

# Revisiting Read-Aloud: Instructional Strategies That Encourage Students' Engagement With Texts

Vanessa Morrison, Lisa Wlodarczyk

Help bolster your students' comprehension with the strategies described in this article.

It is an extremely cold Monday morning in this rural Midwestern community, but warmth and an exciting conversational buzz hovers in one first-grade classroom. Several students are seated in the library corner, turning, pointing, chuckling, laughing, and reading various pages of their class-compiled storybooks. Others are flipping through the large chart papers clipped to the easel, reviewing and talking about ideas they contributed to the assortment of Venn diagrams. One small group is huddled together examining picture books their teacher has asked them to nominate for inclusion on this week's read-aloud class list (all student names are pseudonyms).

Ben: I like this one. I saw it on *Reading Rainbow* [holds up a copy of Jacqueline Briggs Martin's *Snowflake Bentley*].

[brief pause]

Tracy: Wow, look at this one [squeals with excitement]; it's 'bout a crab.

Megan: Let me see [inspects closely]; it looks like... ummm, the one in the other book.

Tracy: [opens eyes wide] It's by Eric Carle, you guys.

Megan: Yeah...the man who did *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *The Grouchy Ladybug*.

[The other two nod their heads in agreement, leaning over to look at the cover of the book.]

Ben: Let's ask Ms. Wlodarczyk to read it.

Tracy writes the title on the list as her peers continue to browse other books in the basket. The children continue to negotiate and select what titles to add to the read-aloud list. In this classroom, the students' talk is lively, energetic, and focused on literacy; they seem to find it especially delightful to locate their past work and share with a friend or thumb through a stack of books, looking for ones that hold and stimulate their interest in some way. Moments later, their teacher calls out, "OK, I need my friends to meet me on the carpet area. It's time to look inside a book."

These interactions demonstrate active student involvement with printed material, which it is hoped will lead to intrinsic motivation to read regularly and widely. Several research investigations have underscored the significance of text engagement and proficient readers (see, Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, & Vincent, 2003; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998).

Getting students to engage with texts involves a multiplicity of simultaneous activities, including motivation, content knowledge, literacy strategies, and social collaboration before, during, and after a literacy event (Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000; Block & Johnson, 2002; Guthrie, 2004). Engagement strategies can be thought of as vehicles with the capability to transfer and transport students' thinking from listening to a story to writing about their understanding.

This article describes evidence-based practices that encourage first graders' engagement with texts. We review reading as a transactional process, revisit the benefits of reading aloud to students, provide a rationale for promoting engagement with texts, discuss three literacy strategies implemented in one

first-grade classroom, and share examples of work contributed by the students.

## Reading as a Transactional Process

Reading is obtaining meaning from printed material (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2006). Historically, it was held that meaning resided exclusively in the text. However, Rosenblatt (1978) changed this perception when she posited that reading is a transactional process. The transactional theory maintains that the reader must transact with the text to make meaning. According to the transactional view, meaning does not reside in the text itself nor can meaning be found just with the reader; in fact, it is when the two transact that meaning occurs. Also, the transactional view further indicates that meaning is derived from the context of a given social interaction (Almasi, 1996).

Additionally, when reading or listening to text, the reader or the listener draws on several interacting knowledge sources to make meaning (Anderson, 1994). These knowledge structures include comprehension strategies, such as prior knowledge (Pearson, Hansen, & Gordon, 1979), making connections (King, Staffieri, & Adelgais, 1997), question answering, question generating, and presenting alternative perspectives (Chan, Burtis, Scardamalia, & Bereiter, 1992). It is essential to make students aware of these different knowledge sources; thus we must teach students how to apply a variety of strategies to promote their ability to read and listen.

Researchers indicate that motivation is a top predictor of whether students will engage with texts in meaningful ways. A reader's motivation can include the context of the reading situation, choice in text selection, and reading of high-interest material (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Pressley, 2006). Furthermore, because learning is a social activity, it is important for us to allow social collaboration as part of our instructional practice (Baker et al., 2000; Guthrie, 2004). Numerous studies claim that peer interactive learning is conducive and perhaps essential to cognitive development. Findings from a large body of studies show that students learn more through peer collaborative learning approaches compared with learning in isolation or teacher-dominated instruction (Slavin, 1983). Peer collaborative learning is an educational

practice where peers interact with one another to achieve learning goals (DeLisi & Golbeck, 1999).

## Benefits of the Read-Aloud Process

The read-aloud process has enormous benefits to literacy learning. Read-aloud is an instructional practice where teachers, parents, and caregivers read texts aloud to children. The reader incorporates variations in pitch, tone, pace, volume, pauses, eye contact, questions, and comments to produce a fluent and enjoyable delivery. Reading texts aloud is the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for successful reading (McCormick, 1977).

Trelease (2001) postulated that reading aloud is a powerful way to engage children in the literacy process. Several researchers and practitioners have demonstrated the significant impact of the read-aloud practice in different areas of reading development (Barrentine, 1996; Sipe, 2000). Klesius and Griffith (1996) concurred and explained that the read-aloud experience increases students' vocabulary development and comprehension growth. They also noted its potential to increase motivation to want to read while building the knowledge necessary for the successful acquisition of reading and writing.

Reading aloud to children builds and supports their listening and speaking abilities and enhances their overall language development (Barrentine, 1996; Sipe, 2000). Trachtenburg and Ferruggia (1989) agreed after they examined the impact of oral language development through the shared book experience with high-risk beginning readers. Both claimed their students developed a rich language base and came to understand the power of words by listening to stories, reading stories, and responding to stories through a variety of engagement activities.

## Rationale for Promoting Engagement With Texts

Teachers can create a variety of situations to extend opportunities for literacy learning; however, having students listen to a read-aloud then participate in an engagement activity relevant to the text is one context in which to keep conversation focused on a target learning goal. A related extension activity before,

during, or after a read-aloud can help students connect or extend their prior knowledge to the text being read and discussed (Hoyt, 1999). To help students become proficient readers and thinkers, it is necessary to teach them a handful of highly effective literacy strategies, such as techniques to use before, during, and after reading or listening to a text and various ways to monitor their understanding as they read or listen to a text.

Researchers and classroom teachers advocate that engaging students in extension activities as part of a read-aloud is good practice because the read-aloud event provides a beneficial context for students to see how language works (Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Gunning, 2010). Engaging with text requires active thinking and reflecting, which enhances comprehension; therefore, activating and making use of cognitive resources can enable understanding of texts.

## Alphaboxes in First Grade

According to Hoyt (1999), the Alphaboxes strategy is one way to encourage students to collaboratively interact with text. Alphaboxes can take the form of a prereading or a postreading activity to help stimulate students to think about and discuss key ideas in the text. For example, while notating examples under the appropriate alphabet letter in each box, students can generate questions; highlight important concepts; make connections; provide explanations; locate, identify, and discuss unfamiliar words; and present different points of view.

The Alphaboxes strategy requires students to move from simple recall of factual information to going beyond the information presented in the text. Generating questions, making connections, providing explanations, identifying and discussing unfamiliar vocabulary words, and presenting alternative perspectives are all higher-level cognitive processes that increase learning (Block & Johnson, 2002; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2006). Additionally, when students work with one another, their thinking is distributed among group members, and participants share cognitive responsibility while externalizing their thoughts as they work through tasks (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 1999).

On several occasions after the read-aloud of an informational storybook, Lisa (second author) used Alphaboxes as an extension activity in her first-grade

classroom. Informational storybooks are children's trade books that use a combination of fiction and nonfiction elements to tell the story. Typically, the students were placed in pairs or small groups of up to four members and given one copy of the storybook that was read aloud and a copy of the Alphaboxes sheet.

From January through April, when Vanessa (first author) observed the students and collected samples of their work, the students were experienced at listening to a story and working in small groups to complete the sheet. One note of caution, the students did not complete paper-and-pencil extension activities every day a read-aloud was conducted, although there were always discussions about the stories. For purposes of this article, Lisa reflects on how the students were taught to use Alphaboxes as a way to stay focused on the learning goal:

Well, they had a lot of experience listening to read-alouds and they knew that part of this process involved them participating in some type of talk, or art, or writing activity after the story...so with Alphaboxes, they didn't come to the experience totally not knowing how to work with their friends or how to ask questions, or how to try to figure out a word...and things like that. When I first introduced Alphaboxes to the first graders, I showed them how to look for the target words and write examples under the corresponding letters of the alphabet. At first, I asked that they come up with maybe five to six words per group, then, as we progressed, I increased the required number of boxes to be filled in. I have never required them to fill in all 26 boxes. Over time, I introduced them to coming up with questions, or trying to figure out a word they didn't know, or explaining a term or idea from the story and things like that. Now...it's almost the end of the year and without me asking...they are filling in more and more of the boxes. It's important to say that at the beginning...I talked them through the activity...I showed them how...I modeled for them...I required that they help me to select words and ideas from the storybook we read...to go in the boxes. So, I provided lots of support when we first started...and gradually they were able to do it on their own. At first, it was hard for some students, but putting them to work with others allowed them to see how to pick out ideas, words, and questions from the story. Now, it's much easier for these students...almost all of them can complete an Alphaboxes sheet. At the end of each activity, I always do a community share by allowing each group to share with everyone the ideas they came up with...the children like doing this...they look forward to it.

One book selected for read-aloud and the Alphaboxes activity was *A House for Hermit Crab* by Eric Carle (1987; see Figure 1). This is an informational storybook about a hermit crab that has outgrown its shell and must find a new one that can fit. Hermit Crab finds one the right size, but it is too simple, so Hermit Crab asks a variety of sea creatures to help decorate and make the new shell feel like home.

## Making Connections in First Grade

When reading a text, proficient readers activate numerous interacting knowledge sources to construct meaning of the message. One of these knowledge sources is schema, which is the stored body of knowledge one already has in memory. Schema theory maintains that reading is an active process, whereby readers construct new ideas and concepts based on their prior knowledge (Anderson, 1994). Using this same line of thinking, we can argue that when listening to a text, listeners must also make meaning by using already-established knowledge structures and integrate this with incoming information. That is, they interpret the information they are listening to and relate it to what they have already read, heard, or experienced. Additionally, the more prior knowledge one has stored about a topic, idea, or concept, the easier it is to understand a text discussing that topic, idea, or concept (Pearson et al., 1979).

Making connections is another effective way to encourage students to actively engage with text. Some (King et al., 1997; Morrison, 2005) claim that learning increases when students make connections to what they are reading. King and colleagues (1997) demonstrated in their study on peer interactive learning that thought-provoking questions forced students to link newly acquired information to material outside of the current lesson, as well as make connections to the concepts they were learning. Morrison's study on peer-led discussions of narrative and informational texts indicated that when students made connections to the material they were reading, listening to, or talking about, their understanding of the information accelerated. Thus, comprehension abilities are enhanced when students are required to make connections to texts (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmerman, 2006; Miller, 2002).

The crux of making connections lies at the time readers or listeners relate something they are reading or listening to, with something in their schema. The research literature identifies three types of connections: text-to-self connections, text-to-text connections, and text-to-world connections. Text-to-self connections involve making a connection between the target text and relating it to some personal experience, prior knowledge, or understanding—for example, an activity shared in the text and a similar one experienced by the reader or listener. Text-to-text

**Figure 1**  
Alphaboxes—Contributions From All Groups

<b>A</b> nemones—flowers in the ocean	<b>B</b> ig fish—scared of Big fish	<b>C</b> oral—hard stuff	<b>D</b> ecorate—his friends help decorate his shell
<b>E</b> arly in February, Hermit crab found new house	<b>F</b> ound—bigger house	<b>G</b> rown too big	<b>H</b> ermit Crab is a sea creature
<b>I</b>	<b>J</b> anuary is when he wanted to move	<b>K</b> eep—he wanted to keep his nice shell	<b>L</b> anternfish—fish that lights up
<b>M</b> ove—Hermit Crab wanted to move	<b>N</b> ot scared of his friends	<b>O</b>	<b>P</b> lain—not fancy
<b>Q</b> uick—he had to find a new house quick	<b>R</b> earranged—he moved pebbles around	<b>S</b> ea creatures are his friends	<b>T</b> idy—he likes his shell tidy
<b>U</b> rchins—little animals like pointy stars	<b>V</b> ery good at making friends	<b>W</b> hy did he go in the dark seaweed?	<b>XYZ</b>

Storybook used: *A House for Hermit Crab* by Eric Carle.

connections examine the relationship between the current text and relating it to texts read or listened to in the past—for example, comparing story elements in one book with another. Text-to-world connections require relating certain aspects of the text to what

is happening or what has happened in the larger community or world—for example, comparing current and historical events and people with that of the text.

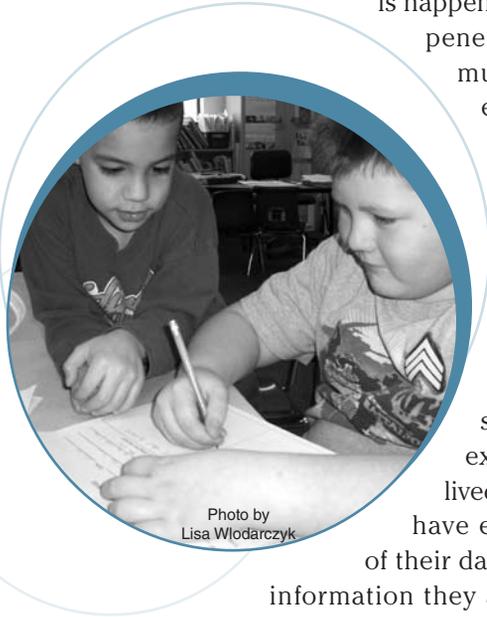
When teaching to make connections, students can be taught that their schemata includes experiences, which are lived through events they

have encountered as part of their daily lives; knowledge,

information they already have stored in their minds about a specific topic; and thoughts and opinions, ideas they have about people, places, and events in our world. Text-to-self connections are the first type of connections to teach students, followed by text-to-text, and then text-to-world. As with the teaching of all strategies, it is essential to model the process for students; the following suggestions can serve as a guideline (Miller, 2002):

Modeling text-to-self connections:

- Tell students that they are making text-to-self connections when they are reminded of something from the text they are reading or listening to and can connect it to something from their own lives.
- Tell students that you are going to show them a strategy that good readers use to help them understand stories they read or listen to.
- Conduct the activity by prereading your selected book and writing notes to guide your instruction.
- Gather students in a large group and tell them to watch and listen as you read aloud and make text-to-self connections.
- Read aloud, model, and verbalize the connections you are making.



- Be sure to stop frequently to share your connections.
- Be sure to use strategy-related language, for example, “This part where (refer to what happened) reminded me of...”
- Give students a turn and record their responses on large chart paper.

Modeling text-to-text connections:

- Tell students that they are making text-to-text connections when they are reminded of something from this text and can relate it to something they have read in another text.
- Tell students that you are going to show them another way to make connections to help them become better readers and listeners.
- Conduct the activity by selecting two books that offer similar elements as this will help to make the process explicit for students.
- Read aloud the selected texts on consecutive days.
- Model connections you are making between one book and the one you already read.
- Be sure you have preread and made notes on the sections of the text you want to refer to.
- Be sure to use strategy-related language, for example, “When I read this part of the story where (refer to the part), I thought about...” “This part is just like...” or “This is similar to...”
- Give students a turn, and record their responses on large chart paper.

Modeling text-to-world connections:

- Tell students that they are making text-to-world connections when something in the book makes them think about something that is happening or has happened in their neighborhood, community, country, or the world.
- Model the process as outlined for making text-to-self and text-to-text connections.
- Give students a turn and record their responses on large chart paper.

Figure 2 is a version of the responses given by the first graders as they worked together in making the three types of connections. After listening to a read-aloud of *Fireflies* by Julie Brinckloe (1985), the students contributed these connections. *Fireflies*

**Figure 2**  
**Making Connections—Contributions From All Groups**

Text-to-self	Text-to-text	Text-to-world
I catch fireflies in the summer time and put them in jars, but I let them go cause I don't want them to die.	It happened in the evening.	If someone locks you up, you will be sad.
It's really fun cause you have to jump high to reach the ones flying over your head.	It happened outside.	You can't lock up wild things.
I catch them too, and it's fun seeing who gets the most.	They are about fireflies.	You can't put so many ( <i>fireflies</i> ) in one jar.
I wanted to find out what he would do with them in the end because I always let them go.	Fireflies wanted to be with their family.	Sometimes you can't have something you want.
I was scared for them when he went to bed and left them in the jar. I never did that.	All the fireflies are happy in the end.	

tells the story of a young boy who joins his friends to catch fireflies. He catches hundreds and puts them in one jar. Excited and happy to see their bright glow, he places the jar on the nightstand, but soon the jar grows dim. Saddened by this sight, the boy releases the fireflies into the night where they immediately begin glowing again. For text-to-text connections, the students were encouraged to relate *Fireflies* to *The Very Lonely Firefly* by Eric Carle (1995), a story they had heard earlier about a firefly who had just hatched but found itself all alone. The story traces the journey of its quest to find other fireflies.

Teachers can use the strategy of making connections to support and enhance students' understanding of texts, which is the ultimate goal of reading or listening. When students make connections, they are actively constructing meaning of the event, thus building higher levels of learning.

### Discussion Web in First Grade

Meaningful conversational discussion has enormous value to the learning process (Cullinan, 1993), as it stimulates and extends students' thinking (Cramer, 2004) while building and supporting social learning communities (Fish, 1980). Discussion enables collaborative sharing of ideas, alternative perspectives, and problem solving during learning (Almasi, 1996).

Discussion allows students to revisit, question, and clarify text ideas, thus promoting higher cognitive abilities.

Alvermann (1991) and Vacca and Vacca (2008) indicated that one effective strategy for deeper processing during reading or listening to texts is through a discussion web. A discussion web is a graphic organizer that enables students to examine both sides of an issue before agreeing on a conclusion. This particular strategy is an adapted approach developed by McTighe and Lyman (cited in Alvermann, 1991). The technique calls for students to think of individual ideas based on their knowledge of the text, then work as a pair to record, discuss, and resolve their perspectives before meeting with another pair of partners to share these ideas. The foursome then nominates a speaker to present this information to the entire class.

The discussion web is an excellent activity to promote students' engagement with text because it allows for the examination of various points of view within a social setting. This comprehension activity encourages students to work collaboratively in small groups and promotes the opportunity for all voices to be heard. It also encourages argumentation of an open-ended question because it requires students to become proponents or opponents of an issue by offering valid reasons in defense of or opposition to

the focus question. Further, this approach develops and enriches the thinking, listening, talking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing abilities of students.

At the first-grade level, it is important to modify the proposed discussion web as previously outlined to meet the developmental level of this age group. Lisa selected the discussion web as an extension activity because it allowed the students to move beyond simple yes-or-no responses when answering a question. To introduce the first graders to this approach, a prepared, open-ended question was always asked after the read-aloud experience.

At first and on three different occasions, Lisa asked a question and proceeded to present reasons as to why she agreed or disagreed with the idea. These initial exposures provided a context for the students to see and learn how to approach this technique. A few days later, the students were simply required to share their ideas verbally when the open-ended question was asked. Two weeks later, the students were placed in pairs, shown, and supported on how to carry out the strategy similar to what was described earlier.

The following is a description of how one discussion web activity was conducted. First, the students were prepared for the reading, and this was followed by a read-aloud and discussion, then the students worked in pairs before sharing their responses with the entire class. All of the children were seated on the carpet area when Lisa took her seat and held up a picture book.

Lisa: Okay, friends, it's time to *look inside a book*. Today, I want to share with you a story called *The Talking Eggs*; it's written by Robert San Souci and illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. [shows the cover, holding the book at students' eye level] And it received two important recognitions: it's a Caldecott Honor book and it received the Coretta Scott King Award.

The students immediately started talking because this piece of information reminded them of their study on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a topic covered under heroes, as part of Black History Month.

Lisa: Okay, I want you to listen as I read.... What do you think this book might be about?

The students provided several predictions including having something to do with eggs. Lisa pointed out the smiling faces on the eggs the young girl was carrying in her basket before reading aloud the text printed on the inside front jacket.

Lisa: Hmm...this reminds me of a story we read earlier.

Several students: "Cinderella...Cinderella."

Lisa: Yes, Cinderella. What do you remember about the Cinderella story we read?

The students offered numerous responses relevant to elements within the Cinderella story. Lisa began an expressive reading of the story, showing students the illustrations, pausing to ask questions, stopping to make connections with other texts read in the past, commenting on the illustrations, and questioning the meaning of some words used in the story that may be unfamiliar to the students.

After the read-aloud, students were assigned to a partner and given a discussion web sheet.

Lisa: Okay, before you talk with your partner, I want you to think about this question and come up with some ideas. The question for our discussion web is, Do you think the mom and daughter Rose deserve to be rich and live in the city? Then I want you to talk with your partner and write your ideas down on the sheet.

The students were given 10 minutes to work in pairs before coming together to share their responses as a large group. Figure 3 shows the collaborated responses based on *The Talking Eggs*, a tale about two young girls. In the story, the mother makes the younger one, Blanche, do all the work, while she and the older daughter sit on the porch and dream of becoming fine ladies. Blanche is very unhappy until one day when she gives a thirsty old lady a drink of water and life for Blanche quickly changes.

Teachers can use the discussion web as a strategy to stimulate collaborative discussions of texts. This technique allows the opportunity for all students to voice their individual point of view and pose alternative perspectives, which can enhance critical thinking abilities. Alvermann (1991) discussed several ways to adapt the discussion web for a variety

**Figure 3**  
**Discussion Web—Contributions From All Groups**

I agree because	I disagree because
They need another chance.	They were very mean because they were hitting the girl.
They were poor.	They were bad and mean.
They had an old, broken house.	They were mean to Blanche.
They might get a job.	Rose was mean to the old lady.
They might not be so mean in the city.	They should not be rich.
They might learn to love Blanche.	They were mean and rude and naughty.
	You need to be good to live in the city.
	They did not like Blanche.
	They let Blanche do all the work.

of grade levels and when teaching content area material, such as mathematics, science, social studies, and literature. We believe teachers can also adapt the discussion web to meet specific forms of writing, for example, persuasive arguments and discussion pointers where students are required to take a stance, provide evidence to support their claims, and formulate reasons why the evidence supports their claims (Hampton & Resnick, 2009). Additionally, the strategy can be modified to brainstorm and prepare students for debates about a variety of topics, for instance, when presenting arguments about moral values and social justice.

## Strategy Engagement Can Enhance Meaning

It is widely agreed that strategy knowledge is critical for effective learning. Some have argued that knowing what strategy to apply and when to apply it can significantly improve students' understanding (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2006). Because comprehending information is the essence of reading or listening to texts, it is essential to teach a handful of highly effective strategies very early.

Alphaboxes, making connections, and the discussion web encourage comprehension development and help meet first-grade end-of-year benchmarks (Reutzel & Cooter, 2008). It is important to note that although some of the students' responses may appear simplistic, we see it as valuable when considering

their age and developmental level. Their verbal and written language enabled us to see how and what they were thinking as they articulated their responses to the given tasks.

When students are required to engage with texts using strategies such as the three discussed in this article, their understanding is enhanced. Additionally, the paired and small-group collaboration promoted motivation, which fostered increased interest and learning of the material. Furthermore, the read-aloud context can serve as a springboard to engage students in numerous activities relevant to the target learning goal. Read-alouds, alphaboxes, making connections, and the discussion web are all powerful techniques to support young students as they begin wading into the reading process.

### Note

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*Morrison teaches at Adrian College, Adrian, Michigan, USA; e-mail vmorrison@adrian.edu. Wlodarczyk now teaches first grade in Oahu, Hawaii, USA; e-mail lwlodarczyk@adrian.edu.*



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