

Beyond Standardized Truth

IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH INQUIRY-BASED READING ASSESSMENT



SCOTT FILKINS

Principles
in Practice

LITERACY ASSESSMENT

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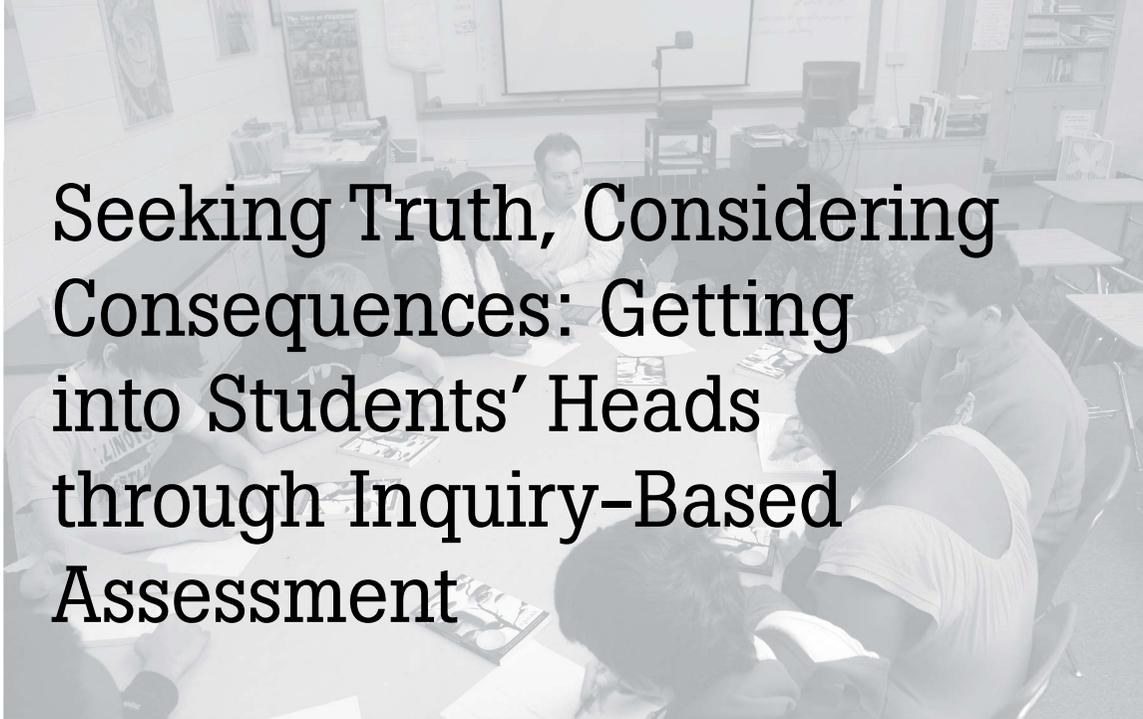
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Seeking Truth, Considering Consequences: Getting into Students' Heads through Inquiry-Based Assessment

Teachers and schools assess students' ability to read for a range of reasons: to seek evidence of progress toward certain goals, to guide and improve instruction, to sort and rank students, to report to various stakeholders, and more. As I mentioned in the opening chapter, the kinds of assessment you'll read about in this book tend to focus on those purposes more toward the beginning of this list than the end. But, as I've come to understand in so many aspects of education, what at first appears to be a set of distinct purposes quickly blurs into a mosaic of overlapping intentions. Effective teaching requires us, for example, to assess learners in order to sort students into flexible groups as a means of improving instruction. Additionally, when we consider that the student is the most significant stakeholder in an act of assessment, as the IRA–NCTE *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing* (SARW) suggest, the function of classroom feedback takes on central importance. Providing assessment-based feedback to a broad range of stakeholders also becomes a means of maintaining teacher autonomy when ineffective practice is mandated through distant administrative decisions, an issue I'll take up in both this chapter and the closing chapter of the book.

We can agree, then, that teachers may have a variety of well-intentioned purposes for assessment and that purposes can overlap in complex ways, but the SARW are emphatic in the assertion that “the *consequences* of an assessment procedure are the first and most important consideration in establishing the validity of the assessment” (p. 22, emphasis added). I was at first struck by this statement for its incongruity with what I had been taught to think about the word *validity* in relation to assessment. *Construct validity*, the aspect of validity most of us learned about as part of our teacher training, refers to the extent to which an assessment measures what it purports to measure. Fulfilling this aspect when assessing adolescent readers is, of course, challenging enough; I’ll give it more attention throughout this chapter. But the SARW’s notion of validity tied to consequences raises the stakes for the integrity of assessment to the level of instructional response.

Afflerbach (2011) reports that this second notion of validity, *consequential validity*, grew out of the awareness of the consequences—rewards and sanctions—related to high-stakes standardized testing in the late 1980s. Despite the term’s origin in the wake of large-scale testing, it is just as applicable to the assessment practices in all of our classrooms. What happens to the student as a result of taking a test (including accounting for the instructional time devoted to participating in the assessment) is as central to the test’s educational validity as the quality of its construction. In this chapter, I share portraits of assessment that illustrate the challenges and successes associated with striving for validity in both senses, construct and consequential. What seem to be separate concepts, two *kinds* of validity, are intimately related. When an assessment, for example, asks students to do more of what we think of as “real reading” (i.e., doing more than answering multiple-choice questions about contextless passages), we have a much better chance of being able to use the information it gives us to shape instruction. In Figure 2.1, I summarize the ways in which I differentiate construct validity from consequential validity and how an inquiry approach to assessment connects the two.

Think about an assessment you’ve administered that allowed you to improve instruction, either in the moment or at a later time. What was it about that assessment that allowed you to do so? How was that assessment different from one that might have been more of a “point-generating” event?

Moving beyond the Limits of Standardized Truth and Consequences

To help illustrate the relationships between construct validity, consequential validity, and the rewarding challenges of taking an inquiry-based approach to assessment, I’ll share some experiences from my colleague Stephanie Royse, who teaches a year-

Figure 2.1: How do construct validity, consequential validity, and an inquiry stance toward assessment support one another?

Determining Construct Validity	Determining Consequential Validity
<p>Given our best understanding of what the act of reading is, does the assessment we use offer insight into how the student “measures up” against that understanding? In other words, have we created an assessment that accounts for the act of reading in its complicated fullness?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are we allowed to observe both process and product? • Are we privileging precision (e.g., the student can answer exactly 6 out of 10 questions) over accuracy and richness of information? • If so, what do we lose or gain in the process? 	<p>Are we using assessments in a way that helps us create appropriate and ethical pedagogy for the students in our classes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are we making both immediate and long-term adjustments to what and how we teach that student? • Is the student in any way <i>harmed</i> by the assessment? • Given a range of assessments in a course, are we able to build a fairly good mental model of our students as readers and thinkers?
<p>Validity and an Inquiry Approach to Reading Assessment</p> <p>A concern for construct and consequential validity undergirds an inquiry-based approach to assessment. As teachers, we should constantly be inquiring into our own practices as readers. How do we make sense of text? How do our stores of (and gaps in) background knowledge allow and impede our ability to interpret and understand what we read? These questions help us build assessments with strong construct validity.</p> <p>A central question for inquiry that has both construct and consequential validity then becomes: <i>How are my students making sense of the text they read in my class?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perhaps starting with the preceding question, develop a question (or set of questions) you need the answer to in order to continue instruction. • Select text that’s right for the question(s), right for the group, and core to the disciplinary work you’d be doing anyway. • Use the full range of possible classroom structures (whole-class think-alouds for teaching and reteaching, small-group work, or individual feedback/conferences) to respond to what you learn through the assessment. • Don’t expect miracles—older learners don’t necessarily develop at the same rates as younger ones—but do expect and look carefully for signs of growth. 	

long reading course for students receiving special education services. When you walk into Stephanie’s reading class, a makeshift classroom with temporary dividers for walls, you’ll see posted co-constructed charts that identify and remind students of some powerful reading strategies effective readers use as they process and respond to text. You’ll hear Stephanie demonstrating fluent reading and modeling through think-alouds that show how she makes sense of text. Students take turns reading high-interest fiction that matches Stephanie’s best sense of her students’ current levels of assisted performance. Students ask and answer questions, both verbally and in writing, to build and verify their understanding of what they’re reading and learning. In other words, this is a secondary reading class in which many things are going very, very well.

The students in Stephanie’s class were assigned there in large part because of their low performance on standardized reading tests. Schools continue to rely on standardized tests to determine placement in reading support programs, despite these assessments’ overwhelming tendency to oversimplify student “success” or

“failure” and the paucity of insight they offer teachers into students’ abilities to decode, identify unfamiliar words, read fluently, and construct meaning from text (Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002; Dennis, 2008; Dennis 2009–2010; Rasinski et al., 2005; Rupp & Lesaux, 2006) (see Figure 2.2). Stephanie was interested in moving past the “standardized truth”—that her students were not reading as well as nearly all of their grade-level peers—and wanted to look for information about her students that could help them develop as readers. Knowing that the limited construct validity of the standardized assessments leads almost certainly to low consequential validity, she needed to inquire further into her students’ abilities, habits, and dispositions as readers to know how to respond effectively to their needs.

When I visited Stephanie’s class, students were learning about Greek mythology and the elements of story structure while reading Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. Because Stephanie was interested in gaining more insight into what her students were thinking as they read, she had them stop occasionally to write whatever they were thinking at the moment on a sticky note. Stephanie had been working with students to understand the connection between

Figure 2.2: The IRA–NCTE SARW on standardized reading tests.

The SARW offer teachers a number of ways to think about the limitations of reading tests that have grown to become the most politically influential forces in our profession. We know these kinds of assessments are not enough. The challenge for classroom teachers, then, involves moving beyond critique and into inquiry around ways in which our professional expertise can be extended and shaped to achieve the goals for assessment that standardized tests so often cannot.

- **From the section “The Nature of Language”**

“Language does not contain meaning; rather, meaning is constructed in the social relationships within which language is used. . . .

. . . Meaning may vary from one person to another. . . . Thus, individuals make different sense of apparently similar language to the extent that their cultural and personal histories do not coincide. Consequently, when we attempt to standardize a test (by making it the same for everyone), we make the tenuous assumption that students will all make the same meaning from the language of our instructions and the language of the individual items.” (pp. 3–4)

- **From the section “The Assessment of Language”**

“That texts can (and should) be read from different perspectives must be taken as a certainty—a goal of schooling not to be disrupted by assessment practices that pretend otherwise. To assert through a multiple-choice test that a piece of text has only one meaning is unacceptable, given what we know about language.” (p. 7)

- **From Standard 1: The interests of the student are paramount in assessment.**

“Traditionally, group-administered, machine-scorable tests have not encouraged students to reflect constructively on their reading and writing, have not provided specific and timely feedback, and generally have not provided high-quality information about students. Consequently, they have seemed unlikely to serve the best interests of students. However, this need not be the case if they are able to provide timely, high-quality information to students.” (pp. 12–13)

- **From Standard 4: Assessment must reflect and allow for critical inquiry into curriculum and instruction.**

“Even when [reading and writing] standards come closer to representing . . . features of complex literacy, high-stakes assessments rarely address the difficult-to-measure standards, opting instead to focus on content that is easier and more expedient to assess using inexpensive test formats.” (p. 17)

reading and active thinking, so they had little trouble making the next step to formalizing their thoughts in writing.

This technique of asking students to write what they're thinking as they read is readily applicable in any classroom context, with any reading assignment (I share a version of this strategy from a biology class toward the end of the chapter). Chances are your students have been asked to annotate text or share their thoughts while they read before—the idea of using sticky notes for purposes such as these is far from revolutionary. What can be revolutionary, though, is the purposeful move from “sticky note as activity”—which can certainly be valuable in its own right to help students understand the central truth that reading is active thinking—to using these brief student responses as a first step toward inquiry-based assessment. This shift, by the way, is an example of the difference Serafini (2000–2001) theorizes between assessment as process and assessment as inquiry, as I discuss next.

The responses in Figure 2.3 come from Richard, a ninth grader. When Stephanie and I met to investigate together what Richard and his classmates were revealing about themselves as thinkers (see the left-hand column only), Stephanie could see right away that Richard was asking questions and making sense of the story. He was noticing characters' motivations (“She like him to be on her team for she can win because of his power”), commenting on developing plot lines (“Some of the kid can go home because they do not have power”), and detecting shifting relationships between characters (“His dad do not like Annabeth's mom,” “Percy and Luke [are] become friends”). Richard's annotations were also telling Stephanie that he could do more than restate; some of his thoughts suggest a degree of inference and prediction that not all of her students were exhibiting. She was already gathering the evidence that told her Richard would benefit from instruction with more emphasis on inference and higher grade-level text for independent work than some of his peers could currently handle.

As Stephanie and I read the sticky notes, we were constantly saying things like “That's really interesting, but I want to know more” and “I wonder what the student did with that thought.” Finding yourself with more questions than answers is indeed a hallmark of approaching assessment as an act of dynamic inquiry. Stephanie and I had previously discussed that, particularly for older students, we see a need to move beyond cognitive strategy work (“I'm making a connection”) to metacognition and awareness of when their habits of thought are supporting comprehension (“This connection helps me understand because . . .”). Thus, our question shifted from “What can students do with this text?” to the much more complex question, “How aware are students of whether their thinking is supporting their understanding?” To pursue this question, Stephanie reread the section with her students and asked them to look back at their responses through a metacognitive lens. Stephanie prompted the students to tell her *why* they thought what they

thought and to assess whether the thought was useful in helping them comprehend, or if they were just writing something down to complete the task. If students had asked a question, she suggested they think about whether their question was answered through their reading or whether they needed to reread or read more to find out the answer.

Look again at Richard's responses (Figure 2.3), this time noting his extended thinking in the right-hand column. This is very likely the first time Richard was asked to think about his thoughts about reading in this way, so it is no surprise that we had difficulty drawing easy conclusions from his responses. In some cases, Richard was able to explain a bit more about the conclusions he came to or the evidence he used; other times the connection between initial and extended response is less clear or merely a repetition. Stephanie did notice that Richard was able to respond most strategically to the question he had asked ("Why is Luke being nice to Percy . . . [?]"), noting that he needed to "Read more." When the class continued reading, Richard went back to his note and explained that he thought Luke was being nice because Percy didn't know anyone else at the camp.

Figure 2.3: Richard's initial thoughts (sticky notes arranged from top to bottom on the left) and further thinking (on the right; each note refers to one of the numbered thoughts from the left, though not in physical proximity).

Section 1:

- 1** (Left): She like him to be on her team for she can win becaus of his power.
- 1** (Right): She know how his dad is from his ~~power~~ power. the girl ask him to talk to the Oracle for his power. her mom is one of the god that in olympians her dad is human. It is god that do not know that ~~they~~ they are demigods. they are become friend in.
- 2** (Left): It is two girl in water took it Percy so they dad can be a water man two.
- 3** (Left): all the peopl say they do not know how his dad is in the song.

Section 2:

- 4** (Left): Some of the kid can go home becausc they do not have power.
- 4** (Right): are going to fight at the ~~camp~~ camp Percy in Luke are going to win the game? Why is Luke being nice to Percy they do not know one ~~one~~.
 ↑
 Read more
- 5** (Left): his dad do not like Annabeth's mom.
- 6** (Left): Percy in Luke are become friend.

Stephanie’s inquiry began with the deceptively simple question, “What are my kids thinking as they read?” She then became interested in a follow-up question that fueled further inquiry and instructional change: “How aware are students of the way their thinking is helping them as they read?” What do you wonder about your students as readers? It may be useful to return to the discussion in Chapter 1 of Kucer’s (2008) dimensions of reading (linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental) to consider different ways you might inquire into your students’ reading processes, habits, and attitudes.

The work of Richard and his classmates confirmed Stephanie’s belief that she needed to continue modeling her own thinking as she read. Even more significantly, she knew she needed to talk more about when and how her observations and questions were helping her make sense of text. Because Richard and his classmates already displayed some ability to think more about their questions than about other types of responses, she had a clear sense of where to start in her attempt to support her students in the transition from being mere responders to being readers who are in control of how they are processing what they read.

This two-step sticky note activity was just a start to Stephanie’s inquiry into what her students do when they read and how to help them improve comprehension. An inquiry approach to assessment is ongoing, with the teacher constantly seeking ways to better “operationalize” reading—to get kids to show what they’re doing as they read.

As the construct validity of the classroom-based assessment improves through teacher inquiry, so does the teacher’s ability to know what to do next—which in turn ensures a higher degree of consequential validity. Assessment viewed through this lens is not something that *happens*; rather, it is constantly in process. Teachers taking this stance are either learning something new about their students as readers or taking stock of whether an instructional intervention was successful for a student.

Using Classroom-Based Assessment Information to Challenge Bad Ideas

At this point in her inquiry, Stephanie shared with me that some district administrators were calling into question some of her professional choices. The push to implement Response to Intervention (RTI) in high schools, well intentioned as it may be, was becoming a complicated struggle for Stephanie and some of her colleagues, as scholars such as William Brozo (2009) predicted it might. Specifically, predetermined interventions were getting all the attention, and consideration of the information necessary to determine the need for or appropriateness of an intervention was coming as an afterthought, if it came at all. Stephanie needed to justify why she wasn’t implementing one of the five “research-based,” district-approved interventions. Sadly, authentic guided reading, with its high reliance on teacher expertise and the need for flexibility in time and instructional resources, was not on the list. Her inquiry-based approach to assessment, with its goal of creating a better

understanding of her students as readers in order to teach them more effectively, was at odds with the district-level approach, with its “focused attention on implementing specific curriculum programs [and] interventions” (SARW, p. 17), without the necessary attention to careful assessment.

The people who assembled this list of five interventions, who purchased some of the published materials, and who shipped them to Stephanie had not indicated what kinds of evidence she would need to gather to know which intervention was appropriate—to say nothing of the commensurate lack of professional development required to implement these interventions. In a bizarre twist on the SARW’s central contention about the relationship between assessment and consequences, Stephanie was being asked to leap to “consequence”—systematized instructional response—without any thoughtful consideration of the assessment information that should lead her to one. Though the frustration Stephanie was feeling was intense and highly personal, I suspect her case is far from unique.

Many of Stephanie’s students enter high school with a history of failure in reading and writing. They are precisely the kinds of kids the SARW refer to as those who are “initially less successful than others in literacy acquisition” and who “often find that their curriculum shrinks to one that is less engaging and less mind-expanding, . . . reducing the breadth and complexity of the literacy students acquire” (p. 21). Stephanie was, in fact, being pressured to abandon her approach in favor of a scripted reading program. She had been provided a single level of text for a comprehension program, purchased in the complete absence of assessment information about her students, and was expected to begin instructing students in comprehension with several selections about—a jar of mustard. Later, the program would have students reading a series of passages about a wealthy man who dreamed of taking a tropical vacation. These lessons were to be supplemented with occasional fluency drills and practice activities. This vastly shrunken curriculum, which had absolutely no potential to speak to her students’ lives and interests, was not something Stephanie was prepared to deploy.

Consequently, Stephanie was even more determined to build on the inquiry approach to assessment in which she was already engaged to find out more about what her students could do and with what level of text. Her goals were now twofold: to improve her instruction and to communicate with administrators who were calling her practice into question. She found herself in a situation in which she knew she had to accept her “responsibility for making and sharing judgments about students’ achievements and progress” and not “defer to others or to other instruments” to make instructional decisions (SARW, p. 14). To that end, we read and discussed Scott’s (2008) “Assessing Text Processing: A Comparison of Four Methods,” which concludes that teachers can get the most insight into their students’

Student think-alouds ask students to share insights about what they're reading and how they're reading it *as they read*. Kucan and Beck (1997) summarize their review of literature on thinking aloud and reading comprehension in this way: "The potential to reveal, which is the power of thinking aloud as a method of inquiry, is also an aspect of its potential as a method of instruction" (p. 292). Through the *inquiry aspect of thinking aloud*, feedback about student progress relative to the learning goals is made possible when teachers can gain access to students' thought processes as they read. The notion of the *think-aloud conceived as an instructional tool* aligns with the need to provide models of expert thinking as demonstrated by the teacher. Teacher-directed think-alouds receive more attention in Chapter 3.

reading processes by requesting that students think aloud while they read accessible text and answer some process-based interview questions after they read.

To facilitate this process, Stephanie selected first chapters of two books, Kate DiCamillo's *Because of Winn-Dixie* and Katherine Paterson's *The Bridge to Terabithia*, to allow for some differentiation of text difficulty. She marked each passage with four dark lines, splitting the chapter into roughly equal chunks indicating where students should stop to tell her what they were thinking. After they read, she asked each student a series of questions to try to gain a fuller picture of how they were processing text as they read.

Admittedly, these preparatory steps sound like a significant amount of work. Engaging in this process also meant that Stephanie would need to meet with each of her students one on one to perform the assessment (the luxuries of small class sizes and a volunteer tutor from the local university minimized the disruption to instruction). But these are the very considerations related to consequential validity I discussed

earlier. When facing decisions such as whether the time required to construct and deliver an assessment as robust as this is worth it, it's useful for secondary teachers to keep in mind Paris's (2005) differentiation between *constrained* and *unconstrained* reading skills. Afflerbach (2011) interprets the distinction particularly well:

In contrast [to reading skills such as letter-sound relationships], skills and strategies related to constructing meaning (comprehension and vocabulary) are less constrained. They typically take more time to assess. Questions and prompts related to reading comprehension assessment may have divergent, acceptable responses or performances. Higher-order thinking involves more unconstrained skills and strategies that contribute to reading for understanding. (p. 301)

So, although an inquiry approach to assessment doesn't by any means guarantee consequential validity, secondary teachers can be certain that the time it takes to dig for elements of "truth" about their students as readers is an integral, unavoidable part of the process. If we feel adolescent reading comprehension is important to know about, we have to set aside the time and space for this knowledge to develop. Some of this time will be "new" time devoted to assessment or analysis of student work, but much of it, done as part of the work of the content area classroom, requires no more than the time it takes for students to read and respond to well-selected text from the discipline.

Reading Assessment: Side by Side

In spite of the time investment required to prepare, Stephanie was ready to plunge wholeheartedly into this new assessment of think-alouds and after-reading questions. Using what she knew about Richard from assessments like the sticky note activity, Stephanie decided to use the passage from *The Bridge of Terabithia* to assess him. (Because one of the consequences of any assessment is the time it takes to administer and interpret it, looking for ways such as this to use assessment data to inform multiple decisions helps improve the validity of the assessment.) Richard decided to read aloud, allowing us to make some observations on the right in Figure 2.4; his comments from the think-aloud are on the left. Figure 2.5 shares the questions we asked afterward, adapted from Scott (2008), as well as Richard's answers. Not including up-front text preparation time, this process took about twenty-five minutes from start to finish and garnered a wealth of information far beyond any standardized data Stephanie had on Richard. For one, Stephanie confirmed that given fiction at this level of complexity, Richard could read independently with a fairly high degree of comprehension. More specifically, she was able to start compiling a list of strengths from which to build and areas of concern on which to focus:

Strengths: Infers reasonably from details; displays incredulity at an unusual event (suggesting some metacognition); uses his own language to summarize accurately; shows an awareness of what to do if he encounters a word he doesn't know.

Weaknesses: Ignores a text feature that is unfamiliar; low awareness of miscues; no sense of prereading behaviors such as predicting based on title, skimming, and so forth; frames difficulty of text on word level only

An added benefit of this method of assessment was Stephanie's ability to gain some insight into Richard's *affect* as a reader. His response to the question about inclination to continue reading is positive, but it was based on his sense that the story wasn't going to have anything to do with school. As we met with student after student and gained similar levels of insight (though naturally not always so positive), Stephanie shared this testament to the power of inquiry-based assessment: "I wish I had done this at the beginning of the year!"

Since working with Stephanie on this project, I've had the chance to collaborate with Sarah Walsh, who teaches another section of self-contained English. Because her class size is similarly manageable, we assessed her students on the first two days of the school year and set goals based on what we noticed. We used a similar assessment to look for growth midyear and will do so again at the end of the year. For small classes with students whose needs are quite intense, I recommend a process similar to this before beginning instruction. The examples from my own reading class in the sections to come might be more appropriate for larger classes.

Figure 2.4: Transcript of Richard’s think-aloud during oral reading (left) and additional teacher observations during reading (on the right). *The Bridge to Terabithia* opens on a farm in the early morning, when Jess sneaks out of his house to go for a run through the cow pasture.

Richard’s thoughts	Our observations as he read
Sounds like they’re on a farm. Waking up. They’re gonna get in trouble by their mama. They’ve gotta sneak out?	He skipped the opening lines, car noises in italics. He had lots of miscues on words.
The boy was practicing for school, to run every morning—he’d wake up. He had all these sisters. Only one them is not gonna dress him up.	
He was on a farm again. Someone was making breakfast. Sounds like he was talking to a cow! He was flying around a cow or something?	
The first day back at school, the upper kids get the advantages, the equipment. The boys run and the girls play hopscotch and talk.	Stumbled on <i>except</i> , replaced with <i>especially</i> , but didn’t notice the shift in meaning it created.

Figure 2.5: Transcript of the questions we asked after the think-aloud (on the left) and Richard’s answers (on the right).

What are some things you did to get ready to read?	Nothing.
Did you connect any of the ideas you thought of before reading to what you were reading at the time?	Nope.
While you were reading, did you come to anything that didn’t make sense? What did you do?	No.
Did you come to any words you didn’t know? What did you do?	Yeah, some of them. I tried to sound them out and make some guesses. Yeah, some.
Did anything surprise you about what you read?	No surprises.
What are some things you did when you finished reading?	I felt happy that I got it over with!
Do you think this chapter was too easy, too hard, or just about right? Why do you think so?	It was okay . . . a lot of the words I knew. Some chapter books be putting all them big words from the dictionary.
Tell us what this chapter was about.	A boy trying to get out of his house and go practice. He has to sneak out because his mama won’t let him go out that early. Looks like he loves to run.
Would you keep reading this story? Why or why not?	Yeah, it seems good. ‘Cause it’s about nothing to do with school. It looks good.

Write It Down: The Power of Record-Keeping

As Stephanie and I talked through Richard’s performance, we decided she needed to start formalizing her understanding of what her students could do. Even though additional paperwork is low on teacher’s wish lists, Stephanie was eager to make a simple chart like the one in Figure 2.6 to begin collecting what she knew about her students. This activity, while again time-consuming, served a number of purposes. Foremost, it gave Stephanie a way of thinking about all the assessment she engages in all the time in her classroom and giving it a space to make it legitimate. Secondary teachers, I find, are likely to put the qualifier *only* in front of the words *an observation* or *observational*—as in “I know the kid can do that, but only from observation” or “My only evidence is observational. I don’t have anything solid to back it up.” The SARW empower teachers by reminding us that we “are in a unique position to engage in valid assessment. Because [we] are closest to students’ learning, [we] have the opportunity to make many detailed observations over time” (p. 14). It’s partly because of the number of students we see every day that we’ve been reduced to such dismissal of our powers of professional observation, a consequence of which is that we let our observations dissipate into the air of the crowded classroom. Such relinquishment of our own expertise is also related to the dominant ideology of “teachers’ observations . . . as informal and subjective [in contrast to] test results that are considered ‘formal’ and ‘objective’” (SARW, p. 9). For things we really care about, in times when they matter most, it’s crucial to get those observations in writing, side by side with—and, I suggest, before—the kinds of information outsiders prize.

Figure 2.6: A record-keeping tool that privileges teacher observational data alongside standardized assessment results.

Student Name	Informal Assessment/ Observational Data	Formal/Standardized Assessment Information	Possible Instructional Responses
Richard	Goes back to text when looking for answers, uses context clues and sounding out when faced with unknown words. Good at predictions. Volunteers to read in class, reads more than one paragraph.	Think-aloud/Interview: with 5th grade level narrative text—making strong inferences, sometimes using sophisticated vocabulary, good comprehension, lots of miscues. Given 3-1 Easy CBM 15/20 in comprehension. Reads 112 wpm at the 4th- grade level according to CBM data.	Increase exposure to high-frequency vocabulary, more access to authentic text at instructional level (4th grade).

Putting all of this information in writing, organized with student names first and instructional response last, also helped Stephanie communicate an important message to the administrators who were asking her to deploy scripted intervention curricula: carefully gathered information and inferences derived about students from assessments *have* to be the cornerstone of decision making. In our efforts to implement quick fixes and meet externally mandated levels of proficiency, processes that take time and professional expertise can get glossed over in the service of getting an intervention in place, fast. The result is that even well-intentioned adults who daily talk the talk of putting students first can make poor decisions when they are under pressure to get a program in place to create the appearance of action.

Stephanie's work as an assessor might be summed up in a clear definition of assessment from Genishi and Dyson (2009), whose work with younger learners and readers I admire immensely. Assessment, they suggest, is "an ongoing, complex process in which we aim to discover and document what children are learning over time in many situations and across multiple symbol systems, so that we can help them learn more" (p. 116). Though Stephanie's inquiry did not involve varying symbol systems (her concern was work with alphabetic text), her questions drove her to look for tools that allowed her to uncover information she could formalize through documentation. Through study of that documentation, she could consider adjustments in instruction to help students like Richard read and learn more effectively. The process is neither perfect nor easy, but there is no substitute for it (see Figure 2.7).

Reading Assessment as Organic Outgrowth of Curriculum

At the time I was working with teachers on this project, I was, like Stephanie, teaching a yearlong reading support class for high school students but with students who received no other special services. When I began teaching the course in 2009, course-alike teachers from our area high schools met with our district curriculum coordinator to discuss curriculum and student selection. Though assessment was not officially on the agenda, this meeting called attention to the fact that assessment was absolutely central to any decisions we would be making. In fact, the frustration and confusion that grew out of that meeting caused me, quite by accident, to begin thinking about this course with assessment at its center. Afflerbach (2011) reminds us that

too often, assessment operates from a top-down position, and tests drive curriculum; or assessment represents a series of afterthoughts—added to an instructional program because it is required, and not because it is tightly aligned with teaching goals and student learning. Optimally, assessment is seamless with teaching and learning, and it develops organically with curriculum. (p. 311)

Figure 2.7: Carefully considering the relationships between instructional responses and assessment tools.

In the record-keeping chart Stephanie created, she was intentional about the rhetoric of the order of the columns: Student name, What she knows about students, What instructional responses (district mandated and her own) might be appropriate. The reasons for doing so are implied in Stephanie’s situation, but that is not by any means the only way to think about or visually represent the relationships between students, assessment, and instruction.

You’ll see other examples in this book that look more like this:

Probable instructional response	Assessment tool to facilitate differentiation	Student groupings
High-, average-, low-difficulty readings to build background knowledge on new content topic	Teacher knowledge about student reading level, informed by state testing data; student responses to anticipation guide on upcoming content	High difficulty Average difficulty Low difficulty

The order in which you think about students, assessment tools, and instructional response should be flexible and determined by context—but it should be done with intention. Generally speaking, the closer you are to the daily interactions of students, the more you can think like the chart in this graphic. After all, since those closest to students—the teachers who teach them—are those responsible for acting on classroom assessment, having possible instructional responses in mind *as the reason for deploying an assessment* is fairly key to maximizing consequential validity.

The following classroom example demonstrates my attempts to establish those optimal assessment conditions for my students—not because I was conscious of meeting some sort of research-based standard, but simply because I needed to know what to teach.

Using a fairly sophisticated data management program, our curriculum coordinator pulled up and manipulated color-coded dots that represented all the ninth graders who would be attending each of the high schools. Then we focused on kids who scored below or at the low end our state’s eighth-grade assessment “meets” level. Knowing that “the more consequential the decision, the more important it is to seek diverse perspectives and independent sources of data” (SARW, p. 24), we factored in students’ scores on a pre-ACT test with a predictive relationship to the state high school exam. Finally, from this pool of students, we factored *out* any student who received any other special support services.

Through standardized assessment measures and a data-sorting process reminiscent of the high-tech world in the science fiction film *Minority Report*, we created a group of students who seemed to have something in common. But what that “thing” in common was—and what implications it had for course design or immediate instructional steps—eluded us. We could not even begin to deduce grade-level proficiency despite having the entirety of these students’ official school records literally at our fingertips. The wisdom of the SARW’s warning about the futility of using multiple, though similarly narrow, forms of assessment to aid in inquiry and problem solving could not have been clearer (p. 25).

Recall that inquiry-focused assessment centers on questions that help you know your students better as readers and thinkers. Ideally, you'll have some potential instructional responses already in mind when you give the assessment, but when you're first getting started, as I was, this might not be possible. Bear in mind that if the assessment result is that you have a better mental construct of your students as readers and thinkers, this is a considerable achievement that will play out in instruction even if you're not initially aware of it.

During this meeting, we also developed a basic instructional framework for the class, agreeing that it would involve lots of teacher modeling of effective reading habits with authentic texts. The habits we would focus on would include

- Setting a purpose for reading
- Activating prior knowledge
- Using prior knowledge to make high- and low-level inferences
- Determining what's important
- Asking questions to check for understanding and fuel new understanding
- Varying reading rate and strategy based on the reader's level of understanding

With such a curricular focus in place, I set about designing an assessment that would help me answer the following set of inquiry questions I had about the nebulously “similar” students who would be enrolled in my class:

- Am I in the ballpark on independent reading level? (We were theoretically choosing students who were reading two to three grades below grade level.)
- How do these students respond to questions that mirror the habits of effective readers?
- How well can they articulate their thinking while they read?

Getting into Their Heads

The assessment model I developed—and now use variations of routinely as the centerpiece of my reading instruction—consisted of eight questions, a passage I adapted from an ancillary social studies text, a prompt to promote active reading, and plenty of marginal space in which students could share their thinking. For the purposes of this task, I excerpted a passage about Martin Luther King Jr., and constructed a title (“Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail”) that I was confident would universally allow students to tap into something they knew about a figure from history. On the first sheet, students were asked to consider this context:

Imagine that in your American history class your teacher asks you to read independently a brief article called “Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail.” After you read the article, you'll be asked to explain some of its main ideas to a friend.

Students then wrote in response to two prereading questions:

What do you think you might already know about an article from an American history class called “Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail?”

What do you expect to learn or find out by reading this article?

Only after students responded to these questions did I distribute the reading passage. The active reading prompt asked them to read carefully the text in the left-hand column and to share anything they were thinking in the right-hand column. Because this assessment’s goal was to help me understand students’ current ability to articulate their thinking as they read, I offered no modeling or examples and was intentionally vague on this point. If students asked whether a certain type of response was appropriate (e.g., “Can I ask questions?”), I assured them that anything that showed me what they were thinking as they read would be helpful to me.

When students finished reading the passage and annotating their thinking, I followed up with six more questions on separate paper. I have included them here with parenthetical commentary suggesting what I was trying to find out in relation to the course’s curricular goals and the specific goals of this assessment:

- You’ve been asked to share a summary of this article with a friend. What would you tell him or her? (Overall comprehension; Determining what’s important; Is this text too hard?)
- After reading the article, what do you still want to know? What are you curious about? (Asking good questions; Intellectual curiosity)
- Was there any place in the article where you got lost or confused? What did you do to try to make sense of what you were reading? (Self-awareness; Use of fix-up strategies)
- Look back at your predictions and expectations from the first page of this activity. Did you learn what you expected to learn? Explain. (Evaluating success in light of purposes set)
- What did you like about reading this article? What did you not like? (Affective awareness)
- Is there anything else you would like to share about this article or how you read it? (General: Acknowledging students may have something to say that’s unrelated to the questions I thought were important)

These questions exemplify attempts to bolster the assessment’s construct validity. If we know that effective readers set purposes for their reading—and that they need an active set of prior knowledge on which to build new meaning as they read—I needed to see what they were able to do with prompts that elicit such information. Because these habits and skills were also agreed-upon curricular goals, this kind of assessment was neatly aligned all around.

Looking at Student Work

Before you see how some of my students responded to the course preassessment, I need to get a little ahead of myself to share some thoughts about examining student work. I'm in complete agreement with the SARW that "ensuring that assessment leads to the improvement of teaching and learning is not simply a technical matter of devising instruments for generating higher quality data" (p. 16). The assessment I designed and the information I gleaned from it were absolutely necessary for improving the instruction I provided, but merely possessing the information wasn't enough. The following three conditions were crucial in allowing me to use the information gathered through inquiry-based assessment to improve instruction:

- Allowing myself the time to examine the work carefully
- Having an instructional framework that allows response through full-class, small-group, and independent instruction in place (more on this in Chapter 3)
- Committing substantial amounts of class time to the acts of reading and writing in order to see these processes occurring on a daily basis

Central to that connection between the well-constructed assessment instrument and thoughtfully designed instruction, then, is determining a way to think through the work you'll be examining. The most common way of doing this is through a rubric, or a listing of desired characteristics and performance levels that describe levels of proficiency relative to them.

When I began teaching this course, I was hesitant to use such a rigid instrument and avoided anything that tried to quantify performance in the different domains. I used a document similar to Figure 2.8 that simply lists the desired observable behaviors in one column and leaves space for me to describe the student work in the other. I found this useful in developing an understanding of what each performance assessment was telling me, but not very helpful for detecting individual student progress from one assessment to the next, and it wasn't useful information for students.

The next time I gave such an assessment, I shifted approaches to one that identified certain products, processes, and habits of mind I was investigating and that described four levels of performance (see Figure 2.9). This second version is useful for seeing growth over time—for both me and my students (the students are curious about those charts with numbers)—although it cannot account for issues such as increased text complexity, which makes cross-assessment comparisons challenging. As I share some of my impressions of student work related to the preassessment previously described, you may wish to look at one or both of the instruments (Figures 2.8 and 2.9) I provide to start thinking through the students' responses. First I look at the responses of three students (Maria, John, and Davon)

Figure 2.8: A first attempt to look for evidence of valued habits in student reading assessment, with sample annotations.

Habit	Evidence of Habit
Activate and effectively use prior knowledge to create meaning	<i>Wrote three facts about MLK, but wasn't able to show connections between these facts and what she read.</i>
Ask varied and relevant questions to clarify understanding	<i>A few insightful questions; one showed a connection between question, answer, and comprehension.</i>
Determine what is important	<i>Summary touches on main idea, but is more of a retelling.</i>
Draw high-level and low-level inferences during and after reading	<i>No evidence</i>
Expand vocabulary knowledge and use	<i>No evidence—Did ask "What does this mean?"</i>
Self-monitor and engage in fix-up strategies	<i>Realization that question had been answered</i>

to the prereading questions, asking them to generate background knowledge and make some purpose-setting predictions (see Figures 2.10–2.12). Then I look at Maria's and Davon's annotations and postreading questions (Figures 2.13 and 2.14).

As you examine students' responses to the prereading questions, you might notice something similar to my observations, summarized here:

Maria: Accurately inferred "Dr. King" to be MLK and called up two facts about him; offered more generalized belief about MLK, noting that he "didn't give up." She explicitly draws on her knowledge of story structure to predict that she will discover a problem and a resolution, mapping the specifics of her knowledge of MLK onto it: "I'm thinking that going to jail might be a problem that later results in him winning the prize."

John: Offers up less information about his thinking, and though his purposes for reading are just as accurate as Maria's, he seems to rely heavily on the language of the prompt (the title) for his own responses.

Davon: In contrast to Maria, who accurately associated "Dr. King" with MLK, and John, who offered no insight on his thinking, Davon misidentifies "Dr. King" and creates a story line about theft of a prize that leads to imprisonment. He does, however, set reasonable cognitive purposes for reading.

Figure 2.9: A second tool I used to examine student assessments for information.

	Product: Summary
4	The student summarizes the article very effectively, including an understanding of main idea and some significant details, expressed articulately in the student's own words. Meaningful extensions, comparisons, or connections may be integrated as well.
3	The student summarizes the article effectively, identifying a plausible main idea and relating some details, most of which are relevant and significant. The student may rely on language from the article and likely makes no extension beyond the text.
2	The student overrelies on retelling, making only limited attempts at differentiating between a central idea and details.
1	The student offers a summary that reveals significant lack of comprehension.

	Product: Activating and Using Prior Knowledge
4	The student activates significant, specific prior knowledge before reading and clearly articulates its usefulness in comprehending text during and/or after reading.
3	The student activates specific prior knowledge before reading and makes attempts at articulating its usefulness in comprehending during and/or after reading.
2	The student activates some prior knowledge but shows little ability to connect it to comprehension during and/or after reading.
1	The student shows little ability to activate prior knowledge.

	Process: Stating a Purpose for Reading
4	The student articulates a clear and meaningful purpose for reading the text based on the information known from the prompt and title.
3	The student suggests a reasonable purpose for reading, but may not relate it directly to the information known from the prompt.
2	The student suggests a purpose that is unclear or underdeveloped.
1	The student is unable to suggest a purpose for reading.

	Habit of Mind: Curiosity
4	The student reveals significant interest in something still—or new—to be learned based on the content of the reading.
3	The student suggests interest in something yet to be learned, but may not connect it directly to content in the reading.
2	The student suggests an unclear or underdeveloped notion of something yet to be learned.
1	The student is unable to suggest an area of further curiosity.

	Process: Metacognition
4	The student reveals an awareness of a broad and abundant range of comprehension-related thinking such as questioning, connecting, clarifying, and inferring—nearly all of which seem to contribute to understanding.
3	The student reveals an awareness of a range of comprehension-related thinking, much of which seems to contribute to understanding.
2	The student reveals an awareness of some comprehension-related thinking, though the variety may be limited and some may seem unrelated to understanding.
1	The student reveals little awareness of comprehension-related thinking, and what is revealed may seem unrelated to understanding.

Figure 2.10: Maria's responses to the prereading questions.

In your social studies class, the teacher asks you to read independently a brief article called "Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail." After you read the article, you'll be asked to explain some of its main ideas to a friend.

First: What do you think you might already know about an article from American history class called "Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail"? List this prior knowledge here. (As you are reading, you might write a note next to any part in the article where you use your prior knowledge to understand the article.)

- Martin Luther King the "I have a dream" speech in Washington, D.C.
- Martin Luther King won the Noble Peace Prize.
- Martin Luther King didn't give up.

Second: What do you expect to learn or find out by reading this article?

In this article, you should be able to figure out what the climax is. You should be able to find out a problem and later on a resolution. I'm thinking that going to jail might be a problem that later results in him winning the prize.

Figure 2.11: John's responses to the prereading questions.

In your social studies class, the teacher asks you to read independently a brief article called "Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail." After you read the article, you'll be asked to explain some of its main ideas to a friend.

First: What do you think you might already know about an article from a social studies class called "Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail"? List this prior knowledge here. (As you are reading, you might write a note next to any part in the article where you use your prior knowledge to understand the article.)

- Dr. King gets a prize that got him in jail.
- we are reading it in Soc. Studies

Second: What do you expect to learn or find out by reading this article?

- What the prize is.
- why he went to jail

Figure 2.12: Davon's responses to the prereading questions.

In your social studies class, the teacher asks you to read independently a brief article called "Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail." After you read the article, you'll be asked to explain some of its main ideas to a friend.

First: What do you think you might already know about an article from a social studies class called "Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail"? List this prior knowledge here. (As you are reading, you might write a note next to any part in the article where you use your prior knowledge to understand the article.)

I think it's about a king getting something but he stole it but then again he thought it was his prize but then later on that day he got caught with the prize

Second: What do you expect to learn or find out by reading this article?

I expect to find out what the prize was and to see why he went to jail

Moments such as these reveal the complex interrelationships between assessment, instruction, and content knowledge and expertise. What is heartening about these connections is that building teacher capacity with one leads to development in the others. You don't have to (and cannot) wait until you can claim expertise in all three areas—reading, reading assessment, and the content you're teaching—before starting to use authentic, performance-based reading assessment with adolescents.

If one of my purposes for this preassessment was to find out more about what is going on in students' minds as they read, you can already see its usefulness. If, however, I hoped to readily see patterns of behavior that imply instructional responses appropriate for the entire class (or even for considerable portions of the class), this assessment is not as immediately useful.

As I continue to look at how students responded to the preassessment, I narrow the cases down to those of Maria (Figure 2.13) and Davon (Figure 2.14; he made no annotations on the second page), both of whom set reasonable purposes for reading, but who brought with them very different kinds of background

knowledge. Notice that the marginal comments in Maria's assessment all rely heavily on the observation she made in the first part of the task (Figure 2.10): "Martin Luther King didn't give up." It's difficult to tell whether specific textual content is prompting some of her responses as she continues to develop the central theme she indicated as prior knowledge. On the second page of her responses, she takes up Malcolm X as a new topic, but she folds him in with her treatment of MLK rather than noticing that the text is actually seeking to portray them as different ("Both King and Malcolm X believed in integration and that blacks and whites shouldn't be seperated").

Though it causes Maria to miss out on some of the subtlety of the passage, her activated prior knowledge seems to support her comprehension of the text. If her prior knowledge had been less fully developed (or less accurate), however, would Maria have had the ability to adjust to what the text was telling her? Davon provides a sense of what I mean. Recall that he predicted from the title that this passage would be about "a king," not Martin Luther King. In a way, his marginal comments in Figure 2.14 reveal a higher degree of engagement with the specifics of the text than do Maria's. Sometimes he's restating, sometimes clarifying an understanding; sometimes he's evaluating or inferring. He doesn't note any confusion about his prediction relating to a member of a royal family—until, when prompted to reflect on his predictions in the postreading activity, he points out the he "had no idea this was going to be about MLK." Like Maria, Davon doesn't make any note of Malcolm X serving as a figure of contrast to King.

A look at my impressions of their postreading responses side by side (see Figure 2.15) offers further insight into what these two very different readers did with the same piece of text. Certainly, Maria and Davon are showing me that regardless of any numerical similarities between tests they took in the past (and in fact their eighth-grade standardized test scores are one number apart on a scale of

Figure 2.13: Maria's during-reading annotations (middle column) and responses to follow-up questions (right-hand column).

Text of article	Your thoughts as you read	
<p>Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail</p>		
<p>Martin Luther King, Jr., was in the hospital. He wasn't seriously ill; it was a case of exhaustion. It was Tuesday and he'd given three speeches on Sunday and two on Monday. And there were all those trips to jail, and the marches, and the pressures. But when the phone rang, he felt a whole lot better. Matter of fact, he felt great.</p>	<p>Martin Luther King was a very confident man.</p> <p>Martin Luther King was willing to sacrifice for what he believed in.</p>	<p>You've been asked to share a summary of this article with a friend. What would you tell him or her?</p> <p>This article is basically about how Martin Luther King J.R. was determined to fight for what he believed in no matter what happened.</p>
<p>His wife, Coretta, had big news: Martin had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. That prize is given each year to the person, from anywhere in the world, who has contributed most to peace. Martin Luther King, Jr., at 35, was the youngest person ever to receive it.</p>		<p>After reading the article, what do you still want to know? What are you curious about?</p> <p>There's nothing I'm curious about.</p>
<p>Some Americans were furious, and they wrote to the Nobel committee in Sweden and told them so. Bull Connor said, "They're scraping the bottom of the barrel!" But most Americans were proud. Newspaper columnist Ralph McGill, writing in the <i>Atlanta Constitution</i>, said Europeans understood King better than most Americans. They saw in him "the American promise," with its message for the whole world.</p>	<p>Even though people were upset, he was still confident.</p>	<p>Was there any place in the article where you got lost or confused? What did you do to try to make sense of what you were reading?</p> <p>No, there wasn't but if there was I would re-read until I understand.</p>
<p>King flew to Europe to receive the Peace Prize. He invited his parents, his wife, and 25 friends to go with him. The Nobel chairman awarded him the Prize and said that King was "the first person in the Western world to have shown us that a struggle can be waged without violence."</p>		<p>Look back at your predictions and expectations from the first page of this activity. Did you learn what you expected to learn? Explain.</p> <p>I didn't learn anything new, I basically knew all the information the text had to offer.</p>
<p>He was soon back in America and in jail again. He was in Selma, Alabama, trying to help black citizens vote. Martin Luther King, Jr., marched with 250 citizens who wanted to register to vote. They were all thrown in jail. King, too.</p>	<p>Martin Luther King Jr went to jail and still, that didn't stop him.</p>	
<p>When they heard of Dr. King's arrest, 500 schoolchildren marched to the courthouse. They were arrested. Two days later 300 more schoolchildren were arrested. The evening television news covered it all.</p>		<p>What did you like about reading this article? What did you not like?</p> <p>I didn't like reading this article because it was too simple and I already knew everything in the article.</p>
<p>King wrote a letter from jail. He said, "This is Selma, Alabama. There are more Negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls. Fifteen congressmen came to Selma. They announced that 'new legislation is going to be necessary.' President Johnson held a press conference and said, 'All Americans should be indignant when one American is denied the right to vote.'"</p>		
<p>Coretta Scott King went to the jail to visit her husband. She brought a message from Malcolm X, who was also in Selma. Malcolm, a black leader who was electrifying urban audiences with hard facts and a spirit of militancy, had been invited to Selma by black leaders. His ideas were different from King's. Malcolm had never recognized the power and force of nonviolent action. But Malcolm seemed to be heading in a new direction. He told Coretta, "I want Dr. King to know that I didn't come to Selma to make his job difficult." Then he added, "If the white people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King."</p>	<p>Both King and Malcolm X believed in integration, blacks and whites shouldn't be separated.</p>	<p>Is there anything else you would like to share about this article or how you read it?</p> <p>It was really short and easy not really interesting.</p>
<p>The alternative was violence. Speaking to a big crowd at a church in Selma, Malcolm said, "White people should thank Dr. King for holding people in check, for there are others who do not believe in these nonviolent measures."</p>		

Figure 2.14: Davon's during-reading annotations (middle column) and responses to follow-up questions (right-hand column).

Text of article	Your thoughts as you read	You've been asked to share a summary of this article with a friend. What would you tell him or her?
<p>Dr. King Gets a Prize and Goes to Jail</p> <p>Martin Luther King, Jr., was in the hospital. He wasn't seriously ill; it was a case of exhaustion. It was Tuesday and he'd given three speeches on Sunday and two on Monday. And there were all those trips to jail, and the marches, and the pressures. But when the phone rang, he felt a whole lot better. Matter of fact, he felt great.</p>	<p>He was exhausted because he gave all those speeches</p>	<p>I would tell them that Martin Luther King, Sr was a great man with lots of thought and doing the things in an non-violent way</p>
<p>His wife, Coretta, had big news: Martin had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. That prize is given each year to the person, from anywhere in the world, who has contributed most to peace. Martin Luther King, Jr., at 35, was the youngest person ever to receive it.</p>	<p>He went to jail because he was doing the right thing and the whites thought it was wrong</p>	<p>After reading the article, what do you still want to know? What are you curious about?</p> <p>Why didn't Coretta Scott King take over for her husband when he was murdered</p>
<p>Some Americans were furious, and they wrote to the Nobel committee in Sweden and told them so. Bull Connor said, "They're scraping the bottom of the barrel." But most Americans were proud. Newspaper columnist Ralph McGill, writing in the <i>Atlanta Constitution</i>, said Europeans understood King better than most Americans. They saw in him "the American promise," with its message for the whole world.</p>	<p>I think he got that award because he was making an change in the world.</p>	<p>Was there any place in the article where you got lost or confused? What did you do to try to make sense of what you were reading?</p>
<p>King flew to Europe to receive the Peace Prize. He invited his parents, his wife, and 25 friends to go with him. The Nobel chairman awarded him the Prize and said that King was "the first person in the Western world to have shown us that a struggle can be waged without violence."</p>	<p>I think a lot of people were glad MLK was getting even rights</p>	<p>I was confused when Bull Connor said, "they're scraping the bottom of the barrel." I didn't understand it at all</p>
<p>He was soon back in America—and in jail again. He was in Selma, Alabama, trying to help black citizens vote. Martin Luther King, Jr., marched with 250 citizens who wanted to register to vote. They were all thrown in jail. King, too.</p>	<p>It was good that King was awarded because he's one of a kind</p>	<p>Look back at your predictions and expectations from the first page of this activity. Did you learn what you expected to learn? Explain.</p> <p>No, I had no idea this book was going to be about MLK</p>
	<p>whites didn't want stuff to get better</p>	<p>What did you like about reading this article? What did you not like?</p> <p>I liked that the blacks finally got what they deserved and that was freedom and I didn't like how the blacks kept on getting thrown into jail for no reason</p>
		<p>Is there anything else you would like to share about this article or how you read it?</p> <p>I would like to share that MLK will never be forgotten</p>

28), they approach text and make meaning of text—or at least this particular text—in significantly different ways. But partly because I selected text that, by traditional readability measures, was within their independent reading level (as best I could guess), they were able to demonstrate a definite ability to think about text as they read it. One of the flaws of standardized reading tests used for accountability purposes is that, by design, at least half the students at that grade level are not able to fully access the text.

It’s important to note here that what I looked for in assessing the work that students produced was inextricably linked to possible instructional responses. To return to the SARW’s central notion of the role of assessment in improving instruction, having potential instructional responses of frameworks in mind (think-alouds and small-group and individual conferences—I discuss this model explicitly in Chapter 3) allows teachers to get the most out of assessment. Part of the “assessment as inquiry” paradigm (Serafini, 2000–2001) implies that action will occur as a result of quality assessment.

I certainly had no idea where the students’ responses would tell me I needed to go instructionally, but knowing that I had the tools of full-class think-alouds, small response groups during collaborative learning time, and individual conferences during independent reading made me confident I could *do something* with the assessment information. I contrast this to the way I taught English early in my career, when I relied almost exclusively on full-class discussion or completion of

Figure 2.15: Summary of how Maria and Davon responded to the follow-up questions.

Prompt	Maria	Davon
Share a summary	An accurate statement about MLK, but it reveals no understanding related to the content of the passage itself.	Makes a general statement about MLK and offers the detail of his nonviolent stance.
Still want to know?	No substantive response.	Asks a question about MLK’s legacy through his wife.
Deal with confusion?	No, but offers rereading strategy as a possible response	Points out a moment in the text that was unclear, offers no insight into how he dealt with it.
Reflect on prior knowledge	Claims no new knowledge resulted from reading.	Clarified that he didn’t realize it would be about MLK.
Like/not like	Expresses dislike because it was simple and offered nothing new.	Positive feelings toward the hopeful nature of the content, negative feelings toward the setbacks it discussed.
Anything else?	Short, not interesting.	“MLK will never be forgotten.”

questions in small groups as the modes of instruction. In those modes, students were responding to my questions rather than the more productive arrangement of *me* responding to the information students offered up about their needs as developing readers.

Maria's and Davon's work implied for me a variety of instructional cues:

- In full-class think-alouds, I needed to show students how an effective reader makes use of background knowledge, both when the text confirms it and especially when the text disconfirms it. Students benefit most from think-alouds when a proficient reader demonstrates both success and frustration with text (Silvén & Vauras, 1992). For example, I shared with students my experience of beginning to read Jeannette Walls's memoir *The Glass Castle*. Because I expected the opening pages to be about the young girl whose story is told in the book, I had to work through a self-generated confusion when the opening chapter introduced the narrator as an adult, and I showed students how I did that.
- It's possible that Davon's reference to nonviolence in his summary might prompt Maria to notice that she glossed over the contrast with Malcolm X. In a small-group setting, these two students might work together to construct a summary that includes a high-level main idea statement and key relevant details.
- In one-on-one conferences, I can use text structure language with Maria to show her how I use that knowledge to navigate through text. With Davon, I may need to introduce the idea of text structure first before demonstrating how it can help him make sense of text.

My students take one of these assessments every six weeks or so as a natural extension of the unit we're studying. Using a similar format, I select a text that allows students to apply their knowledge developed over the course of the unit to respond to the process questions. For example, after reading Richard Wright's short novel *Rite of Passage*, students are assessed using a short excerpt from his

Though my inclination is to ask you to wait until you read about a teacher delivering a think-aloud in Chapter 3 to discuss them further, I understand that if you're not familiar with preparing and teaching with think-alouds, you may be a little frustrated at this point. Think-alouds, as I use them, are a way to respond to what I learn about students from their annotations. When I see a pattern of productive or unproductive thought, I use a short excerpt—usually a few paragraphs—to show them how I think as I read. To prepare, I either find the text online or type it into a document; doing so familiarizes me with the text *and* keeps me from selecting too long a chunk. Then I think about how I make sense of the text while I read, often focusing on some habit I want students to develop, such as moving beyond questioning to making thoughtful inferences. I use the Review tab to write out my thoughts in the margin so that the think-aloud is tightly planned. On the day of the think-aloud, I project the unaltered text on the overhead and use a printout with my marginal notes as an unofficial script.

autobiography, *Black Boy*. After reading the Young Readers Edition of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, students read and respond to a few pages of the introduction to another of Michael Pollan's books. Asking students to bring their developed knowledge about style, content, and ideas into a new, but not completely unfamiliar, setting is an activity they respond well to, even when the text is significantly more challenging, as in the case of the not-adapted-for-young-readers second book by Michael Pollan.

I should also add that in combination with the process-oriented questions and prompts I use to assess my students, I do sometimes construct more traditional multiple-choice comprehension/response items and include them as part of the assessment. I have to remind myself that, as useful as I find the more authentic student work, forced-choice questioning is part of students' real assessment experience, and it does offer a way of getting students to respond to aspects of the text that perhaps they wouldn't if not required to do so. Take, for example, verbalizing the philosophical differences between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X from the assessment discussed earlier. It would have been useful to know whether students had picked up on the differences because the absence of annotations on the subject doesn't necessarily mean an absence of understanding.

So far the portraits of inquiry-based reading assessment I've shared have come from classes in which the processes of reading comprehension are the content of the class. Knowing that this is neither the norm nor, truth be told, the ideal situation for students to develop critical comprehension that will serve them in a variety of disciplines, I close this chapter with examples of assessment-centered instruction from a biology and a world literature class. Though the teachers' stances as assessors vary considerably, both instructors sought information about how their students were developing as readers as a seamless part of their content area instruction, and both exemplify the power of assessment with strong construct and consequential validity.

"Try the hardest you can—I will help you through it"

This is what Faith Sharp told her students in her accelerated biology class as she passed back work at the beginning of the period. Students had recently written up the results of their inquiry into proteins in milk, their first lab report of high school, and Faith was offering verbal and written feedback carefully crafted to prompt revision and refine students' understanding of the conventions of writing in the academic discipline of science. Despite Faith's assurance that she would guide them through the process, one student inquired about grades. "I'm not concerned about grades right now," replied Faith. "I'm concerned about helping you learn how to do this."

Faith's sophisticated notion of assessment—as a process that privileges low-risk learning opportunities and feedback that prompts learning—was an approach students were just getting used to. And Faith was still getting used to her students as she gauged what they were able to do as writers, thinkers, and readers in her discipline. Knowing already that her students came from a variety of academic backgrounds and had diverse levels of skill and interest in her subject area, Faith wanted to learn more about her students as readers of science. So, as half of her students were engaged in an investigation into the behavior of guppies in tanks situated around her room, Faith started inquiring into her students' abilities and dispositions as science readers.

Her process began with carefully selected text, a relatively brief excerpt from *Reason for Hope* by Jane Goodall that describes Goodall's observation of chimpanzees using tools (see the left-hand column of Figure 2.16). Faith formatted this passage to allow a column for student responses, and while half the class visited the tanks to observe and take notes on guppies for half the period, the other half of the class read the text and wrote their responses to what they were reading. Then the students swapped tasks, and Faith had a sample of student work that she was eager to examine.

Faith read the students' responses and provided written feedback that honored their thoughts as genuine acts of communication—answering questions where appropriate, commenting on insights, and countering with her own questions to probe further thinking. She sensed that some students were already fairly adept at reading science, those who noticed the features of Goodall's text that discussed her scientific process, drew conclusions about the evidence she presented, and asked questions that demonstrated curiosity about her discoveries and methods. Other students, however, made significantly fewer comments overall, relied more heavily on restatement, and asked only superficial or tangentially related questions. Faith had already gotten a feel for which students likely had the background knowledge and dispositions as readers to handle some of the assignments she'd ask students to read; now she needed a plan to begin supporting those who indicated they might not be so ready.

When Faith and I met to review the student work, we decided we could use some of the stronger student responses to construct a sample set of annotations (see the right-hand column of Figure 2.16) that I would then deliver as a modified think-aloud. Doing so would give students further supportive feedback on the kind of thinking that meets the task of successfully navigating authentic science writing, offer models to students who were not yet performing at that level, and allow us to talk about how reading about science could help students learn about not only *the content* of the science but also the processes and intellectual stances that are central to the discipline.

Figure 2.16: Collected student responses delivered as a think-aloud.

While it was rare for a whole day to pass without at least one chimpanzee sighting, sometimes I had to wait hours and hours for the privilege. It was very important, during those periods of waiting, to stay watchful, because the chimpanzees were often in small groups, or even alone, and completely silent. It was the movement in a tree or the snapping of a branch that would alert me—though as often as not it would turn out to be baboons or monkeys and not chimps at all. One scientist who visited me during those early months was surprised that I did not take a supply of books up to the Peak, so that I could while away the hours of waiting. How much I would have missed!

During those days on the Peak I gradually began to piece together something of the daily life of the Gombe chimpanzees, and my fear of failure began to subside. But three months had passed before I made the first really significant and tremendously exciting observation. It had been a frustrating morning. I had tramped up and down three different valleys in search of chimps but had found none. At noon, weary from crawling through the dense undergrowth, I headed for the Peak. I stopped when I saw a dark shape and a slight movement in the long grass about forty yards ahead. Quickly focusing my binoculars, I saw that it was a single chimpanzee, and soon recognized the adult male, less fearful than the others, whom I already knew by sight. I had named him David Greybeard because of the distinctive white hair on his chin.

I moved a little, so I could see him better. He was sitting on the red-earth mound of a termite nest, repeatedly pushing a grass stem into a hole. After a moment he would withdraw it, carefully, and pick something off with his mouth. Occasionally he picked a new piece of grass and used that. When he left I went over to the termite heap. Abandoned grass stems were scattered around. Termites were crawling about on the surface of the nest, already working to close up the openings into which David had poked his grasses. I tried doing as he had done. and when I pulled out my grass termites were clinging to it with their jaws.

I think that Jane Goodall has some serious patience, waiting for hours. She's not even promised the sight of *one* chimpanzee.

If you wait patiently you can get more out of a day than if you bring stuff to occupy your mind with.

She obviously had devoted much time to this observation of chimps. Spending whole days without seeing a chimp is all made okay with just one sighting. She is easily able to recognize an already named chimp. She really cares about them.

I am sure Jane kept good records of times like these.

I don't know how she can be so amazed by chimpanzees eating termites with leaves. She went through that much trouble just to see that?

For students who demonstrated less proficiency in interacting with the text, Faith also wrote a quick note that she posted to their work (teachers can use sticky notes, too!), encouraging them to move beyond restatement, to try asking questions, or to make evaluations about the content they were reading. She kept a list of these students and her own comments so that she could remind herself to look for changes or growth in student responses as the year progressed. Although Faith knows that her job isn't to become a reading teacher, she realizes that her students will be more successful in her class if she calls attention to the kinds of reading behaviors that will serve them best and offers them the necessary support to develop those behaviors. This relatively simple process helps her do that—and her students are being exposed to key ideas and figures in the field of biology every time she does so.

Looking Ahead to Chapter 3: Systematic Formative Assessment

Students in Liz Dietz's sophomore English class were reading George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. One of the curricular objectives she and her course-alike teachers had agreed on was to help students develop an understanding of the language of propaganda. Liz knew she would need to provide some direct instruction in terminology (e.g., *loaded language*, *begging the question*), but she wanted the need for those terms to arise from students' interpretations of the text. She also wanted to create some flexible groups for a series of activities that she would carefully design to build understanding and independence with the novel—and the rhetorical devices of propaganda.

Through work we had done together, Liz's students were already accustomed to annotating text to demonstrate their thinking as they read, so when she passed out Squealer's first speech to the animals of Manor Farm, the kids knew just what to do. They had read the chapter containing the speech as homework, so this activity focused their attention for the period on this specific moment in the text. When the students completed their annotations, Liz opened the class to discussion, and they worked through their responses to and understanding of what the character was saying.

After this discussion, Liz distributed a list of terms associated with propaganda and shared definitions and examples of the terms with the class. To assess their initial understanding of the terms, she closed class by asking students to return to the left-hand column of the handout—the speech itself—and label examples of the devices of propaganda (see Figure 2.17). This work became the object of inquiry for three questions:

- Which students were demonstrating strong understanding of the novel, as indicated by their right-hand column annotations?

Figure 2.17: Student annotations on a passage from *Animal Farm*.

Text	Your Thoughts/Analysis
<p>"Comrades," he said, "I trust that every animal here appreciates the sacrifice that Comrade Napoleon has made in taking this extra labour upon himself. Do not imagine, comrades, that leadership is a pleasure! On the contrary, it is a deep and heavy responsibility. No one believes more firmly than Comrade Napoleon that all animals are equal. He would be only too happy to let you make your decisions for yourselves. But sometimes you might make the wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be?"</p> <p>Suppose you had decided to follow Snowball, with his moonshine of windmills—Snowball, who, as we now know, was no better than a criminal?"</p>	<p>Guilt in the animals for saying that leadership is very hard</p> <p>That Napoleon really cares for the animals and wants what is best for them</p> <p>Leaving the answer and consequences to the minds of the animals</p> <p>Saying that Snowball is a criminal by asking the question.</p>
<p>"He fought bravely at the Battle of the Cowshed," said somebody.</p> <p>"Bravery is not enough," said Squealer. "Loyalty and obedience are more important. And as to the Battle of the Cowshed, I believe the time will</p>	<p>He is saying that Bravery is not that important and is undermining Snowball's values and attitude</p> <p>undermining Snowball's efforts</p>

- Which students were demonstrating a strong understanding of the propaganda terms, as indicated by the left-hand column annotations?
- What persistent misconceptions were students demonstrating that she would need to address in the next day's instruction?

Liz used these questions to guide her analysis of student work, and she was able to sort students into higher-, middle-, and lower-level groups for the reading and analysis of a future speech. She also noticed that students were consistently mislabeling anything with a question mark in Squealer's speech as "begging the question." She made review and clarification of that concept the focus of the start of the next class session, after which she put students into mixed-performance groups to read, discuss, and analyze the next of Squealer's speeches. Although she couldn't meet with all of the groups at once, Liz was able to rely on the existing expertise of some of her students to provide support for those who were still developing an understanding.

After a few cycles of such assessment and instruction, Liz shared with students a real-world example of political propaganda, and students used the right-hand column to annotate both the propaganda devices and their impact on meaning, uniting the new content of the unit with the ongoing focus of her class—developing students who are capable of reading increasingly complex text with independence.

An important thread that joins these brief portraits of reading assessment in content area classrooms is that students were reading text they would have read anyway as part of the course. That's what makes a thoughtful, inquiry-based approach to adolescent reading assessment seem, in some ways, so unremarkable. These teachers aren't deploying sophisticated tools or inventories, though there are times that those are appropriate (see Chapter 5 for such a case). Instead, Faith and Liz are asking their students to respond to text in a way that will help these teachers investigate a question they already planned to respond to instructionally. Faith had a long-term, relatively low-intensity plan for response: individual student feedback and frequent opportunities to continue engaging in the act of reading and response. Liz's goals were more short term and high intensity: she changed instruction and student learning groups in immediate response to the work students produced and continued to monitor her three main questions until students were eventually ready to be assessed on independent performance.

Both approaches take heed of the dual notion of validity—construct and consequence. Students were reading real text and sharing their authentic, thoughtful responses; the teacher used their responses after careful analysis to uncover evidence manifested in their written and spoken responses, to guide instruction,

and to provide appropriate support through full-class and more focused responses. These portraits, together with the more detailed scenarios earlier in the chapter, represent the foundation of the approach to adolescent literacy assessment that is further developed through examples in the next chapter.

Tools for Thought from Chapter 2

Building from the call for an inquiry approach to reading assessment in Chapter 1, this chapter offers a window into what it looks like to start asking questions and gathering evidence about students' reading abilities, habits, and attitudes. The assessment tools I describe offer three ways for you to get started with inquiry-based reading assessment with your own students:

- Sticky note annotations
- Student think-alouds and pre/postreading interview questions
- Pre/postreading questions and marginal annotations

The most appropriate tool for your context will depend on a number of factors, including the size of your class, the questions you have, and your level of comfort with this type of inquiry.

If the task seems daunting and the amount of information you might generate seems overwhelming, consider starting small. Ask a cooperative student to join you at lunch or before or after school to try the verbal interview. Give your students photocopies of the first few pages of the novel you're about to start in class and ask them to read independently while sharing their thoughts in the margins. Don't pressure yourself to start changing instruction immediately—though some cues might present themselves right away. The following chapters offer ideas on how to create a classroom structure and climate that not only allows for such assessment information to be taken up, but in fact requires it in order to function effectively.

The Common Core State Standards call for students to read and comprehend increasingly complex text as they move through middle and high school. While this is a worthy goal, how will teachers know what kinds of text students are ready for, or how to support students as they develop the necessary skills, habits, and stances to grow as readers?

This book in the Principles in Practice imprint is the result of the author's own efforts to bridge the gap between valuing reading and being able to respond with appropriate instruction or evaluate growth in reading. Scott Filkins brings us into his classroom and the classrooms of his colleagues to demonstrate how high school teachers across the disciplines can engage in inquiry-based reading assessment to support student learning. Based in the IRA–NCTE *Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing*, Revised Edition, the classroom portraits highlight the importance of incorporating genuinely formative assessment into our instruction.

Filkins unpacks his own history with assessment through engaging “confessions” of his early practices and eventual growth toward a framework that situates reading assessment in an inquiry model. Throughout the book, he showcases his colleagues’ attempts to use an inquiry framework, including the various tools and documentation methods that help them inquire into their students’ habits and thoughts as readers, use formative assessment to fuel the gradual release of responsibility framework, and use reading assessment as a means of professional reflection. Finally, Filkins challenges us to broaden the conversation about assessment to a wider range of stakeholders and offers a vision of assessment as an expression of care for the students in our charge.

Scott Filkins has worked as an educator in the Champaign (Illinois) Unit 4 schools in a variety of roles, including English teacher and department chair, reading teacher, instructional coach, and curriculum coordinator for English language arts and social studies, grades 6–12.

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