



Learning Literacy Through Inquiry

by HEIDI MILLS and TIMOTHY O'KEEFE

Teachers who embrace reading and writing workshops naturally inspire students to inquire. When learning to read like writers, we are inquiring. When noticing and naming craft moves, skills, and strategies, we are investigating how readers and writers construct and share meaning. We inquire when learning how to use reading and writing as tools for learning across the curriculum. Whether we realize it or not, teachers who implement reading and writing workshops with integrity are teaching through inquiry. Over the years we've learned we can make the process of inquiry (learning how to learn) even more impactful if we do so explicitly. We have learned we best support readers and writers through intentional and systematic inquiry.

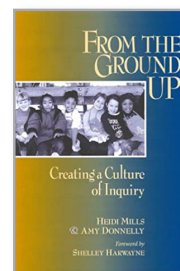
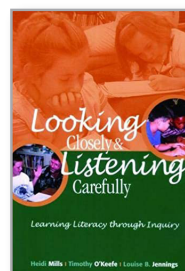
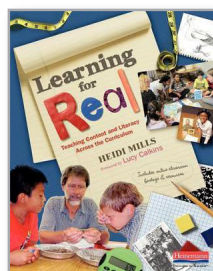


LITERACY CHAMPIONS: HEIDI MILLS AND TIMOTHY O'KEEFE

Dr. Heidi Mills is Distinguished Professor Emerita at the University of South Carolina. Heidi's collaborative research with classroom teachers is featured in professional journals, videotapes, national conferences, and seven books published by Heinemann and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Heidi's latest book, *Learning*

for Real: Teaching Content and Literacy Across the Curriculum, published by Heinemann reflects years of collaborative inquiry with remarkable, take-your-breath-away K-5 teachers at the Center for Inquiry. Heidi and her husband, Timothy O'Keefe, were the recipients of the 2014 National Council of Teachers of English Outstanding Educator in the English Language Arts Award. Heidi consults with schools across South Carolina and the country.

Timothy O'Keefe recently retired from teaching second and third graders for



twenty-four years, at the Center for Inquiry in Columbia, SC. Tim's career as a classroom teacher has been well documented across three decades and a diverse range of school communities. Tim is a featured teacher in five professional books published by Heinemann and the National Council of Teachers of English and a range of professional videos by the Annenberg Foundation, PBS, NCTE, Heinemann, and Scholastic. Tim is in the process of writing middle grades and new adult novels.

One to Know: Provocations that Promote Inquiry

Across the years we have witnessed the power and potential of inquiry to teach content and literacy across the curriculum. See *Learning for Real: Teaching Content and Literacy Across the Curriculum* as well as *Looking Closely and Listening Carefully: Learning Literacy through Inquiry* for rich descriptions across K–5 classrooms. While inquiry permeated every corner and moment of Tim's curriculum, in this piece we'll focus on practices that provoked focused, deliberate inquiry into the reading process.

What to Do: Inquiry into the Reading Process

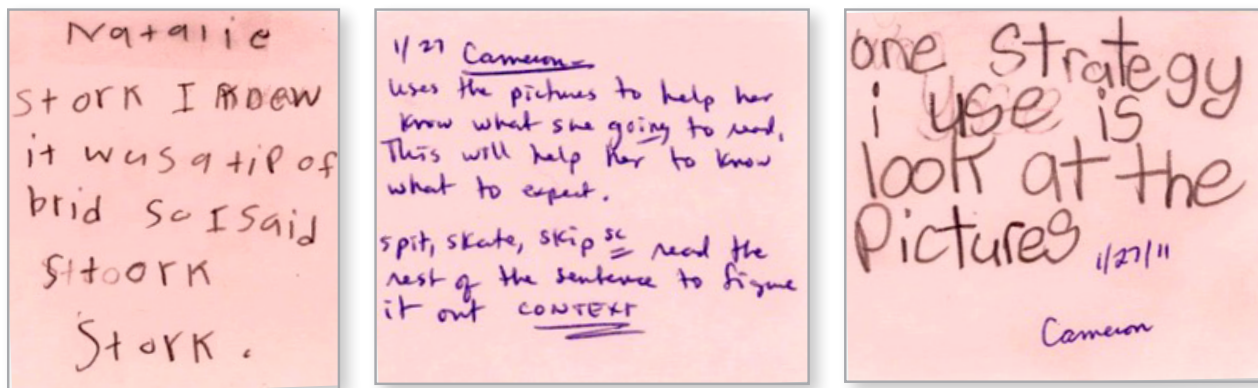
Reading workshop is the obvious context to make deliberate inquiry into the reading process a habit of the heart and mind. Like most workshop teachers, Tim regularly reflected on reading strategies as he noticed, named, and wondered aloud during shared reading, close reading, and interactive read alouds. He also offered clear illustrations about how to learn from mentor texts. He helped students develop strong reader identities by inquiring into the authors, series, genres, and topics they loved. These strategies are well documented in professional literature and were foundational to Tim's teaching. However, there were several teaching moves Tim developed and wove into the fabric of his reading workshop that helped students actively inquire into the reading process. Tim enacted these strategies with second and third graders. However, they could easily be transferred and transformed for younger and older readers by making time and space for ongoing inquiries into the reading process across the year. You can do so by:

- institutionalizing strategy sharing to conclude reading workshop.
- engaging students in quick-writes and reflective conversations in response to the question: What is reading?
- investigating and charting reading strategies parents and caretakers use in the world.
- listening to a child from another class read a common text to code and analyze miscues as well as retellings, to develop a genuine understanding of strategic reading.

Illustration of Strategy Sharing in Practice

At the beginning of independent reading (IR), Tim regularly distributed sticky notes for children to record strategies they used to figure out unknown words or passages. Students recorded their strategies, and led reflective conversations during strategy sharing to conclude reading workshop. This practice served three important purposes:

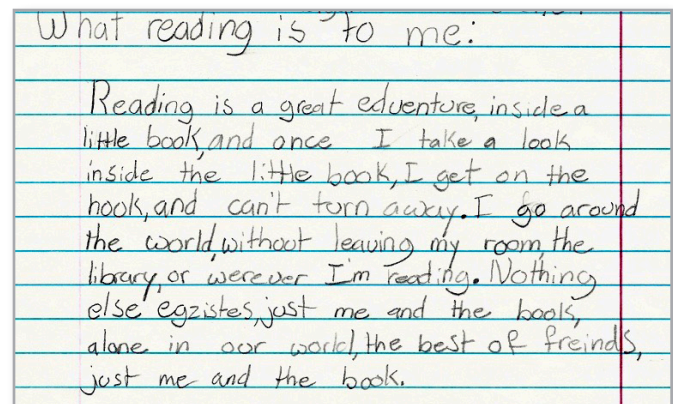
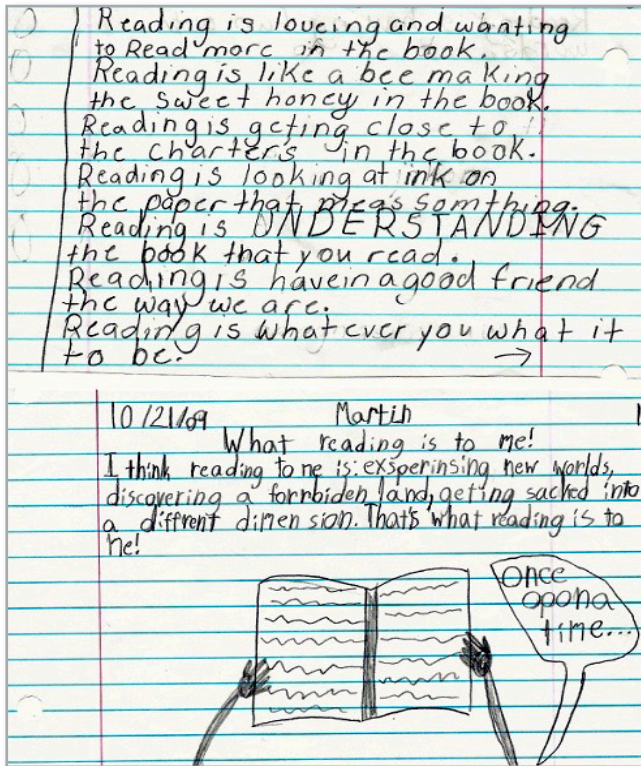
1. First, it encouraged children to get in the habit of self-monitoring as they read books of their choice.
2. Second, it offered Tim naturally occurring kid-watching data he could use to identify patterns in children's reflections. He tracked the strategies children employed within and across readers. These data made it possible for Tim to teach responsively. We've found that children's perceptions of what they do when they encounter challenging text while they are reading are much more accurate than when we ask about their reading strategies via a formal reading interview.
3. Third, it created the conditions for rich, reflective conversations to conclude independent reading. Tim normalized thinking and talking about reading strategies.



Tim often described his literacy curriculum as an ongoing conversation about books and the reading process. Strategy sharing was one aspect of these rich conversations. Tim shared his observations as well. Tim and his students left each discussion with a richer understanding of the reading process, as well as the authors, genres, and series they had fallen in love with.

Illustration of the Guiding Question, “What is reading?” in Practice

While Tim and his students engaged in ongoing conversations about the reading process during reading conferences and strategy sharing sessions, he also invited whole class reflections in response to the question, “What is reading?” several times across the year.



Together, Tim's students co-constructed and charted these beliefs as they shared and summarized their quick write responses.

Reading is:

- understanding.
- knowing what is happening and what it means to you.
- learning new words – developing vocabulary.
- learning about human nature.
- understanding what is going on, and feeling like you are in the book.
- being in the book.
- learning content through story.
- when you pick up a book you can't stop reading.
- an emotional experience.
- an adventure, a quest!

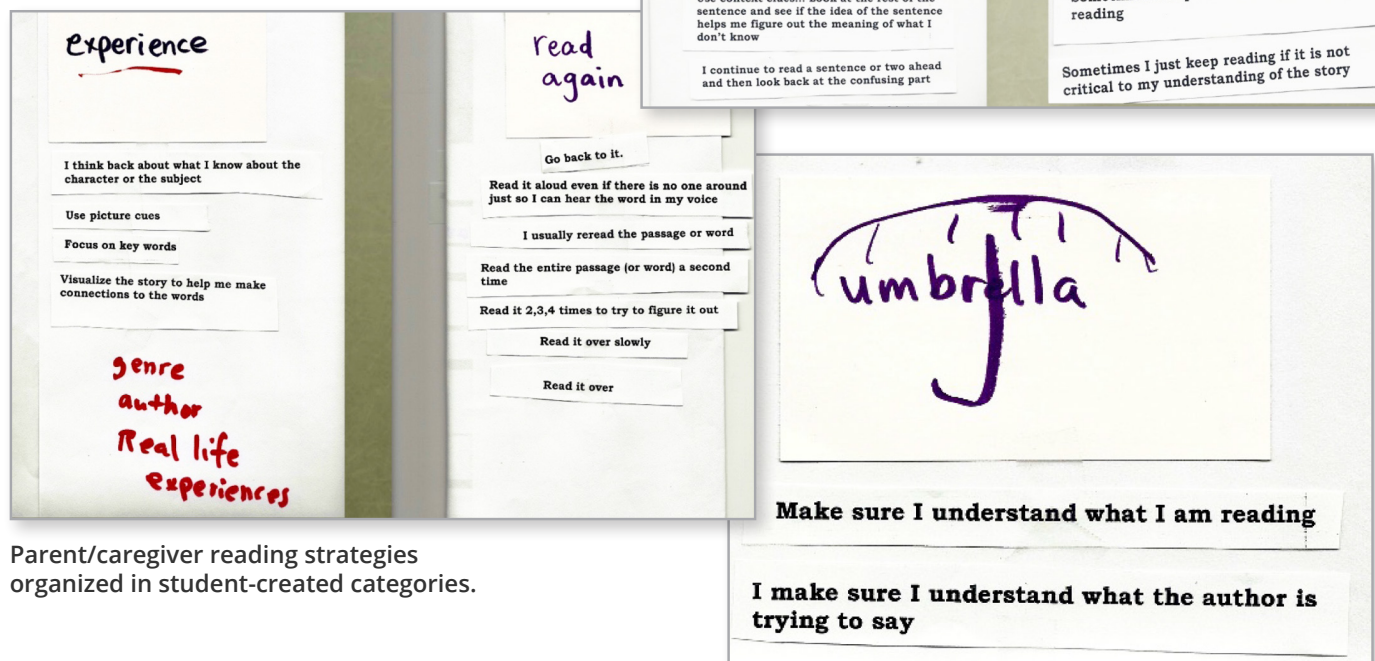
This list reveals the value of this inquiry as the depth and breadth of children's thinking mirrors Louise Rosenblatt's notion that reading is both an efferent and aesthetic process.

Illustration of Inquiry into Family Reading Strategies in Practice

We know parents and caregivers are often the children's most influential and beloved teachers. So, Tim invited families to join their ongoing investigation into the reading process. In a newsletter he simply asked adults to study themselves as readers by self-monitoring when reading at home or work.

1. Tim asked parents to jot down strategies they used to figure out unknown words or passages and send their reflections back to school in their kids' homework folders.
2. Tim typed the parents' contributions, made copies, and distributed the list to the class.
3. The kids worked in small groups to sort and organize strategies into logical groups. They pondered, made connections, puzzled, questioned, named patterns, reorganized groupings, and so on.
4. Once they noticed and named patterns in small groups they came together as a class to share their thinking.
5. Finally, they came to a consensus for a heading for each group of strategies, with the umbrella category (meaning making/understanding) being the most important.

This collaborative inquiry made it possible for parents, children, and the teacher to all work in concert, to form a shared vision of the reading process, and what strategic readers do. All of this information was shared with parents and caregivers in subsequent newsletters.



Parent/caregiver reading strategies organized in student-created categories.

Illustration of Modified Miscue Analysis in Practice

When Tim conferred with readers, he coded their miscues in his kid-watching notes, using his own innovation on miscue analysis. He jotted down the actual text and the child's response in his notes. Next, he quickly coded the miscue using shorthand.

- NMC = No Meaning Change
- MC = Meaning Change
- SMC = Subtle Meaning Change
- SC = Self-Correct

Tim held honest reader-to-reader conversations with his students. He shared his codes and over time, they began discussing the difference between high- and low-quality miscues. He did so because he wanted children to realize we all miscue when we read. Those that maintain meaning are high-quality miscues. Those that disrupt meaning are low-quality miscues.

After Tim and his students inquired into the reading process during reading conferences, he later introduced them to a strategy he devised entitled Mystery Reader. Tim and his students engaged in Mystery Reader conversations several times across the year.

1. To prepare for the experience, Tim recorded a child from another class reading a text the kids were familiar with. He often chose a chapter book he was currently reading aloud. After the Mystery Reader read for a few minutes, Tim paused and asked him/her for a retelling. Tim chose to use an anonymous reader to keep the children's focus on the reading process, not the reader or someone's relationship to the reader. This made it possible to speak openly about high- and low-quality miscues.
2. To launch the engagement, Tim played the recording while his 2nd and 3rd graders read along, listening intently, recording miscues, and their general impressions of the Mystery Reader. Tim often paused the recording so everyone would have time to accurately record their noticings.
3. After listening and recording, they turned to their reading buddies and interpreted the miscues they noted, and discussed their overall impressions.
4. Next, they reflected together about how they might support the reader. Tim shared his kid-watching notes alongside those of his students, often marveling at their perceptive observations and coding decisions.
5. They always concluded the investigations by discussing how the children might apply lessons learned to their own reading behaviors.

By inquiring into someone else's reading process, they grew their own.

Name Lee date 4/26/17 # 18

Mystery Reader

Notes

She's a confident reader. A couple
low quality miscues. Sounds out a lot.
I wonder if she knows what this means.
Phrases in the middle of a word.
She doesn't use ^{much} A in thuziazum. Her reading kind
of sounds like word, word, word, word. She really takes
in the story. Skips a WFW.

What is your impression of this reader? What strategies do you think this reader uses?

^{and}
Sounding out, going back, re reading/misreading
the context around her. I think this
book is too hard for her. Guessing words.
Taking chunks.

If you were this child's teacher, how could you help her to develop?

Try to read with her more. Give
her all easier book. Read a little more
each night. Close.

Miscues
High
III
Low
III

Second grade student's notes, analyses,
and recommendations during Mystery
Reader engagement

Name Tim date 4/26 # 23

Mystery Reader

Notes

WFW

(Sentence-scent) MC (fluttered-floated) SMC skips(.)
(And-A) MC (as-sat) SC (... laughed ^{T-clues} -longed) MC
(Woodle-woolen) MC seems to read in spurts,
notices "n", (drawl-drawing-darling) MC skips(.) → This
means she probably didn't understand, (out... stretched)
(she-said) SC doesn't use(y) (todd-deal-toddled) MC
(Miss-Mrs.) NMC

She does have a general sense of the story - gets the affective parts

What is your impression of this reader? What strategies do you think this reader uses?

I think she chunks and uses letter sounds a lot - her low quality guesses tell me that she isn't attending to the meaning as much as she could.

If you were this child's teacher, how could you help her to develop?

I would focus on meaning-making strategies, (close) while reading with her I would keep asking about the meaning or her impressions, reading logs with specific questions around what she read.

Teacher's notes, analysis, and recommendations during Mystery Reader engagement.

More to Do: Practice Inquiry into the Reading Process with Students

Historically, reading instruction is something we've done for or to children. We have spent far too much time, energy, and resources on finding programs or materials to impart or impose literacy skills and strategies on students. Tim's success as a teacher came from his capacity to help students fall in love with books, authors, genres, and series, while inquiring into the reading process along the way. Tim taught literacy through inquiry by inviting children into the process, by exploring together what successful readers do, and how they think. By harnessing the power of children's home and school community through authentic, reflective, inquiry-based engagements, he demystified the process and grew strategic, engaged, passionate readers ... and you can, too.

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