Reading for Real:  
Creating a Culture of Literacy through Inquiry

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Join third-grade teacher Tim O’Keefe and his students as they engage in a reflective conversation around the question, “What is reading?” In the midst of their musings, a few eight-year-olds convey beliefs reminiscent of Louise Rosenblatt’s notion that reading is an aesthetic process (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Sarah Beth: Well let’s say you’re reading a book about horses. Reading is kind of like understanding and feeling like you are in the book. If you are reading a book about horses, you are the one. You are the one riding the horse and not falling off the horse and your hair is blowing in the wind.

Carl Lewis: Mine kind of goes with Sarah Beth. You have to be in the book if you are enjoying the book.

Ty: Reading to me is like . . . I’m Fireheart in Warriors and it’s like I am in the woods and talking to Cloud.

While some teachers might find such insights from young readers astonishing, Tim was pleased but not surprised. You see, Tim had been carefully scaffolding his students to grow as readers through an inquiry into the reading process for some time. Tim and his colleagues “loop” with their students, meaning they stay together as a group for two consecutive years. Additionally, Tim teaches in a school organized around a shared philosophy so the students he inherited from the K–1 teacher had received theoretically congruent instruction. The inquiry stance that permeates classrooms at the Center for Inquiry (CFI) in Columbia, South Carolina, is grounded in “wondering” and “information seeking” forms of dialogue (Lindfors, 1999). Teachers and students co-construct a culture through dialogic inquiry (Wells, 1999) by sharing ideas, negotiating, collaborating, critiquing, and engaging in ongoing problem posing and solving experiences (Jennings and Mills, 2009). At CFI, children inquire as readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and social scientists. Consequently, Tim had been nurturing a deep understanding of the reading process with this particular class for a little over a year already. At CFI, reading workshop is grounded in an inquiry into the reading process, that is, an ongoing investigation into what strategic readers do to construct meaning. And writing workshop is organized around an inquiry into the various genres, craft moves, language use, conventions, text features, and text structures that effective authors use when composing.

As a teacher of young readers, Tim stands on the shoulders of giants who embrace a reading workshop model when developing a literacy curriculum (Allington, 2011; Braunger & Lewis, 2006; Hindley, 1996; Keene, 2008; Miller, 2009; Routman, 2003; Smith, 1981; Taberski, 2000; Wells, 1986). His daily forecast includes read-alouds, independent reading with reading conferences, literature circles, and writing workshop (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016; Calkins, 1986; Daniels, 2002; Egawa & Harste, 2001; Ray, 2002; Wilson, 2002). He is a careful kidwatcher (Goodman, 1978; Mills, O’Keefe & Jennings, 2004) who makes intentional and systematic instructional decisions from formal and informal assessment data (Serravallo, 2014). In so doing, Tim teaches responsively by planning for individuals, small groups, and his whole class. Tim’s responsive teaching moves come from knowing his kids as readers and from a deep understanding of the reading process (Mills et al., 2004; Serravallo, 2015). In short, he teaches readers, not simply reading (Mills, 2014).

Over the past twenty years, Tim has been cultivating
a solid set of beliefs and practices around literacy instruction within a supportive professional context that honors teachers as the primary decision makers in the classroom. At the Center for Inquiry, Tim and his colleagues meet weekly to inquire into and grow new beliefs and practices (Mills, Jennings, Donnelly, & Mueller, 2001; Mills, 2014; Glover & Keene, 2015). As the Curriculum, Research, and Development Specialist at CFI, I (Heidi) capture teaching and learning engagements by videotaping across classrooms. We use the videos to frame our weekly curricular conversations by theorizing from our own practices (Mills, Jennings, Donnelly, & Mueller, 2001). This reflexive stance promotes teaching and learning from one another and also pushes us to continually outgrow ourselves (Mills, with O’Keefe, 2015). Through ongoing curricular conversations, we investigate our instructional strategies, assessment decisions, classroom conversations, children’s growth and change, and so on.

Across the years, we have solidified our belief that knowing kids as readers through careful kidwatching is foundational (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). It’s at the heart of responsive teaching. It all begins with kidwatching. In fact, kidwatching makes it possible to truly scaffold conversations around children’s inquiries into the reading process. When carefully analyzing video clips from Tim’s reading and writing workshop, the literacy engagements that took our breath away occurred when Tim engaged his young readers in guided inquiries around books, authors, and the reading process itself (Beers & Probst, 2012; Johnston, 2004, 2005; Smagorinsky, 2013).

We noticed Tim carefully scaffolded conversations with his kids using his knowledge of them as readers. It was clear he accessed information he had gleaned from weekly reading conferences to inspire and respond to children’s thinking about the reading process. He takes careful notes to capture children’s reading strategies, as well as their reflections on themselves as readers and their perceptions of the reading process. These data make it possible for him to teach out of an in-depth knowledge of each child’s strengths, needs, and interests. We also noticed he made space for them to get to know one another, their teacher, and even their parents as readers. And we noted that Tim deliberately nurtured conversations that helped children get in touch with themselves as readers in relationship to a deep and abiding understanding of the reading process.

As he talked reader-to-reader with his students, Tim consistently wove the notion that reading is about understanding and meaning making into the fabric of their collaborative conversations. Basically, he created a culture of literacy in his classroom through collaborative inquiries into the reading process. (See Figure 1.)

**How an Inquiry Stance Enhances Literacy Learning**

Because inquiry is a stance that permeates Tim’s curriculum, he has created a number of strategies that contribute to the culture of literacy in his second- and third-grade classroom. In this piece, I illustrate how he

- Enriches independent reading through strategy-sharing sessions to conclude reading workshop;
- Invites parents and students to work as reading researchers by investigating the strategies proficient adult readers use; and
- Engages students in an innovation on retrospective miscue analysis through Mystery Reader
conversations, a strategy Tim developed to help kids notice, name, and analyze miscues of anonymous young readers.

Each dimension of the model featured in Figure 1 comes to life as Tim and his diverse group of second and third graders engage in ongoing strategy sharing to conclude independent reading, conduct research on their parents’ reading strategies, or participate in retrospective miscue analysis sessions to get in touch with themselves and others as readers in relation to their growing understanding of the reading process.

**Inquiry in Action: Strategy Sharing to Conclude Independent Reading**

Like most teachers who embrace a reading workshop model, Tim devotes a significant amount of time to Independent Reading (IR) (Bridges, 2014; Miller, 2009; Seravallo, 2014). He launches the year by coaching his young readers into making wise “just-right” book choices based on their capacity to comfortably read particular authors, genres, and series they love or find personally compelling. He confers with them during IR and takes careful notes to guide his instruction. He also encourages his students to reflect on themselves as readers by jotting down strategies they use to work through challenging words or passages. They document their insights on sticky notes.

Tim pulls everyone together at the end of reading workshop for a reflective strategy-sharing session. He accesses these reflective conversations to promote authentic inquiry into the strategies the children and their teacher use daily to construct meaning. The students use the sticky notes to inspire focused strategy-sharing conversations, while Tim uses their notes as naturally occurring kidwatching data. The children’s reflections complement and extend the notes he takes. (See Figure 2.)

Tim accesses the anecdotal notes he takes when conferring with readers to make contributions to the reflective conversations, as well (Mills & O’Keefe, 2013). His students learn to study themselves as readers, knowing they will be responsible for teaching their young colleagues during the strategy-sharing session. This feature of reading workshop promotes authentic accountability. Students feel a sense of responsibility for helping each other grow and change. The students and their teacher move fluidly in and out of mentor and apprentice roles, as they hold conversations around the strategies that help them construct meaning.

Strategy sharing at the conclusion of reading workshop is one of many ways Tim and his students co-construct a culture of literacy through ongoing inquiries into the reading process. “As students study themselves, they outgrow themselves by identifying their strengths, as well as their struggles, and envisioning new possibilities” (Mills, 2014, p. 91).

It was April in second grade. The strategy-sharing session evolved this way:

**Lucas:** My word was *exuberantly*.

**Tim:** What do you think it means?

**Lucas:** I think it means they celebrated crazily. [Reading from his book] It says, “No one celebrates life more exuberantly than the ??? clan often with disastrous conclusions as some wolf gets killed in what was supposed to be a friendly wrestling match.”

**Tim:** Wow! That would be quite exuberant. So how did you figure it out that it meant celebrated crazily?

**Lucas:** I read the text after it and before.

**Tim:** So one of the patterns that I’m noticing is so many of us are moving toward using the meaning to figure out the words that are tricky for us at first. Exuberantly!
Emma: [walks to the board and writes *fatal*. She turns.] My word is *fat-al*. [Pronouncing it with a short *a* sound.] I didn’t really know how to pronounce it. I found it with Miss Betty (student teacher). She was asking me what it meant and I was trying to figure it out by using the sentence. I was trying to figure out how it was the right way to pronounce but I couldn’t really find any other way. But I thought it meant bad, painful or deathly [reading from her sticky note] because the paragraph is: ‘‘Has it occurred to you that I have gone to great effort and expense as well as personal sacrifice to reach this point,’ the man in black replied. ‘That if I fail now I might get very angry and if she stops breathing in the very near future, it is entirely possible that you will catch the same fat-al illness?’”

Tim: [Referring to her sticky note] “Bad, painful or deathly.” So one thing that Emma said was reading the context doesn’t tell you how to pronounce it. Very occasionally you might find a pronunciation guide somewhere in a book, but you don’t see it very often. What I appreciate about this strategy of figuring out what words mean by using all the sentences and things happening around it is that you don’t have to say the word out loud to get the meaning of the word. Does anyone else know this word? How it’s pronounced correctly?

Tray: I heard it’s pronounced *fatal* [correct pronunciation with long *a* sound]. It means like if a snakebite is fatal, it means it could kill you.

Tim: [Turning back to Emma] So you got the definition. You could practically write the definition for Webster’s Dictionary but it’s interesting that you could do that without pronouncing it the way a lot of people pronounce it. If you are lucky sometimes you can remember you’ve heard the word before. But you can still read it and enjoy the story without necessarily pronouncing all the words correctly. I think that’s a change for a lot of us. At first we thought reading was saying the words. Right? Even if you miscue on the way the word sounds, you can still enjoy the story.

Emma: Usually if I see a word with a letter that says its name it usually has an *e* at the end or after the letter so that’s why I thought it was *fat-al*. Yeah, it really looked like that because often long vowels are marked by two vowels together or a silent *e* on the end.

This vignette shows how Tim and his young readers co-construct a powerful set of beliefs about the reading process through reflective conversations like these. In this particular segment, they illustrate a growing understanding that readers do the following:

- think
- strive to understand and make meaning
- use the text before and after an unknown word to make sense of the word
- seek to understand what a word means even if they are not sure how to pronounce it

As you might imagine, ongoing inquiries like this deepen and broaden children’s conceptions of reading while strengthening their identities and sense of agency as readers (Harvey & Daniels, 2015; Johnston, 2004).

When we make space for ongoing reflection in the curriculum, we create the conditions that make learning in school more closely reflect learning in the world. Physicist Ben Brabson, in a personal conversation (1996) about how physicists collaborate, put it this way, “You go off and work, then you come back together to reflect. You get feedback and fine-tune your ideas with the knowledge of your colleagues. You have an extended mind when you have the benefit of everyone’s wisdom.” And that’s precisely why reflection is central to inquiry. This strategy–sharing practice makes reflection a habit of the heart and mind. It solidifies and makes individual insights part of the class thought collective . . . an extended mind.

**Inquiry in Action: Students Become Reading Researchers by Investigating Their Parents’ Reading Strategies**

While Tim employs an apprenticeship model in his classroom, he also strives to expand the model to include parents as much as possible. Parents are, after all, their children’s first and often most powerful mentors. Like most teachers, Tim attempts to harness the potential of parents as mentors by inviting them into his classroom in a variety of ways. One of the most compelling engagements he has devised is a focused inquiry into the reading strategies his students’ parents use.
Tim initiates this inquiry in one of his weekly newsletters. He invites his children’s parents to study themselves as readers to create a list of the strategies they regularly employ. To do so, they simply self-monitor and document the strategies they use to figure out unknown words or confusing passages when reading for work or pleasure. After the majority of parents respond, he compiles and types a list of strategies experienced readers use.

Tim makes copies, distributes, and reads the list to his class. The students delight in hearing their parents’ contributions. Next, he suggests the children work in teams to look for patterns in strategies that are similar, group them together, and name the category. They cut the list apart and begin sorting. As they do, they engage in deep conversations around skills and strategies in the reading process (Afflerback, Pearson & Paris, 2008).

I joined the class one day to capture the engagement on video. One particular team noticed a number of parents used “skipping” as a primary strategy. They grouped the following contributions under the title Skipping:

- Skip the word.
- Read on.
- Sometimes I skip the word and continue reading.
- Sometimes I just keep reading if it is not critical to my understanding of the story.
- I will substitute another word that I know probably means nearly the same thing and just keep reading.

After each team noticed, named, and negotiated titles for a range of categories, they gathered together at the front of the room to share their thinking. As they did, they continued expanding and refining their understanding of the reading process. They developed categories with supporting data such as the following:

**Read again.**
- Go back to it.
- Read it aloud even if there is no one around just so I can hear the word in my voice.
- I usually reread the passage or word.
- Read the entire passage (or word) a second time.
- Read it 2,3,4 times to try to figure it out.
- Read it over slowly.
- Read it over.

**Use your background experience.**
- I think back about what I know about the character or subject.
- Use pictures.
- Focus on key words I know.
- Think about what I know about the genre, author, or my real life experiences.

**Make an educated guess.**
- Use what I think it means and go on.
- Read the entire paragraph and take a guess at what it means.
- Make a guess or prediction.

**Use the context.**
- I will substitute another word that I know probably means the same thing and just keep reading.
- Look at how the word fits with the rest of the words.
- I relate passages to the story around them.
- I translate into my own words.
- Use context clues . . . Look at the rest of the sentence and see if the idea of the sentence helps me figure out the meaning of what I don’t know.
- Keep reading and look for hints.

As the seven and eight year olds conversed and negotiated categories, they noticed the interrelated nature of reading strategies. The children began seeing themselves in their parents’ responses. Claiming strategies they used naturally strengthened their identities and sense of agency as readers. Most importantly, they recognized their parents were constantly trying to understand or figure out the meaning of texts when reading. They rarely employed strategies to figure out words in isolation. Rather, experienced readers use syntax and graphophonemic cues in concert to construct meaning (Goodman, Watson & Burke, 2005). Consequently, the class decided to devise an overarching category that conveyed the essence of the reading process. They decided to call it the **umbrella category** and placed it at the top of their list.

**Umbrella**
- Make sure I understand what I am reading.
- I make sure I understand what the author is trying to say.
Once Tim and his students compiled a final draft of reading strategies from parent reading data, he posted it in the classroom and included it in a parent newsletter. In so doing, he contextualized his recommendations for responding to young readers when they miscue or come to something they don’t know. Tim accessed parent strategies to foreground the importance of reading for meaning. We all know parents typically offer the age-old adage of “sound it out” when kids look to them for reading guidance. By referring to their own data, he could naturally and explicitly demonstrate the importance of responding to young readers with questions such as: Does that make sense? Does it sound right? Does it look right?

This collaborative inquiry made it possible for Tim to think up with parents rather than talk down to them. It also increased the odds that the children would receive theoretically consistent and supportive feedback when reading at home and at school.

**Inquiry in Action: Noticing, Naming, and Analyzing Miscues**

When Marie Clay began observing, coding, and identifying patterns in the reading process, she transformed our capacity to understand emergent readers using running records (Clay, 2015). Around the same time, on the other side of the planet, Ken and Yetta Goodman joined forces with Dorothy Watson and Carolyn Burke to analyze the miscues of proficient readers. They revolutionized reading assessment and instruction for years to come by institutionalizing their research findings with the creation of the Reading Miscue Inventory (Goodman, Watson & Burke, 2005). Both running records and reading miscue analysis procedures offer a structure that makes it possible to identify patterns in a reader’s miscue profile. Although the coding and analysis procedures for both tools are complex and require extensive training and practice to use them proficiently, the underlying processes are clear and accessible. They just make sense. In fact, even Tim’s seven and eight year olds have demonstrated they can grasp the underlying concepts of retrospective miscue analysis (Goodman & Marek, 1996). Tim’s young readers have also illuminated how analyzing miscues helps them transact with texts intentionally and strategically.

Several times a year, Tim engages his students in focused investigations into the reading process via a strategy he devised called the Mystery Reader Project. To prepare for the experience, he selects passages from a current read-aloud or literature study text so his students are familiar with the storyline and characters. Then he invites a child from a different classroom in the school to read a passage while he records it. Next, he displays the passage on the SMART Board while playing a recording of the anonymous child reading it.

Tim’s children take miscue notes as they read along with the mystery reader. After sharing the recording and retelling, Tim and his students embark on a rich conversation about the moves the mystery reader made and how they affected his or her comprehension. Tim named this strategy Mystery Reader to maintain a clear focus on the process rather than the students’ relationship to or knowledge of the child. The anonymous nature of the task also makes it possible to speak openly and honestly about the young readers’ strengths and challenges without affecting the reader personally. The conversation is focused solely on the reading process and what children might learn and apply to their own reading behaviors.

As an experienced teacher with an in-depth understanding of miscue analysis, Tim believes it is critical to teach his students how to read for meaning by using balanced cue systems. When conferring with readers, he has developed his own coding system inspired by miscue analysis (Goodman, Watson & Burke, 2005). He does so to determine if his students’ miscues maintain or disrupt meaning. Tim talks reader-to-reader with his students, just as he does with their parents. In other words, Tim thinks up with his readers rather than talking down to them. He is open and honest about the notes he takes when conferring with them.

He recently explained his coding system when responding to a Mystery Reader transaction:

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

**Tim:** Here’s how I would have coded some of this. He said “Loobo” for Lobo. This is a cue for my notes, this little “NMC.” I’ll put that on my notes if it’s a high-quality miscue. That means there’s no real meaning change. It didn’t change the meaning at all that he said “Loobo” for Lobo. So I’m agreeing with Emily on that one. [Emily had recently suggested that mispronunciation of names doesn’t interfere with comprehension.]
Tim: Here’s one. He said “Miss” for Mr. I think it was Mr. Hobbs. He said, “Miss . . . Mr.” He self-corrected. So for me, this little SC means he self-corrected. Again, that’s what I want to see. If a person is self-correcting his miscues, that means he is really paying attention to the story, not just reading words. There was one part where he omitted the word of. Then he read on. I think he realized that what he read didn’t really work there. So he went back and put of back in.

Trey: What do you mean by omit?

Tim: As he was reading it, he read that sentence without the word of, even though it was there, then he reread the sentence and he put it in. Because it just didn’t sound right without it. Again, he self-corrected that one.

And then “Mig-you-la” for Miguel, and then “Mingle” for Miguel. I thought it was interesting how he tried a couple different things. So he wasn’t sure. He saw the name twice and he tried two different approaches.

The conversation continued. As you read the extended excerpts that follow, notice how the talk promotes a sophisticated understanding of the reading process. Together, they explore how miscues impact understanding. They consider those that maintain meaning and those that reflect subtle meaning changes. They even address the relationship between dialect and comprehension. All the while, they seek to understand rather than judge the reader. It’s all about interrogating the reading process.

Tim: What an interesting reader. How about if you have not had a chance to make any comments out loud yet, why don’t you put your hand up?

Jake: She kept saying “axed.”

Tim: I noticed that too. So for this word (writes on board) ask or asked she said “ax” or “axed.” What do you make of that? Do you think she understood what she was reading? Do you think she meant . . . this was a question?

Jake: Yeah.

Tim: I agree. What do some of you think about that? So she just pronounced it a little differently. It didn’t change the meaning you think. [Jake nods.] Anyone want to comment on that?
Emily: Because they would think she would be going by her house.

Tim: So it changed the meaning a little bit. When I code those, I write this [writes on the board] SMC for subtle meaning change or some meaning change. It’s not exactly a no meaning change, it’s not exactly a big meaning change. It’s sort of a subtle one. That’s really neat that you picked up on that. Heidi Mills, do you want to say something?

Heidi: Did you notice at the very end she said, “The grumble grew longer,” instead of “larger”?

Harris: I thought she said, “The grumble grew older.”

Tim: No, it was “longer.” So what do you think about that one, Harris? She said, “The grumble grew longer.” Would that be a meaning change?

Harris: No.

Tim: You think it means about the same thing?

Harris: Yes! Of course it does. It’s a high-quality miscue.

Tim: Totally! And it kind of looks like longer. It wouldn’t take much of a change to make that word larger look like longer. So it’s a high-quality miscue and I can see exactly why she did it.

This example beautifully captures foundational processes of reading and inquiry in concert. The children learn how to make careful observations, interpret, and name features of the reading process just as reading researchers do. The strategy helps students get in touch with a range of strategies readers use while deliberately exploring the difference between strategies that support and those that disrupt comprehension. At the same time, this engagement allows Tim to teach the skillfulness of inquiry. His students learn how to make and interpret careful observations around the reading process.

Tim demonstrates how we might ask ourselves to engage kids in an investigation of the reading process in ways that reflect how reading researchers work (Goodman, 1996). When we do, we make learning in school more closely reflect learning in the world.

This I Believe: Inquiry and Literacy Are Symbiotic in Nature

Tim creates a culture of literacy in his classroom by creating the conditions to read intensively and extensively, to talk about books, to inquire into and explore the reading process itself. The inquiry stance that permeates Tim’s curriculum nurtures the culture of literacy he and his students co-construct. Inquiry and literacy feed one another.

The three examples of inquiry in action—ongoing strategy-sharing sessions to conclude reading workshop, collaborative research into the reading strategies of children’s parents, and analysis of anonymous peer reading strategies—show why Figure 1 is such a powerful model. Clearly Tim knows his students as readers; they know one another, their teacher, and their parents as readers; and they know themselves as readers in relation to their current conception of the reading process. Each embedded dimension of this model contributes to the culture of literacy Tim cultivates through inquiry.

In the opening vignette of this article, three young readers portray the essence of Rosenblatt’s (1995) notion of reading being an aesthetic experience. They learn to think so deeply and talk so eloquently about reading because it is a habit of the heart and mind in Tim’s room. It’s a way of being. It’s what they do and who they are. In short, Tim’s students understand and embrace the informative and transformative power of reading.

To conclude their loop—two years of thinking and working together—the third graders select a topic they are most passionate about and write a persuasive essay on its merits. They listen to several “This I Believe” essays from National Public Radio for inspiration. Then they embark on their own belief piece. Hamilton chose to write about reading. His essay is entitled “Reading Can Take You to More Than a Magical Place.” Although this piece may not represent what is typical for seven and eight year olds in American schools, it certainly points to what is possible. Hamilton captures the power and potential of a literacy curriculum that offers ongoing opportunities to read and inquire into the reading process. May Hamilton’s words and the demonstrations from Tim’s classroom inspire you to cultivate a culture that supports reading for real (see Figures 3 & 4):
If you are really reading—not just looking at the words—you will become that main character. You are not yourself anymore. . . . True reading is not just glancing at signs on paper, but making those signs come alive. Out of the book and into the world. They close in around you and it fills your mind so you can’t think of anything else. . . . That’s reading for real.

References


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**Note:** All ideas and findings in this article represent the perspective of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of Richland School District Two or the University of South Carolina.