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Sincerely,
Karen Haag

**Revive Your Readers:
These Reading Strategies Work for Every Age**

By Karen Haag

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To ease my tenth graders into my first Socratic Seminar on *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, I asked an easy question. Just ask a question that everyone can answer, I'd been advised on my first time out. So I asked, "Tell me something you remember about the book. What stands out in your mind from your reading as you sit in this circle today?" Most of the class had read about half of the book by this January morning, and so they would have plenty of pages on which to reflect.

But not right away. Instead, there was silence. Silence. Long, tense silence.

"Remember," I reminded them, "I am recording points this morning for anyone who contributes to the discussion," hoping someone would help me out.

"The monster," Shanita finally said.

"Tell me more about the monster and what you remember," I responded.

"You know, the monster. That was the best part."

"I don't remember a monster in the book," I said, scanning the faces and pleading with my body language for the others to come to my aid.

Instead, most of my class yelled back, "Mrs. Haag! You're confusing us."

"Well, go back to the text and read for me what you're talking about."

Silence. Long, tense silence.

Some flipped through the pages. A couple dropped their heads to the desk, off to sleep again. Most just did nothing. Finally, one student focused our attention back to the earliest chapters, and read:

"The thing in question on the port quarter!

"All eyes were turned toward the point indicated. There, a mile and a half from the frigate, a large black body emerged more than a yard above the waves. Its tail, violently agitated, produced a considerable eddy. An immense track, dazzlingly white, marked the passage of the animal, and described a long curve.

"The frigate approached the cetacean, and I could see it well. I estimated its length at 150 feet. As to its other dimensions, I could only conceive them to be in proportion.

"While I was observing it, two jets of vapour and water sprang from its vent-holes and ascended to a height of fifty yards, thus fixing my opinion as to its way of breathing."

My students looked at me as if to say, "Well?"

Now that I understood the mix-up, I gently tried to clear up the confusion. I referred them to another passage 9-10 pages later, about the professor climbing out of the water.

"I wriggled myself quickly to the top of the half-submerged being or object on which we had found refuge. I struck my foot against it. It was evidently a hard and impenetrable body, and not the soft substance which forms the mass of great marine mammalia.

"The blow produced a metallic sound. Doubt was no longer possible. The animal, monster, natural phenomenon that had puzzled the entire scientific world, and misled the imagination of sailors in the two hemispheres, was, it must be acknowledged, a still more astonishing phenomenon, a phenomenon of man's own making."

I explained. At first most of the characters in the book *had* thought there was a monster in the sea, but by now the three main characters realized that the monster was some new vessel made of steel, and it was indestructible. The author described what we would now label a submarine as a monster in the beginning of the novel because the people did not know what strange creature was destroying their ships. At the time this story was written, submarines did not exist.

"The monster is the submarine you've been reading about, the sub on which Ned Land, Conseil and the professor are riding," I concluded.

"Oh," Shanita said, discouraged. "Mrs. Haag, do I still get my points?"

I knew I was in the right place to answer Shanita's question in the positive. "Absolutely. You get points for any risks you take," I said.

For one year, I team-taught one 10th-grade world-literature class during first period at the high school and worked the rest of my day as a literacy coach at the elementary school around the corner. Diane Wildman, a well-respected high-school English teacher, invited me to co-teach this diverse collection of kids who struggled to understand texts. Her 9th-grade colleagues at Vance High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, recommended a group of students that would come together to improve their reading and writing skills in 10th grade under Diane's guidance. The class of about 25, depending on the day, was balanced between Caucasian and minority students, males and females. Three students were mainstreamed in English class for the first time, having come to us from Exceptional Education classes. Five students were learning English as a second language.

The diverse class shared a dislike for reading, reading classes and comprehension tests. The stumbling block for most of our students was attitude, not aptitude. In individual interviews, all but three students indicated that the last book they read all the way through was in elementary school. Comments like, "I try not to fall asleep. Reading makes me tired; I just go out and play basketball. I don't read about it; I'm too active to stay inside and read," were the norm. I suspected that for many of the students, their intense dislike for reading had grown out of an inability to understand what they read. How were we going to teach them to comprehend in a year when they had to read difficult-to-find, adolescent, world literature texts like *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* for their end-of-year state literacy test?

Diane and I reasoned that the recommended students could work their way out of "regular" English classes and pass their writing test with the right instruction if they could see their success. Armed with a book called *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Reading in a Reader's Workshop* (1997, second edition 2007), we set out to teach our students the proficient reader strategies they so badly needed to understand what they chose to read. (See sidebar, Keene and Zimmermann's List of Seven Proficient Reader Strategies.) These strategies were the very same ones that my elementary colleagues and I had taught these students' younger brothers and sisters since *Mosaic of Thought* hit the bookstores. Would the same approach work here? The thought of finding out energized us.

**Keene and Zimmermann's
List of Seven Proficient
Reader Strategies (1997)**

1. Ask questions.
2. Make personal connections.
3. Create visual and other sensory images.
4. Use a variety of fix-up strategies.
5. Retell or synthesize.
6. Draw inferences.
7. Determine the most important ideas or themes.

A huge problem in high schools is finding sets of books students can read. From author Margaret Mooney I learned that students must read three different levels of texts to advance in comprehension (1990). When reading books 1–2 years below their reading level, students learn to enjoy books. Reading such books builds confidence, fluency and expression. Most adults read John Grisham novels at the beach, not *War and Peace*, even though they could. It's when reading magazines and comic strips, romance novels and mysteries that we relax and have fun with reading. We nurture our desire to read with "easy-reads".

Reading books on reading level (missing no more than 10 words per 100) gives a child a chance to try out reading strategies. If children find more unfamiliar words than familiar ones, comprehension breaks down no matter how good their figuring-out-word strategies are. Teachers can estimate a child's reading level in my state (North Carolina) by looking at the data

returned from the state end-of-grade tests where lexile scores are listed. (For more on lexiles, visit my website www.liketoread.com – Getting Started – Reading Levels – lexiles.) Teachers can also estimate a student’s reading level by listening to a student read. If a child misses 5 or more words per page *and* cannot explain what is happening, then the book is too hard. Reading excessively difficult books as a steady diet actually makes readers regress.

There are reasons to read difficult books, as well. By reading texts above grade level, students get a feel for what they will be able to read next. Reading challenging books is an efficient way to learn new words in context. However, children need support to read these texts. Such support comes when an adult reads the book to them, they listen to the book on tape, they receive instruction on how to read the book with a dictionary, or they read the book with a partner nearby so they can ask questions.

Our plan

The world-literature novels are definitely difficult texts for these students. Therefore, we decided to read these novels together at the beginning of the year so they would be prepared for our 10th-grade writing test in March. During second semester, students would choose novels to read and talk about in pairs or groups. We asked the students what strategy they wanted to study first. Their biggest worry was what to do when they came across unfamiliar words, besides sounding them out. Not surprisingly, our group selected Keene and Zimmermann’s fourth strategy to study first.

Since the strategies can’t be used in isolation, we fell into a comfortable pattern of teaching a mini lesson on a specific strategy and then practicing the strategy along with the others. We provided class time for the students to read the text in class and/or discuss the use of the strategy. During discussion time, the students talked about what they didn’t understand, as opposed to trying to answer questions we had prepared to check their understanding. Our students started off talking in pairs, then small groups and, eventually, literature circles and Socratic seminars. Finally, the students recorded what they learned *about reading* in their response notebooks. (See sidebar, Lesson Plan.)

Lesson Plan

- I. Minilesson
- II. Read silently. Some read along with a book on tape.
- III. Students discuss how they made use of the reading strategy or what details confused them.
- III. In response notebooks, students write a reflection explaining *how they learned to read better*.

I began the year by explaining to my students the importance of reading easy, challenging, and just-right books on their own and in class. I was sure that they would get enough challenging reading from their textbooks. In addition, I heard Dr. Cecil Mercer explain that students who read 40 minutes per day, inside and outside of school, scored in the 90th percentile on tests (1996). I challenged our students to find materials they liked and wanted to read, to select a variety of text levels, and to read for 20-40 minutes a day. We gave them time in class to help them meet that goal.

In the past, I had asked children to read aloud in front of one another to “get through the text” or assess what students could read. My reading of *Good-bye Round Robin: 25 Effective Oral Reading Strategies* convinced me to change... immediately (1998). Author Michael Opitz maintains that when students are called on to read aloud and haven’t had a chance to prepare the text, the practice leads to:

1. Inaccurate view of reading
2. Faulty reading habits
3. Unnecessary sub vocalizations
4. Inattentive behaviors
5. Decreased comprehension for all students
6. Loss of valuable class time
7. Anxiety and embarrassment

I looked through my books and scanned the Internet to see what else I could find about reading aloud in front of peers. I found no sources that supported the practice.

Harris and Hodges define round robin reading as “the outmoded practice of calling on students to read orally one after the other” (222).

Sloan and Lotham concur: “In terms of listening and meaning-making, this strategy is a disaster.”

Allington also agreed. “In the face of [round robin reading], it isn’t surprising that struggling readers begin to read hesitantly. I describe the word-by-word behavior as ‘checking the traffic’ response. When struggling readers grow used to a steady stream of rapid, external interruptions, they begin to read with an anticipation of interruptions - word-by-word” (74).

Finally, Linda Hoyt said in her NC Title I keynote presentation, “ ‘Tangled readers’ listening to ‘tangled readers’ is not beneficial. There are no good models for good reading. Rehearsal is a

must for readers who will be reading aloud. Kids love round-robin reading because they are used to it, and they are only on the spot a short period of time. Promise the children that if they want to read something aloud, you will find them an audience after they have rehearsed the story. Maximize read-aloud time by having all children read aloud or read silently at the same time" (2001).

Round robin reading and its sister, popcorn reading, are still used despite the overwhelming advice by experts against the practice. Google Round Robin Reading today and you still find articles such Edutopia's "11 Alternatives to 'Round Robin' (and 'Popcorn') Reading," December 1, 2014:

Round Robin Reading (RRR) has been a classroom staple for over 200 years and an activity that over half of K-8 teachers report using in one of its many forms, such as Popcorn Reading. RRR's popularity endures, despite overwhelming criticism that the practice is ineffective for its stated purpose: enhancing fluency, word decoding, and comprehension. Cecile Somme echoes that perspective in *Popcorn Reading: The Need to Encourage Reflective Practice*: "Popcorn reading is one of the sure-fire ways to get kids who are already hesitant about reading to really hate reading."

If the experts aren't convincing enough, I asked adults to talk about their school experiences. I heard horror stories that persuaded me that every teacher should stop asking students to read unrehearsed text aloud to their peers. Adults tell of figuring out what page they would be asked to read by counting ahead, reading and rereading their page or paragraph, and finally, when called on, stumbling through the reading. They talk of nerves and embarrassment and hatred of class. They didn't comprehend anything at all: not what they read and certainly not what others had read.

In our high school class, we eliminated reading aloud for one another, unless students had rehearsed the reading. The students read most of their assignments silently. (For alternatives to round robin reading, consult Edutopia's article referenced previously.)

To boost understanding, we sometimes used movie clips to help students visualize the parts where comprehension broke down. The clips helped by building background knowledge. For example, once the students saw the submarine in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, they followed the story line of the book better.

Since the texts were so challenging by Margaret Mooney's standards, sometimes I scaffolded the task by reading the beginning of the chapter aloud up to the best part, and then releasing the students to read the rest. Reading aloud allowed me to talk through what I do when I come across words I don't know. It gave me a chance to model the Fix-Up Strategies. (See sidebar, "Fix-Up Strategies".)

I told my students that as adults they would use the same strategies they were learning now; they would be reading harder texts. Therefore, students benefitted from me thinking aloud and the discussions we had. Also, students heard a fluent, expressive reading of the text. By listening to me read aloud to the climax of the chapter, students were motivated to find out what happened and they wanted to read the rest. By giving them time in class to read, all students practiced "getting in the reading zone," as we called it. They built their ability to sustain reading time by practicing in class with a coach by their side. Diane and I were right there to answer questions about how to read when the meaning stopped making sense. Modeling and discussing one strategy and how it integrated with the others spanned approximately one month of study.

The students had to read long, challenging books like *Hunchback of Notre Dame* for 10th-grade World Lit. We sometimes scaffolded the reading by summarizing half of the chapter for them. By talking them through the initial details and asking the students to read the rest, we moved them through texts more quickly. The more stories in their heads, the more they had a sense of story structure, vocabulary, and accomplishment.

We knew that they would not always need these supports. When faced with students who had not read *anything* by choice since they were 10 years old, we wanted to build enjoyment of reading quickly. Pretty soon, I began to call on the more able readers to read a chapter at home and summarize the first few pages for their classmates – for extra points, of course! The responsibility for summarizing quickly shifted from me to my students as they volunteered to take on the task.

Finally, we read every book we would study on tape so that students could use listening as an intervention. Some students needed the support of hearing the words read aloud --- slowly ---

11 Fix-Up Skills

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1. Sound out the word.
2. Use context clues.
3. Remember. Use connections.
4. Use the picture.
5. Skip the word and read on.
6. Reread.
7. Read slower.
8. Look for syllables.
9. Take a guess
10. Use the (online) dictionary.
11. Ask for help.

especially our English Language Learners. Scaffolding the reading so that struggling readers could access difficult texts built confidence for these shaky readers.

In the beginning, Diane and I thought that *all* the books the students would need to read for World Literature would be too hard for *every* student.

To find out, I began by gathering information about our kids. I read through their cumulative folders and built a grid of past data including scores on end-of-grade tests and writing tests that I carried with me. I made notes of past teachers' comments and suggestions.

In typical elementary-teacher style, I was determined to make time for each student to read aloud to me privately at least once per quarter. The plan was for one student to read to me each day at the end of the class period while others worked on assignments. If I was lucky enough to carry out the plan despite fire drills and other interruptions, I took notes on the oral reading of a book he/she selected to read to me. I asked a few questions about their reading life, praised their good reading habits and taught one or two reading skills I thought would have the greatest value. We set a reading goal together that we both recorded in our reading response journals. (See sidebar, Sample Reading Goals.)

The dialogue in the coaching sessions provided fodder for whole-class mini lessons from which others benefited. For example, many students knew that a dictionary is a book of definitions. However, few realized that each word is spelled phonetically also and is included to help readers figure out how to say words. Once students can pronounce a word, they often recognize the word. I used conference time and mini lesson time to encourage and remind them to do so. By the end of the year, we progressed to more difficult lessons like debating which words were necessary to look up, which words they could figure out in context, and which words to let slide.

Sample Reading Goals

- Read 20-40 minutes per day.
- Find a book you like to read. Use other students, teachers and media specialists for help.
- Read in chunks or phrases, not word for word.
- Don't try to read every word correctly right now. Look ahead and try to build speed.
- Keep vocabulary pages in your response journal. Record the new word, and a guess about what it means. Ask someone, look it up or bring it to class to ask about.
- When the reading doesn't make sense, stop and think a minute. See if you can figure out what is happening. If not, mark the spot to bring to class and ask about.
- Use the sound spelling in the dictionary to figure out how to say words. Once you know how to say them, you may recognize them.
- Skip names or make up a pseudonym.

When students read to me, I recorded whether they omitted or substituted words and whether those mistakes changed the meaning of the reading. I watched to see what they did when they came across words they didn't know; I wanted to know whether they discovered and corrected their errors when the reading didn't make sense, if they read smoothly, and if they could talk about what they read.

The rest of the class wrote reflections while one student read to me in the last 10 minutes of class. I found that if I put my chair in the classroom doorway and the reader's chair out in the hall along the wall, I could watch the class and the student could read to me in relative privacy at the same time. These students did not want to read in front of their peers and, luckily, very few people walked past our doorway. Excusing this student from writing at the end of the period served as additional motivation for the reader to read to me.

In the fall, each child read to me from the novel we were studying, picking up where he/she had left off the day before. However, in the spring, each student read the same 250-word passage from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, a Puffin Classic the students had read in class. This time, I wanted to compare their reading abilities. I recorded the results in my journal:

April 18, 2000 --- I cannot emphasize the value of reading one-on-one with these kids enough. I learned valuable information. In my mind, Tony was a weak reader and yet he is not! Plus, he's made progress since the last time he read with me. His attitude is much better AND he's reading on his own. He talked to me today about finishing the book Holes and how he read two whole periods yesterday. He was proud of that accomplishment. He read with expression. He talked about how the first half of Harry Potter was slow going but it sped up in the end. He enjoyed the Quidditch game and talked about the fantasy element and how he wished his world was like that.

MaryLisa is also a good reader - almost 100%. Yet, she's been reading a book on tape. I think I would have encouraged her to read without that support to build her speed, had I realized. She said she likes "just following along," yet she's one of our weakest performers in discussion.

I had a hard time finding time to read with each student, but I had made up my mind. I am grateful I did find the time. I read with each child just twice that year. If I could do it all over, I would read individually with each student more often. However, even one time gave me information I could not have gotten any other way.

For example, the individual reading sessions helped me discover that several children who scored in the lowest percentiles of *The Comprehensive Reading Test* actually could read fluently. They read with expression and could talk in detail to me about what they read. Fortunately, they could read. By listening to them, I knew my job was to teach them how to take tests.

I also found students who read word-for-word, painfully calling each word and never getting into the flow and rhythm of the text. For some students, it took just a few minutes to explain how to read the sentences in chunks, combining words that naturally go together. The trick is to read for meaning, not to sound out each individual word. For example, in the sentence, "The brown dog got caught under the wooden fence," the reader needs to train the eye to chunk "The brown dog" together, then "got caught" together, and finally, "under the wooden fence." together. By reading ahead, in essence scanning the text, and reading words in meaningful groupings, the reader can learn to read more fluently. The technique worked miracles for some. Immediately, their reading sounded more like speaking, and they gained confidence and speed.

I loved individual reading sessions. I was able to see patterns, such as the types of words and problems that gave each student difficulty. I could not have gathered that information from any standardized test. Several students also referenced the strategy in their final reflections at the end of the year. "My individual reading session with Mrs. Haag improved. I read faster and I pronounced words I didn't think I would say," Yang wrote me after his spring reading session. "I'm trying to read faster now. I'm looking at phrases."

Since everyone eventually read with me in a one-on-one session, no one was singled out. No one knew what reading advice was shared, plus the students and I saw immediate improvement. Huddling together in the corner of the room, teacher and student, gave me the chance to advise the student. That tip carried more weight than making pronouncements to the whole class. Plus, reading and coaching in one-on-one sessions, though few, matched instruction to specific reading problems and "took" better than teaching the whole class.

For example, names stymied some students. "Names are often impossible to sound out," I told them. I explained that sometimes it is all right not to be able to pronounce a word. Furthermore, it was okay to either substitute another name or even just scan the word when reading silently. The reader was able to try the idea right there with my guidance. I helped readers by showing them how to let go of the expectation to read word for word

Many of our students read just any word when they came across a word they didn't know. Usually the word they conjured up at least had the same first letter. But, sometimes the word they called was utter nonsense. In the safety of a one-on-one session, I could say, "Does that make sense to you?" A smile. A glance downward. "No," came the reply. I explained to these 16-year-olds that reading just has to make sense. Self-correcting is also okay.

Readers stop and figure out what is wrong. They apply many strategies before they give up. They stop, puzzle over words, take words apart, look for words within the word that they recognize, try to remember where they've seen that word before, look words up in a dictionary and ask people close to them what words mean and how to pronounce them. Readers get better at reading by practicing all they know about reading better. Furthermore, I surprised them by telling them that no one ever reads perfectly. There will always be harder texts, more challenging reading assignments and mistakes. Adults use the same strategies, although they do, in time, become more automatic. (See Fix-Up Strategies, above.)

The students were at first wary of the individual reading sessions. They thought they had to read flawlessly when they read for the teacher – the first of many myths we worked to dispel. Teenagers are normally self-conscious when reading aloud, and they often cannot remember what they read. With older students I discovered that they needed a minute after they read aloud, to reread and prepare to talk to me about the text.

However, by the end of the year the students valued the private-tutoring time as much as I did. A student wrote a reflection typical of the others: "My individual reading session with Mrs. Haag was real good because of her being so calm. But my reading part was alright and this was the first time somebody asked me about my reading."

When spring came, we played out a different scenario than the Socratic-seminar experience of January. A quick scan of the classroom revealed a triad of students gathered around a tape recorder in the corner of the classroom "reading" the second Harry Potter book. Three others were in the library trying to find enough copies of Orson Scott Card's next book in the Ender series. A group of students were clarifying their misconceptions about *Clover* in a discussion circle. One student worked on his vocabulary notebook, where he had collected almost 100 pages of words he was interested in learning. Two teens were reading different books using their talk time to compare how authors develop characters. Several students were scanning the Orson Scott Card website to read about their now-favorite author. Others were reading and "in the zone," or preparing for discussion time by writing in their daybooks.

Diane and I found out the answer to the question we posed at the beginning of the year: teaching how to use proficient reader strategies was successful for these high-school students. We were stunned but pleased that every student passed the 10th-grade reading and writing assessments. However, I was more delighted that by spring, our students were reading one book on their own all the way through every couple weeks. Our readers came to us lacking reading experience and confidence. We simply scaffolded the reading experience with summaries, visuals, books on tape, and coaching sessions to make reading as pleasurable as it had been in elementary school.

Once these 10th graders felt comfortable reading again, they began to read more. Providing practice time for students to read in class proved to students that they could build sustained reading time again. Studying and recording how to read helped students construct their understanding of the proficient reader strategies so they knew what to do when reading no longer made sense. Mostly, however, we asked them to choose books and gave them time in class to read them. We asked them to do what every teenager wants to do: get with their buddies and talk.

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