



# ENGAGED *in* BOOKS

*Lessons for Literary Interpretation in Students' Independent Reading*

**By Randy Bomer**



**W**hat if we focused our teaching of reading more on the mental actions we want students to use, rather than talking about the text itself? Then we can have meaningful discussions about how readers make decisions as they read. At the same time, we can tap into the high motivation to read that comes from allowing students to choose texts that interest them.

In fact, students' independent reading provides an especially fertile context for teaching reading strategies that everyone should know such as envisioning what's happening in the text or critiquing the social worlds of texts. We don't always have to teach those strategies with shared texts. When students are engaged in books they really want to read and understand, our lessons about reading as thinking have some preexisting motives to stick to. Meanwhile, our instruction about a particular kind of thinking becomes the goal of our teaching. We could teach the students to envision, rather than discuss the possible meanings of Curly's glove in *Of Mice and Men*, or what happened in Chapter 4, or how Steinbeck's life might have informed what he wrote. The teaching objectives come from a precise analysis of what a reader does while reading rather than the *things* in a particular text. We might sometimes discuss a text, but the focus of discussion would be on the reader's action.

Recently, a teacher, Maya, and I worked on minilessons with students who were each reading a self-selected book. From our conferences with them, we noticed that they were drawing on some of the kinds of thinking they had done in a recent whole-class experience with a short story—envisioning, predicting, and building relationships to characters—but they weren't presently drawing upon the kind of interpretive thinking that Maya had taught.

Teachers who love English Language Arts often place a high value on interpreting. Once we have made an interpretation, we may think we know why the text exists. But an interpretation doesn't really belong to the text. It's a product of something the reader has done. From early on in a reading event, the reader usually starts to get a feeling about *what this text is really all about, or what the author is trying to say, or what I'm supposed to be understanding on a level that transcends just the events of this text*. This feeling is the beginning of the act of interpreting, and following those little, tentative hunches until evidence begins to confirm or disconfirm them is the process of building an understanding of the reading.

We wanted to reintroduce the idea of interpretation, so we started with a minilesson about asking "What's the point?"<sup>1</sup> Maya said, "Say you walk up to someone and ask them about that building right there, and they say, 'Let me tell you a story. . . .' If you can't see the connection between their story and the question you wanted answered, you're bound to ask, 'What's your point?' You want to understand what's not being said—the connection, relationship, or meaning that connects that story to this building or some relevant aspect of the context. If someone's telling you a story in just about any context, you expect to be able to see the point. It's the same with books. It's good to ask what any book's overall point is—how it connects to the rest of life and the world. What big idea is behind this text?" Maya asked her students to start thinking about interpretation as they moved along in their books, even if they were just getting started, adding that it was something she or I might be talking about as we conferred with them.

The next day, I brought in a short poem, "The Cities Inside Us" by



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✦ **When students are engaged in books they really want to read and understand, our lessons about reading as thinking come to life. This particular type of thinking then becomes an objective for instruction.** ✦

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1. Vipond, Douglas, and Russell A. Hunt. 1984. "Point-Driven Understanding: Pragmatic and Cognitive Dimensions of Literary Reading." *Poetics* 13(3): 261–77.



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Alberto Ríos,<sup>2</sup> and asked the students to read it while focusing on their hunches about the point of the poem and when that hunch changed or was confirmed. We looked at the title and generated a few hunches and then read the first couple of lines to see what changes happened in our theory building. We also talked after the next two lines. Then I asked the students to read to the end and notice the points at which their thinking changed. We did not try to exhaust the meanings in the poem or to discuss every idea we had. It was just an opportunity for students to notice their acts of interpreting with a little bit of assistance from me. We weren't concerned about them "getting it right," just with the actions of following hunches and building theories.

The next day, Maya asked the students to think about times when they did this kind of interpretive thinking before. She reminded them that sometimes families taught their children by telling stories that had a special, pointed meaning. Maya asked the students to jot down three or four times in their lives when they were supposed to learn a lesson from a story and then to talk with a partner about how they learned from hearing the story. In the fourth of this string of mini-

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lessons, I gave every student four sticky notes, reminded them of the thinking we had been doing over the past few days, and asked them each to open their own book to three places where they noticed themselves thinking something like "I bet I get what the point of this book is," or "My previous hunch doesn't seem valid anymore, and now I think this other thing," or "That confirms my theory about what this book is all about," or any other thought they could call "interpreting" and to mark these places with the sticky notes. The fourth sticky note was for them to keep out while they read, so that when they made an interpretation in their reading and thinking, they could jot a note about the idea and stick it in the text where they got that notion. In the seven-minute share time at the end of the period, students talked with a partner about their decision making in placing the fourth note and how it fit with the first three. This use of sticky notes to mark a spot involves mediation—using a tool to support or extend thinking—and that's something I discuss extensively in *Building Adolescent Literacy in Today's English Classrooms*.<sup>3</sup>

To teach this way, we as teachers have to risk that students might think things about their texts with which we would not agree. But to ask them to delay their own sense making until we told them the right interpretation would be to miseducate about how people go about the business of making interpretations. Reading standards these days often value providing evidence for arguments about claims. However, readers need to go through a process of really developing those claims. Maya and I wanted to attend to the honest process of how readers approach a text and come up with things to say about it, to model that process by thinking aloud, and to engage students in repeated, self-conscious experiments with interpretation as a mental action. We reasoned that, looking into the future of their literate lives, we would only really be successful at teaching each student to interpret if we could get them doing it in self-sponsored, independent reading. Perhaps they needed to learn how to follow hunches and build theories about the texts they chose to read on their own, not just in shared reading events. With a complex kind of thinking, we knew one single minilesson about interpretation on a particular Tuesday morning was not going to do the trick. We needed to teach the students a little, let them read with that idea, and repeat.


2. Ríos, Alberto. 1998. "The Cities Inside Us." Available at: [www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15231](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15231). Accessed May 21, 2012.
3. Bomer, Randy. 2011. *Building Adolescent Literacy in Today's English Classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.



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**Randy Bomer**, author of the recent Heinemann title *Building Adolescent Literacy in Today's English Classrooms*, is a leader in secondary English/Language Arts teaching. As a professor at The University of Texas at Austin and Director of the Heart of Texas Writing project, he shares his passion for thoughtful teaching of reading and writing with preservice and inservice teachers. As a teacher of first-year college students, he helps young people develop habits of mind that prepare them for further college work. As a literacy consultant and former Co-director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, he has shared his vision with large groups of teachers nationwide. He has also brought his experience to the entire field as past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, and as the author or coauthor of *Time for Meaning*, *For a Better World*, and *The Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research*.

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