Reading and thinking aloud

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The scene was a disturbing one - or, at least, it should have been.

My seniors had finished reading Ian McEwan's "Atonement," a masterful story told from multiple points of view. They are fairly skilled readers, yet in our class discussion I realized that they had missed important clues in the narrative. I directed their attention to what they had thought was an innocuous scene - one character talking to a young girl and her brothers, offering pleasant conversation and handing out chocolates.

The character later assaults the girl, leading to the central tragedy of the book; indeed, everything from that moment on hinges on that conversation, the one laced with hidden threat and innuendo.

"Turn to page 57 and listen again to the conversation," I told my seniors, and then I reread it to them, pausing to emphasize a phrase, to point out the irony of a verb choice, to emphasize the creepy tone of the assaulter. As I read and talked through the passage - expressing aloud the internal commentary of a mature reader - my students suddenly saw what the author wanted them to see - that evil can lurk in hidden places - and also in plain sight.

Modeling that sort of close reading is sometimes called a "think-aloud" in education - where the teacher calls attention to the patterns and connections students need to see to be successful. In English classrooms it is often used to teach students to recognize the craft of writing itself by illuminating the techniques authors use to make meaning in text. Being able to identify a symbol, for example, is not enough - genuine literacy means knowing how that symbol functions in the story as a whole - and whether or not its use enriches and makes more complex a narrative or detracts from the meaning.

Helping students develop close reading skills is not the only reason high school teachers read aloud to students. Often we read aloud when students are not fluent and we want them to hear how the language should sound - such as emphasizing the meter and melody of poetry, or to highlight a particularly well-turned phrase in a short story or novel.

Sometimes we read aloud to motivate students to read independently. A typical example is what I did with my juniors this semester. In the past I have assigned "The Scarlet Letter" and then given reading checks - handing out mostly failing grades to students who were unable or unwilling to tackle something so far beyond their comfort level.

For the past couple of years I have read the first few chapters aloud while the students followed silently, stopping to explain some of the dense vocabulary or confusing plot points. Once the students were used to Hawthorne's prose, I read only the first page or so of a chapter and turned them loose to finish the chapters on their own - and the students had experienced enough success with the text already that they were no longer intimidated by it.

In a recent issue of Education Week, researchers point to the benefits of reading to students, even in secondary school. In December at the Literacy Research Association conference, Lettie Albright, associate professor in literacy at Texas Women's University, showed that reading aloud to middle school students improved their content knowledge, improved their own reading fluency, and fostered positive attitudes about reading in general. Other secondary teachers report the same experiences with reading aloud that I have found true in my own classroom - that students benefit in multiple ways when I read to them.

Not all educators are as sanguine and worry that reading aloud prevents students from developing their own reading abilities.

If teachers never gave students the opportunity to read independently I might be worried, too, but in my experience, teachers are selective about when and how to read aloud to their students. For one thing, reading aloud is tiring, and for another, students won't stay engaged as listeners for long stretches at a time without participating more actively in some way.

Those educators who caution about reading aloud are also confusing the activity of reading - the decoding skills that allow us to know how words sound and what they mean - and the larger purpose of reading, which is to apply the meaning of text to our lives.

They are also forgetting that adults like to be read to. Dick Estell has been hosting Radio Reader for almost 50 years, and the market for books on CD is larger than ever. We are hardwired to make meaning through narrative - and the spoken word has been the medium for storytelling long before writing evolved.

By the time I meet them, most of my students can decode sounds and words, though some are not particularly fluent or enthusiastic about reading. My task as a high school teacher is to convince them that reading - from breezy nonfiction articles to highbrow literature - is worth their investments of time and energy - not just so they become good readers, but because good readers are better thinkers. If that means reading aloud to them when the occasion demands, I will.

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