review, authentic writing, and the integration of reading and writing to return peer response to a place in students' overall literacy prac-

tices and to help students treat each other's writing as they do published writing. To do so, we must have students practice identical or nearly identical strategies with published texts to those they will use in peer review. At the same time, however, I am not arguing that we do away with all peer review that attends directly to improving students' texts. We must make such decisions appropriately, as students move through the composing process.

While I have described a sequence of instruction leading to the read-aloud protocol that focuses on improving students' reading by making explicit the cognitive strategies used by experienced readers, teachers can develop similar sequences with other text-response strategies—summary, reverse or descriptive outlining, analysis of appeals (*ethos, pathos, logos*), formal analysis of literary devices, even dialectical journals. Ideally, students will use those approaches first with published texts, then on each other's writing. If we wish students to transfer their learning about writing in our classes to writing that they do in other classes or for their own purposes, we must help them feel like authors composing for audiences who will read their work to understand it rather than merely to critique it. 

Notes

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2. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for the reminder to make this experience explicit.
3. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for that point.

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