

Talk About Understanding: Teacher Talk that Facilitates Children's Understanding

Ellin Oliver Keene

ellin@mosaicliteracy.com

www.mosaicliteracy.com

Key Questions

For Our Exploration Today

1. How do we know if students retain and reapply what we've taught
2. What do we mean when we talk about deeper understanding?
3. In what ways can we modify our language with students to enhance understanding?

The Outcomes of Understanding Cognitive Markers of Deep Understanding

The Outcomes of Understanding in Narrative Text

Thinking patterns that characterize deeper comprehension (narrative text)
1. Readers experience empathy - we sense that we are somehow <i>in the book</i> . Empathy can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character empathy in which we feel we know the characters, experience the same emotions, stand by them in their trials • Setting empathy in which we feel a part of the setting, • Conflict empathy in which we experience the internal and external conflict as if first-hand
2. Readers experience a memorable emotional response - the sense that what the reader feels may be part of his/her emotional life for a long time, he/she may feel moved to take action to mitigate a conflict in the world
3. Readers experience the aesthetic - we find particular aspects of a book very compelling; we feel a desire to linger with or reread portions of the text we find beautiful, well-written, surprising, humorous or moving
4. Readers ponder - we feel a desire to pause and dwell in new facets and twists in the text - we may want to reread in order to think more about certain ideas
5. Readers find ourselves thinking about the book when we're not reading - we generate new ideas and imagine new possibilities in characters' lives; our ideas are original, but related to the text
6. Readers advocate and evaluate - we may follow one character or plot element more intensively and may have the sense of being "behind" the character(s) or narrator - we want events to evolve in a particular way
7. Readers recognize patterns and symbols - we may experience a moment of insight or begin to use our knowledge of literary tools to recognize themes, motifs as well as symbols and metaphors in stories
8. Readers extrapolate from details in the text - we arrive at global conclusions from focal points in the text - these conclusions may reach beyond the scope of the text to other people, events, settings -- we may feel an urge to take action to solve a problem or act on an issue in our community
9. Readers evaluate the author's intentions, values and claims - we actively study the author's style and may choose to replicate it in our writing; we are aware of how he/she manipulates our thinking with tools such as diction, foreshadowing and metaphor; we sometimes argue with the author; we discern and evaluate the author's success in making the book credible and we are attuned to ways in which he/she affirms or changes our beliefs, values and opinions.
10. Readers remember - we develop a sense of permanence that comes with deeply understanding something - we know that we'll be able to use a concept we understand in a new situation

The Outcomes of Understanding in Informational Text

Thinking patterns that characterize deeper comprehension (expository text)
<p>1. Learners imagine themselves in real world situations, immersed in ideas. We have compelling questions. We take on the role of scientist, social scientist, mathematician.</p> <p>We:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • begin to understand thought leadership - we explore and seek to understand the lives of those who have made significant contributions to a field and begin to imagine how we might make contributions • understand the problems that led to discoveries and new solutions in the scientific, technological or social scientific world - we have a sense of the elements that make a situation problematic and some sense of the steps to be taken to solve the problem
<p>2. Learners experience a memorable emotional response - we feel a passion to learn more, compassion for others that may be affected by a problem and may be moved to take action to mitigate a conflict in the world</p>
<p>3. Learners experience the aesthetic - we feel a sense of wonder about the complexities and nuances related to a concept we are learning - we may feel compelled to reread portions and dig more deeply into the topic</p>
<p>4. Learners revisit and rethink - we choose to re-read or explore other texts in order to learn more about a concept - we feel that we want to review and rethink a concept</p>
<p>5. Learners generate our own hypotheses and theories about why and how things happen in the natural and social world; we check those hypotheses against those that have been tested</p>
<p>6. Learners direct our energy to comprehending to a few ideas of great import - we develop a sense of what matters most, what is worth remembering, and have the confidence to focus on important ideas rather than details that are unimportant to the larger text - we evaluate the information and make decisions about credibility or bias in what we read</p>
<p>7. Learners recognize patterns and text structures including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cause/effect - we use our background knowledge to discern how events affect each other • comparisons and contrasts - we develop a sense of how concepts are similar and different • chronology - we sense the general order of development or the progression of a series of ideas <p>problem/solution - when a problem is introduced, we begin to consider solutions and/or to anticipate solutions that may be presented in the text; we anticipate new problems and solutions related to earlier ones</p>
<p>8. Learners create schema -- we realize how newly learned concepts "fit" into existing background knowledge, that we can make sense in relation to what is already known - that our existing knowledge is accurate or inaccurate (and needs to be revised) - we look to a variety of sources to complete schema when we recognize that it is missing</p>
<p>9. Learners recognize the influence of beliefs/values/opinions - we may experience a sense of affirmation of existing beliefs/values/opinions and/or sense newly developing beliefs/values/opinions related to the text - we can give evidence to support them</p>
<p>10. Learners remember - we develop a sense of permanence that comes with deeply understanding something - we know that we'll be able to use a concept they understand in a new situation</p>

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Talk About Understanding Key Ideas

- Any child who can use an oral language to communicate by the age of five can think and learn at the highest levels
- Children deserve impeccable examples of oral language - we owe them the most thoughtful, precise, elegant, varied language we can muster
- Children need more opportunities to interact, using increasingly sophisticated oral language, with their teachers and other children
 - These opportunities deepen and secure understanding (as do written, artistic and dramatic opportunities to share thinking)
- Children who are asked to think at high levels consistently rise to the occasion

Classic Patterns in Teachers' Oral Language

- Talking “around” the key points
- Introducing too many learning objectives
- Non-specific praise
- Cutting students off before they've had a chance to fully develop their thinking
- Accepting the students' first thoughts without probing for deeper thinking
- Missing opportunities to introduce more sophisticated vocabulary and syntax
- Failing to vary the tone, volume and emotion in our speech
- Failing to vary the formality of our speech
- Segueing too quickly from our modeling to student responsibility for discourse
- Failing to label students' descriptions of thinking so they can be used later

Talk About Understanding Principles

10 Ways to Modify Language to Enhance Understanding

In order to enhance understanding when teaching or talking informally to students, we should:

1. **Vary the tone of our speech** - speak in the quietest tone appropriate for the situation; garner children's attention by speaking more quietly, not more forcefully.
2. **Vary the pace** of our talk depending on the context and the content.
3. **Vary the intensity and expression of emotion** we use verbally and non-verbally to reveal which concepts and ideas are most essential for children to understand and remember.
4. **Use sophisticated vocabulary**, but define the words in the context of the discussion; use these words repeatedly.
5. **Speak with heightened civility and respect**, making clear the distinction between settings in which informal language is appropriate and the need for more formal, academic language in serious learning situations.

In order to enhance understanding when we're responding to children's talk we should:

6. **Use silence** frequently, giving students an opportunity to think about concepts; serve as a model for taking time to think.
7. **Restate and probe** children's responses during discussions giving them a chance to further reflect on what they have said and to probe ideas further.
8. **Label children's ideas with language you want all children to use**; display the language your community uses to describe thinking and use the same language consistently across the content areas.
9. **Use a variety of syntax**—vary the length of sentences, depending on the purpose and content of instruction; expand what children are saying into more fully developed sentences without changing the central ideas they are trying to communicate.
10. **Facilitate the transition from one child's comment to a larger spirited and informed discussion about ideas**; show passion, surprise and moments of insight about ideas; model what it means to **consider the perspectives of others in conversation** and revise one's knowledge and beliefs because of those perspectives.

Oral Language Reflection Tool

Oral Language Behavior	What Am I Looking For?	Evidence
Teaching		
Vary the tone of our speech - use quieter tones to garner students' attention.	Using a range of tone and volume for specific purposes in the lesson	
Vary the pace of our talk depending on the content and context.	Using varying pace to emphasize particular points in the lesson	
Vary the intensity and expression of emotion.	Using a range of emotions, labeling and discussing how they relate to understanding	
Use sophisticated vocabulary and define it parenthetically during discussion.	Re-name and discuss vocabulary in multiple contexts	
Explicitly teach and promote civility in oral language interaction.	Demonstrate and practice civility and more formal, academic language at particular times, in specific settings	
Purposefully use silence in interactions with students.	Model by taking time in silence to think about your own responses; Give students time to think in silence	
Restate and probe, rather than immediately accept responses from students.	Delve deeper; ask, "What else?" "Then what were you thinking?"	
Explicitly teach the language of thought - label the students' ideas with language you want all students to use.	When possible, teach the appropriate terminology to more succinctly define an idea a student seeks to share. "That feeling is called 'empathy.'"	
Amplify simple syntax into more complex sentences.	Use complex sentences; encourage and/or help child to amplify (add to) his thinking. Practice "expanding" simple sentences for more complex ones.	
Demonstrate spirited and informed argument about ideas from text -- model what it means to consider the perspectives of others.	Demonstrate how a speaker defend his/her opinions -- Speak about ways in which you have been influenced by others' ideas	
Learning		
Students vary the content, pace and delivery of oral language to suit different situations.	Do they use appropriate content and 'tone of voice' and pacing based on their purpose and audience?	
Students seek to use recently introduced vocabulary, more sophisticated syntax, and	Do students use the vocabulary they have learned? Are their	

formal academic language in their interactions.	spoken sentences becoming more sophisticated?	
The students determine when to use colloquial/informal language and when to use more formal/ academic language appropriately, in different situations.	Do they know when to use slang/home language and when to use formal/academic language?	
Students take the time they need (even if it includes long periods of time in silence in the presence of others) to fully formulate and develop their thinking before they speak.	Do they give themselves the gift of silence in order to develop their thinking?	
Students show evidence of intently listening when others are speaking, probing others to develop their thoughts - describe when they are influenced by others' thinking	Do they listen and respond appropriately?	
Students appropriately initiate and sustain conversation with other students and adults including well-informed argument about texts, ideas and opinions	Do they start conversations? Are they at ease conversing with others? Do their conversations reflect influence/perspectives of others?	

A Year And A Day

by [Edwidge Danticat](#) January 17, 2011



In the Haitian vodou tradition, it is believed by some that the souls of the newly dead slip into rivers and streams and remain there, under the water, for a year and a day. Then, lured by ritual prayer and song, the souls emerge from the water and the spirits are reborn. These reincarnated spirits go on to occupy trees, and, if you listen closely, you may hear their hushed whispers in the wind. The spirits can also hover over mountain ranges, or in grottoes, or caves, where familiar voices echo our own when we call out their names. The year-and-a-day commemoration is seen, in families that believe in it and practice it, as a tremendous obligation, an honorable duty, in part because it assures a transcendental continuity of the kind that has kept us Haitians, no matter where we live, linked to our ancestors for generations.

By this interpretation of death, one of many in Haiti, more than two hundred thousand souls went *anba dlo*—under the water—after the earthquake last January 12th. Their bodies, however, were elsewhere. Many were never removed from the rubble of their homes, schools, offices, churches, or beauty parlors. Many were picked up by earthmovers on roadsides and dumped into mass graves. Many were burned, like kindling, in bonfires, for fear that they might infect the living.

“In Haiti, people never really die,” my grandmothers said when I was a child, which seemed strange, because in Haiti people were always dying. They died in disasters both natural and man-made. They died from political violence. They died of infections that would have been easily treated elsewhere. They even died of chagrin, of broken hearts. But what I didn’t fully understand was that in Haiti people’s spirits never really die. This has been proved true in the stories we have seen and read during the past year, of

boundless suffering endured with grace and dignity: mothers have spent nights standing knee-deep in mud, cradling their babies in their arms, while rain pounded the tarpaulin above their heads; amputees have learned to walk, and even dance, on their new prostheses within hours of getting them; rape victims have created organizations to protect other rape victims; people have tried, in any way they could, to reclaim a shadow of their past lives.

My grandmothers were also talking about souls, which never really die, even when the visual and verbal manifestations of their transition—the tombstones and mausoleums, the elaborate wakes and church services, the *desounen* prayers that encourage the body to surrender the spirit, the mourning rituals of all religions—become a luxury, like so much else in Haiti, like a home, like bread, like clean water.

In the year since the earthquake, Haiti has lost some thirty-five hundred people to cholera, an epidemic that is born out of water. The epidemic could potentially take more lives than the earthquake itself. And with the contagion of cholera comes a stigma that follows one even in death. People cannot touch a loved one who has died of cholera. No ritual bath is possible, no last dressing of the body. There are only more mass graves.

In the emerging lore and reality of cholera, water, this fragile veil between life and death for so many Haitians, has become a feared poison. Even as the election stalemate lingers, the rice farmers in Haiti's Artibonite Valley—the country's breadbasket—are refusing to step into the bacteria-infected waters of their paddies, setting the stage for potential food shortages and more possible death ahead, this time from hunger. In the precarious dance for survival, in which we long to honor the dead while still harboring the fear of joining them, will our rivers and streams even be trusted to shelter and then return souls?

A year ago, watching the crumbled buildings and crushed bodies that were shown around the clock on American television, I thought that I was witnessing the darkest moment in the history of the country where I was born and where most of my family members still live. Then I heard one of the survivors say, either on radio or on television, that during the earthquake it was as if the earth had become liquid, like water. That's when I began to imagine them, all these thousands and thousands of souls, slipping into the country's rivers and streams, then waiting out their year and a day before reëmerging and reclaiming their places among us. And, briefly, I was hopeful.

My hope came not only from the possibility of their and our communal rebirth but from the extra day that would follow the close of what has certainly been a terrible year. That extra day guarantees nothing, except that it will lead us into the following year, and the one after that, and the one after that. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: TOM BACHTELL

To Take Away...

- * Children long to be intellectually engaged
- * Depth and breadth in language use introduces them to the life of the mind
 - * Children can *learn how* to be intellectually engaged if we, and eventually, they can name and describe the thinking processes they use.
- * Our oral language matters as much as any other teaching move teachers make
- * Our oral language choices have everything to do with whether students understand