

Analyzing Student Responses for Evidence of Thoughtful Literacy

It goes without saying that teachers who want to assess the extent to which children can think about text will need to ask questions that require thoughtful responses. If the passage states that the rabbit was wearing a blue sweater and the teacher asks “What color was the rabbit’s sweater?” then she is asking a question that calls for *recitation* of factual knowledge. There is no point expecting students to engage in discussion; there is nothing to discuss. If on the other hand, a teacher asks whether a child thinks that, based on what we found out about the rabbit in the story, the rabbit would be someone that the child would like for a friend, we have an entirely different situation. In the latter case, the teacher has in essence issued an *invitation* to the child to think about the story in light of his/her own experiences with friendship and to share those thoughts with others. This type of questioning serves to open a window on the mind of the reader and lets the teacher see evidence of the presence or absence of clear thinking.

Consider the following passage, written for 3rd grade children. Following the passage, we will first describe what we would like thoughtful readers to grasp from the reading, and suggest two questions designed to elicit thoughtful reactions. Then we will examine some children’s actual responses to those questions for evidence of insight and higher level comprehension.

The Championship Game

At the end of a long softball season, Jill’s team made it to the championship game. They would play against the top team in the league, the Ramblers. Before the game, the teams practiced throwing and catching the ball. Jill watched her teammates. She knew that they would have a hard time winning. Three of the girls kept dropping the ball during practice. The team’s best pitcher was as awful as Jill had ever seen her. Jill thought that if her team was going to win, she would have to be the one to get the job done. Soon the coach called the players in to sing the national anthem. Jill thought to herself “this is just like it will be when I get to the pros.” She knew the other players were nervous but not her! She couldn’t wait to start the game.

Early in the game, Jill’s team took a 1-0 lead. Jill came up to bat with a runner on second base. But when she didn’t swing at the ball, the umpire called, “Strike three!” She couldn’t believe that he would call such a terrible pitch a strike. She really wanted to say to him, “You just called strike three on Jill, the best player on the team.” By the third inning, Jill’s team was ahead 3-0. The team was looking good.

But Jill still didn't have a hit. Her next time up, she hit the ball a long way. When the ball was caught, she blamed a gust of wind for taking away her home run.

Then the Ramblers scored four runs and took the lead. Soon Jill had her chance to be the star. Her team had two players on base but Jill had two strikes on her. Then she got the pitch she was looking for. She swung with all her might. She couldn't believe that she missed it. Jill sat down, angry that the sun had gotten in her eyes at the wrong time. She just couldn't see the ball. The next player up hit the ball to left field and scored the two runs that the team needed. When the game ended, Jill's team had won 5-4. The team went wild, but Jill didn't feel like celebrating. Even after the team picture, Jill felt terrible. It was her worst game all season and it was the biggest game of the season, too. She wished that she had done better in front of all those people.

(from Applegate, M.D., Quinn K.B. & Applegate, A.J. (2008). *The Critical Reading Inventory*, 2nd Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, p. 137.)

It is our hope that the thoughtful reader will look beyond the mere details of this story and recognize that Jill has certain characteristics that will not serve her well as a team member. She gives little thought to the outcome of the game and instead concentrates only on her personal performance. She seems to be watching the team's practice session but not actually participating in it; she does not even appear to know the names of her teammates. She exudes overconfidence and when her performance is not up to par, she consistently makes excuses for her shortcomings. Even after her team has won the championship, Jill is distraught because of her poor play, and does not join in the team's celebration. It seems that she is consumed by her own performance and cares little for the team itself.

In our attempt to assess the ability of readers to think about the story and its key character, we asked the readers to use information that they gleaned from the reading to explain whether they thought that Jill and her teammates were good friends or not. We hoped, of course, that readers would note Jill's detachment from the team, her criticism of the performance of two team members, her failure to encourage her teammates, and her overarching concern for herself and her image. Then, of course, we hope that they can use this evidence from the text to complete the text-experience link that defines the essence of reading comprehension. We have arranged the responses according to the thinking types that they represent and included some commentary with each response.

Question # 1: Do you think that Jill and her teammates were good friends or not? Why?

Responses that include imprecise concepts

1) "I thought they were good friends because they play together."

Here the reader reveals a very immature concept of friendship and a potential tendency to over-generalize. The reader seems to be assuming that their presence on the same team assures that all of the girls will be good friends.

- 2) “Yes because everyone thought she was the best player on the team so she would be friends with everyone.”

There is significant evidence of imprecise thinking on the part of this reader. First of all, only Jill made the claim that she is the best player on the team, and while this reader may be implying that being a good athlete insures popularity, it certainly cannot be construed as guaranteeing friendships.

- 3) “Yes because if everybody was cheering together, I would think they were good friends. If they weren’t friends they’d be cheering for themselves.”

This response manages to include both imprecise concepts and some miscomprehension of the text. There is no indication in the story that Jill joined any of her teammates in cheering. The reader seems to have completely missed the point of Jill’s self-interest, including the point that “cheering for herself” was precisely what Jill was doing.

- 4) “Yes because they were all working together.”

There is little evidence that Jill was working with the team but even if there were, it would be no guarantee that friendships would develop. Here the reader has merged an imprecise concept with what appears to be a miscomprehension of some story details and a tendency toward fuzzy logical relationships.

- 5) “No. She struck out and so people wouldn’t like her.”

This is an exceptionally imprecise and immature idea of friendship. The reader is suggesting that friendship is contingent upon game performance.

- 6) “Yes because they probably knew each other for a long time.”

This is no guarantee that friendships will develop and there is no suggestion in the text that the players knew each other for any longer than they had been teammates.

- 7) “Yes because they have to practice together.”

This circumstance does not necessarily guarantee the development of friendships.

Comment: A pattern of responses that include imprecise concepts contains a treasure trove of information for teachers. If readers attempt to build their comprehension on these types of misunderstandings, then they are certainly building on a shaky foundation. On the other hand, each of these instances can provide teachers with guidance in differentiating instruction and clarifying the fuzzy concepts that can stand as obstacles to clear comprehension.

Responses that include illogical conclusions

- 1) “Yes because she wasn’t yelling at them when they were making mistakes.”

This is true, but hardly what we would view as the basis for deep friendship. This reader is attempting to build a conclusion on a fuzzy initial concept.

- 2) “No because she wasn’t practicing with them.”

This is an accurate observation but does not address the issue of whether they were friends. This reader may be on to something, but it is not apparent from the initial response. This is a good illustration of the need that we have sometimes to use follow-up questions to clarify children's responses to open-ended questions.

3) "Yes because she talked about them a lot."

This does not in itself provide evidence of friendship, and the reader seems to forget that what Jill said about her teammates was negative.

4) "Yes because they were together for the whole season."

That in itself is no guarantee that friendships will develop. Here the reader seems to be equating proximity with friendship.

5) "Yeah, because they were in the championships."

This reader seems to be drawing the conclusion that success as a team will inevitably lead to friendship among team members.

Comment: A pattern of illogical responses on the part of a reader offers teachers a fairly clear picture of a child's instructional needs. We need to insure that these children develop the habit of carefully examining whether their responses to questions make sense and of using details from the text to support their thinking. Discussion Webs are particularly effective with these children because they require readers to retrieve supporting details from text.

Responses that include miscomprehension of text

1) "I think so because when she felt bad everybody felt the same way with her."

There is no indication in the text that Jill shared her feelings with anyone or that any of her teammates felt bad when the game was over. Here the reader is adding details that do not appear in the text itself. This kind of response suggests that the reader has had some difficulty comprehending the gist of the story.

2) "No. In the story it didn't seem like they cheered each other. They just seemed bored."

This is a partially correct response in that there was little evidence that Jill and her teammates were encouraging each other, as friends might do. On the other hand, there is nothing to indicate that they were bored during the game. We will need to keep an eye out for a tendency on the part of this reader to read too much into the text.

3) "Yes because they all celebrated at the end."

This is an inaccurate response. Jill did not feel like celebrating after the game because of her poor performance.

4) "No because she didn't cheer them on and her teammates were mad that Jill kept making up excuses."

There is nothing in the story to suggest that her teammates were mad at Jill but she clearly did not cheer them on or encourage them, as friends may have done. She was too occupied with

thinking about her own performance and it was equally clear that she made up excuses for her failures. But this reader has added details that did not appear in the story.

5) “Yes, good friends. They thought she was a good player and a good sport.”

It is only Jill who makes the claim that she is the best player on the team and few people would regard her as a good sport. There is no information in the text to support this reader’s claims.

Comment: It goes without saying that readers who miscomprehend must be directed back to the text to verify their responses.

Responses that include support for conclusions

1) “No because she doesn’t encourage her teammates.”

We agreed with this reader that Jill’s failure to encourage her teammates could be taken as a sign that they are not particularly good friends.

2) “No, because she only cared about how she played.”

This response is brief and straightforward but also quite accurate. Friendship and selfishness do not seem to mix particularly well. This reader seems to have effectively grasped the essence of the story.

3) “No. She didn’t say anything nice about them.”

It is reasonable to assume that readers at this age would not expect friends to be as negative as Jill was about her teammates’ skills. Here the reader noted a detail from the text and used it effectively to support her conclusion.

4) “No because she didn’t celebrate with them.”

It seems reasonable to conclude that friends would celebrate good fortune with friends. This struck us as a well thought out response on the part of this reader.

5) “No because she really wasn’t playing with the team. She just wanted to be the star.”

This seems to be a plausible explanation of Jill’s aloofness toward the rest of the team, but we must interpret “playing with the team” as equivalent to “being part of the team.

6) “No. They probably don’t want to be friends with someone who thinks she better than they are.”

Here we have a budding philosopher who had grasped the essence of the story, put it into her own words, and drawn a conclusion that extends far beyond the confines of the story itself.

7) “No. She thinks she’s better than everyone else. She seems like she would go on her own. Everyone else was trying hard.”

Here the reader has zeroed in on Jill’s non-participation in practice and drawn a well-supported conclusion about her self-concept as a player.

8) “No, just because of the way she was acting.”

This is too vague a response to be awarded credit. A follow-up question for more specific ideas may shed more light on this reader’s thinking. The ability to follow up student responses is a tremendous advantage for teachers who are looking into the thinking of their students.

9) “Not really because she didn’t talk to them in the dugout or anything.”

We really have no way of knowing whether Jill spoke to anyone in the dugout. If the reader is suggesting that Jill never spoke to her teammates throughout the game, she may be close to an accurate assessment of the situation.

Comment: These readers are demonstrating a solid link between text and their own experiences and values.

Question # 2: Do you think that Jill has a chance of becoming a professional player? Why or why not?

Responses that include imprecise concepts

1) “No because she is not nice to her team and you have to be nice to your team to play good and win.”

Imprecise concept. Being nice has no real connection to playing well.

Responses that include illogical conclusions

1) “I think she might have a chance because she was going to hit a home run.”

This is not very plausible since Jill never did actually hit the home run.

2) “Yes, because she wants to be on the team.”

This response is almost completely irrelevant to the question, reminiscent of a Left Fielder.

3) “No because she wants to do her best but she’s not caring. She needs to be a good sport. You can’t win every game.”

This response seems a bit scattered and vague but includes some support for the opinion.

4) “No. She’s a girl.”

This is not a relevant consideration in today’s sports scene. This reader may need some work on his gender sensitivity.

5) “Probably not. She missed the ball too much.”

Fairly faulty reasoning. In the story, Jill missed only a single swing.

6) “Yes because she has been playing for a long time.”

This response is irrelevant to the question, one that we might expect from a Left Fielder

7) “No. She is going to get to the championship game and then she is going to lose.”

This reader is making inaccurate predictions about events he has just read about.

Responses that include miscomprehension of text

1) “No...well, I don’t know because she kept getting strikes but then she did hit some good hits.”

There is no indication in the text that Jill had a single hit in the game. This reader may be confused with some baseball terminology so a probe question may be helpful.

2) “Yes. She’s good and she won a championship.”

Here the reader seems to forget that Jill contributed virtually nothing to the team’s championship game win. Furthermore, being a “good” player is not generally enough to get a person to the professional ranks and the assertion that she is good is made by Jill alone.

3) “Yes, she has to control her anger and practice.”

Responses that include vague or unsupported assertions

1) “No because she’s not that good.”

The reader has no way of really knowing whether Jill is a good player or not. Jill claims that she is the best on the team but the reader cannot make a judgment based on one game.

2) “Maybe, because she really tried to hit the ball.”

This would be a characteristic of every player who took up a bat and played baseball.

3) “Yes. Anything can happen.”

This is a vague and unsupported opinion one that we might expect from a Politician (see Applegate, Quinn & Applegate, 2006; Profiles in Comprehension).

4) “Yes because she works hard.”

There is no indication in the story that Jill works hard at her game. She seemed to be watching while the other players practiced.

5) “Probably not because she did bad in the championship game.”

It is fuzzy thinking to base a judgment on performance in a single game.

Responses that include support for conclusions

1) “Maybe, because she almost hit a home run and she is doing pretty good in baseball.”

Here the reader hedges his bet somewhat but still provides two propositions in support of his opinion. The reader uses details from the story to shore up the stated opinion and that is exactly what we are looking for in a thoughtfully literate reader.

2) “No because in the game she didn’t get a hit and she displayed bad sportsmanship.”

This reader gives two accurate statements in support of her position. Clearly the second is the more effective support for the statement.

3) “No. She blames her mistakes on other things.”

This reader cuts to the heart of the matter and provides a brief but powerful observation about Jill’s reactions to her misfortunes.

4) “Yes because she was such a good player in the other games.”

If we take Jill at her word, this is true. The reader recognizes that one should not base a judgment on one game.

5) “Yes. Just because she made one or two mistakes doesn’t mean she isn’t really good.”

This seemed to us a solid, logical observation that supports the stated opinion.

6) “No, because she doesn’t practice.”

Jill seemed to be watching the other players practicing but not practicing herself. This may be a particularly astute observation but would, of course, need to be part of a pattern of astute responses before we draw any conclusions about the reader.

7) “No because she has an attitude and coaches will kick her off the team.”

While we would be more comfortable with the fuller explanation that a probe question is designed to elicit, the reader correctly identifies Jill’s attitude as an area of concern.

Comment: The more we sharpen our own skill at determining the kinds of thinking that readers use, the easier it will be to address their instructional needs. But as you have seen already, the entire process begins with a question that requires the reader to think about text, not merely to recall it. At various places on this website, we will provide examples and some simple tools for helping teachers identify themes that can become the building blocks of thought-provoking questions.