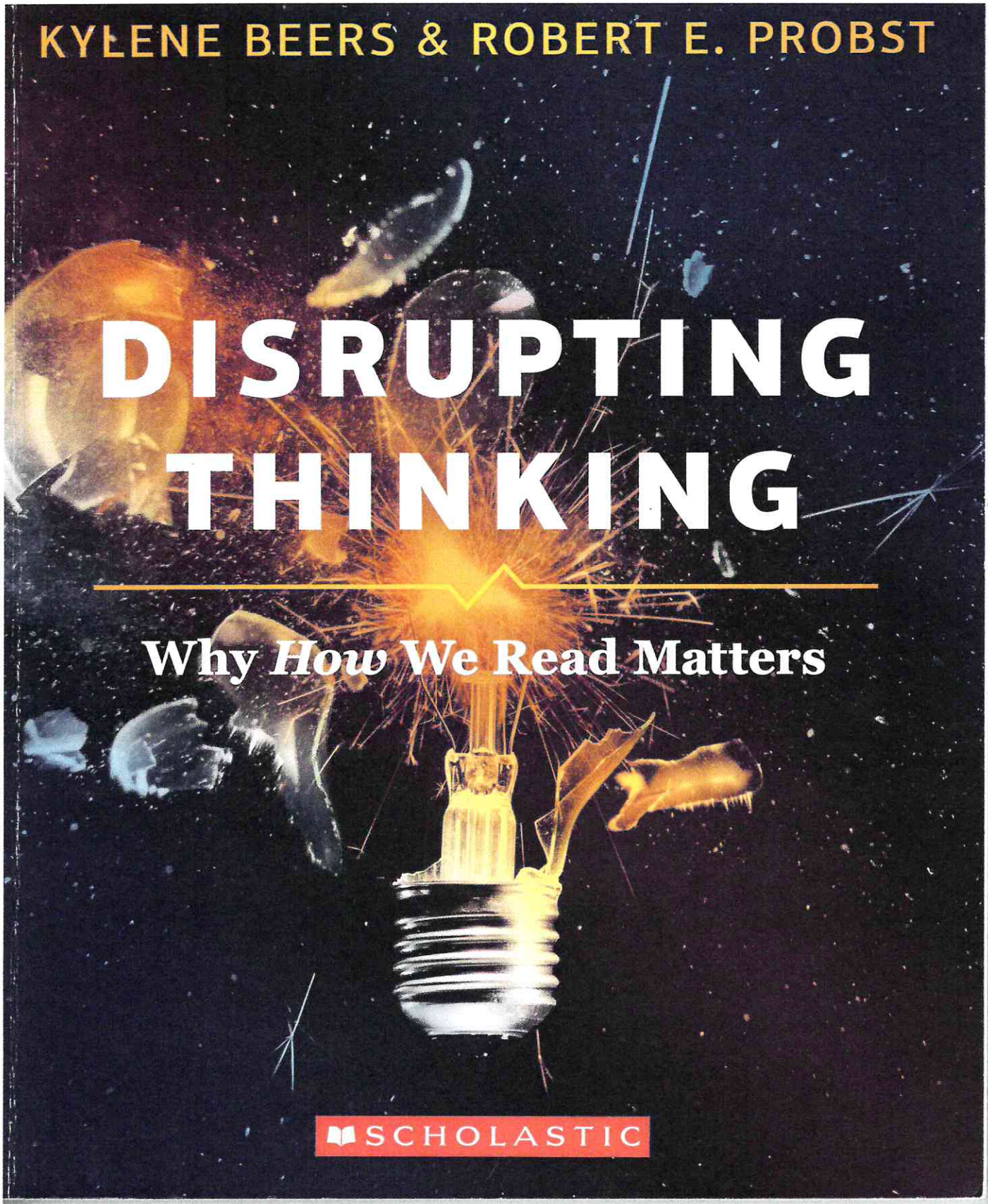
KYLENE BEERS & ROBERT E. PROBST



DISRUPTING THINKING

Why *How* We Read Matters

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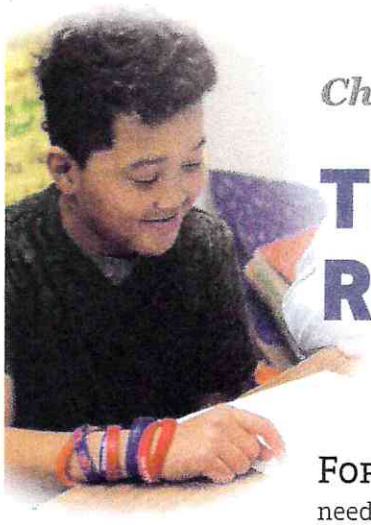

Chapter 2

The Responsive Reader

FOR KIDS TO BECOME the readers our ever-changing society needs—our *democracy* needs—the first thing they must do is become responsive readers.

The book—or poem, or editorial, or movie, or any other text—will offer the students nothing more than a task to be completed if all they are expected to do is decode correctly, retell completely, summarize accurately. It is only when they link that text to their own experiences that the text will begin to matter, and it may then evoke more rigorous attention, reflection, and analysis. When the text matters, when it plays a role in their intellectual, social, emotional, and physical worlds, then they are likely to do more than simply decode the words, simply call them out, simply repeat them, and perhaps simply try—probably futilely—to remember them. When the text matters to them, then we are on our way to having responsive readers.

But the text won't matter to them unless it touches them emotionally or intellectually. And so readers must be aware, not only of the text, but of the effects the text has upon them. They must be responsive. That means they must be alert to their own reactions to the text.

Alert to Their Own Responses

Benji: You have GOT to read *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*. It is the funniest book ever. I LOVED it. (a first grader)

Sharon: When I was little, my mom would read *Corduroy* to me over and over and over. I don't know why I loved that book so

much but I did. It made me sad because *Corduroy* didn't have a home and then it made me happy because he did. (a second grader)

Corin: Did it [the story] make me think about anything? Like what? (a seventh grader)

RJ: Did it help me think about me in any way? I don't even know what that means. (a ninth grader)

When the reader notices what's going on inside himself and feels the emotion or raises the question that the text evokes, he is doing more than simply decoding, more than simply word calling, more than simply memorizing what the text offers him. He is instead opening himself up to the text, interacting with it, accepting its invitation into the fictional world or—if nonfiction—recognizing its intrusion into his world, and using it to help him make sense of his own experience.

This responsive reader is aware of the effects a text has upon her and the response it evokes—amusement, curiosity, surprise, revulsion, doubt, uncertainty, or any of countless other possible reactions. She will be awake to those possibilities, will notice those inner stirrings, and will think about them. Just as she notices the uncertain tremor of anxiety awakened in her by the frown on her teacher's face, the responsive reader will notice that uncertainty and doubt awakened in her by the frown on the face of the character in the novel. In both instances, she will pause and ask herself essentially, "What does my response—this anxiety or doubt I feel—tell me about what is happening in the world (with this frowning teacher) or in the text (with this frowning character)?"

For kids to become the readers our ever-changing society needs—our *democracy* needs—they must become responsive readers.

This, we think, is what even the youngest child does quite naturally, at her own level, when someone reads her a story. She is aware of her curiosity. She wants to know what will happen next. Will the three bears find Goldilocks and what will happen to her? She is aware of her own anxiety. Will Chrysanthemum end up liking her name? Even these very simple stories awaken feelings and create expectations, and even the

While working with some eighth graders, one of us mentioned that reading ought to awaken inner stirrings. One boy responded a bit too enthusiastically, "Inner stirrings? Well, okay!" We decided not to use that phrase with adolescents again. Ever.

youngest child, though he may not be able to articulate them clearly, is aware of those stirrings in his own mind. It is our older readers, we worry, who seem to have learned to set aside their own responses entirely or to have relegated them to a lower status. As a student at Sam Houston State University said, "What is my response? Does that matter?"

The responsive reader is present, in mind and heart, when he is reading the text. Rather than simply collecting facts or trying to remember information that, unless it matters, will remain pointless, he is trying to *make sense*. It is much like what he does every day with the world around him. He observes, notices, and tries to make sense of what he sees. In the cafeteria, at lunch, he is unlikely to collect information at random. He doesn't count the number of students present, doesn't calculate the ratio of boys to girls, doesn't estimate the percentages of tall, short, and middling students. All of that information is there to be observed, noted, collected, and remembered, if there were any point to it. But to do so without some reason would simply be to undertake an exercise. It would be akin to the decoding of nonsense words we may ask of a student to merely demonstrate that he is able to transform squiggles on the page into sounds that hang together. Instead, he looks around the cafeteria and takes in and makes sense of information that matters to him.

When readers are lost in a book, they stand a good chance of finding themselves.

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That student might enter the cafeteria and sense that it "feels different." If so, he is being alert to his own responses. He might then look around and notice that this feeling may have been evoked by an unusually large number of empty tables, and then he may wonder, "What accounts for this? Where is everyone?" Aware of his response to the feeling of strangeness the half-empty room evoked, he is motivated to make sense of that feeling by raising questions about it and collecting the observations that may answer them. And so, awareness of his responses should lead to a close look at what has caused them—in other words, to the room itself or, if he is reading, to the text itself. Just as he observes the teacher's frown, senses the growing discomfort it has caused him to feel; just as he observes the cafeteria, senses that it seems strange, and then attempts to figure out what it means; so, too, does he read the words on the page, sense the reaction they evoke, and then attempt to figure out what his reaction to those words might mean.

Alert to the Responses of Other Readers

Additionally, the responsive reader might be, *should be*, responsive to the thoughts and reactions of other readers. Without a text, a student is limited to her own perceptions and insights. With the text, she has the benefit of interaction, if she accepts the invitation, with one other person—the author—and perhaps more if we accept the characters as others. But if she collaborates with a group, a small group within her class, or perhaps the entire class, then she has the rich resources of many minds brought to bear upon the same text.

That same text, entering different minds, will yield different readings. Each of us is unduplicated, bringing to the text a unique personality, a unique set of expectations and hopes, a unique personal history. Consequently, what we make of the text will be unique. Shaped by our idiosyncrasies, our readings will differ, even if only slightly, from one another. The text broadens and enriches the individual's experience; talking about it with others broadens and enriches the individual's otherwise limited and narrow insight still further.

The talk in the classroom is thus very important. It enables us both to see aspects of the text that we did not manage to perceive when

If you haven't read Ellin Keene's book *Talk About Understanding*, add it to your must-read list.

trapped within our own isolated minds, and to see something about ourselves that would go unobserved if not for the comparison of our reading with the readings of others. A book such as *Bully* by Patricia Polacco, which, as the title suggests, is about bullying, explicitly calls for the comparison of our reading and yours by ending with the question, addressed to the readers, "What would you do?"

This question allows the readers to discuss how people, either victims or witnesses, might react to bullying. The talk might first be about the character. Should she return to the school or leave it and go to another school? It is easy to imagine those students who would more courageously or defiantly argue that the character should return to the school and confront her tormentor. Others would probably say it's safer and wiser to leave that school and go to a more comfortable place. Each reader brings his own history, his own language, values, and worldviews, to the text. Some may have been victims of bullying themselves; others may have perpetrated the crime upon their classmates; still others may have witnessed it and tried to ignore it; a few may have witnessed it and tried to intervene. All of those readers will have different comments to offer about the story. Hearing those different reactions will enrich and sharpen the readings of each. Without the responses and thoughts of other readers, the isolated reader has only his own resources to draw upon.

If the reader isn't responsive, if she doesn't let the text awaken emotion or inspire thoughts, then she can barely be said to be reading at all.

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If the reader isn't responsive, if she doesn't let the text awaken emotion or inspire thoughts, then she can barely be said to be reading at all. Passing her eyes across the page, collecting undigested bits of information from the text, preparing to answer recall questions about it, even committing parts of it to memory, can scarcely be compared with the richer activity of responding emotionally and intellectually to the words on the page, looking inside oneself to see what lies there, examining the text to see what caused those reactions, and sharing perceptions and understandings with other readers.

Turn and Talk

Take Two: Chapter 2
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- In workshops, we've occasionally had teachers tell us that they don't care how students respond to a text. "My job is to teach them to understand it." Our point is that responsiveness is critical for understanding, even more critical for close reading. What is your thinking about the role of responsiveness?
- You might reconsider the opening sentence: "For kids to become the readers our ever-changing society needs—our *democracy* needs—they must become responsive readers." Do you and your colleagues agree with this statement?
- What's happening in your classrooms and in your school to encourage responsive reading?

Chapter 3

The Responsible Reader

OBVIOUSLY, THE READER'S RESPONSIVENESS to her own feelings is necessary but insufficient, just as we know the ability to decode is necessary but insufficient. It is the response that connects the reader to the text and demands that she attend to the words on the page. The responsive reader must also be a responsible reader.

She must do more than simply respond. She must—if she is to be responsible—examine the feelings awakened by the text. She should question the thoughts of her own that the text has called to mind, assess the writer's evidence and logic, speculate about his purposes and his biases, and finally come to some reasoned and responsible conclusions about the text and her reading of it. The response is the beginning, but only the beginning.

If the text is to provide anything beyond idle amusement, a distraction from the tasks and problems that confront us, or—worse—a way for others to manipulate us, then there must be an element of responsibility in the act of reading.

It's pointless to collect information if you do nothing with it. It contributes nothing to your intellectual or emotional growth to notice that you have responded in a particular way to a text, but not give the significance of that response any further thought. It is a waste of time to hear what someone says about a text and then to either reject it out of hand or accept it uncritically. If the text is to provide anything beyond idle amusement, a distraction from the tasks and problems that confront us, or—worse—a way for others to manipulate us, then there must be an element of responsibility in the act of reading.

Responsibility to the Text

Take a look at two conversations, the first between sixth graders.

Brendon: Why did it say, "It was a metal thing"?

Sharon: It didn't say that. He's in the wilderness. There isn't any metal. Except his hatchet. Was it talking about his hatchet?

Brendon: No. But it did too say it was a metal thing. See right here. Page 98. Oh. Wait. It says, "It was a mental thing." Oh. That's really different.

These students are discussing a line from Chapter 11 of *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen.

And now this one between fifth graders...

Lila: That article, about the left-behind children in China. I didn't know anything about that.

Ellie: Me neither. I thought it was good that the Chinese government was going to try to do something.

Lila: They won't do anything.

Ellie: That's not what it said.

Lila: That doesn't matter. Just because the government says they are doing something doesn't mean anything.

These students are discussing an article from the September 5, 2016, issue of *Junior Scholastic* titled "China's Left-Behind Children."

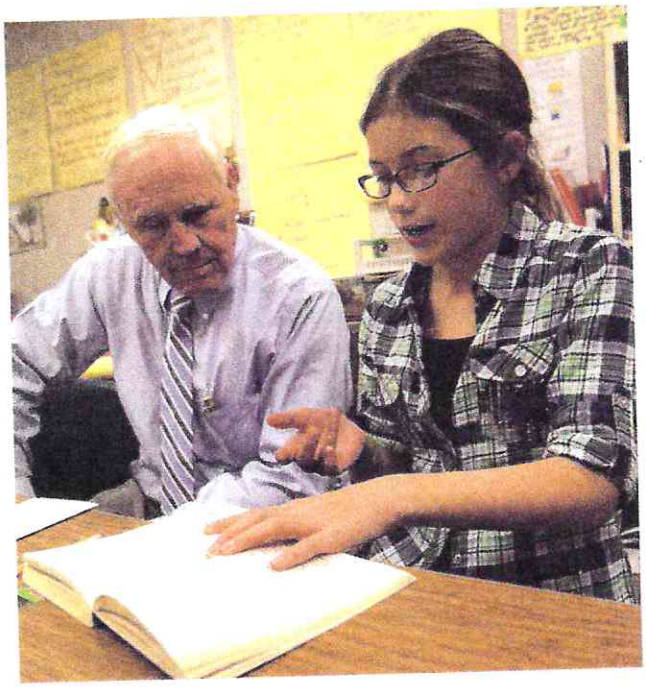
One aspect of responsibility, and the one that has perhaps been most heavily emphasized by state standards, is responsibility to the text. While we, of course, want students who pay attention to what's in the text, we know that the most responsible reading requires that students pay attention to their own responses, their own thoughts, their own reactions. Responsible reading is rooted in a reader's response, and that response attends to both the words on the page and the thoughts the reader brings with her.

Yet, the attention to the reader's response has sometimes been seen as a dismissal of the words on the page. Fearing that, some advocate encouraging students to focus their attention on what is there, in print, on the page. If a response should be offered, it is, too often, seen as an unimportant idea, one to be heard and then discounted.

We share some of our favorite strategies that help students focus on the text on pages 64–65.

Reading responsibly requires attending to what's on the page. Such attention does not mean the reader's responses should be relegated to mere opinion. Both what's on the page and what's in the head are important. Focusing on the reader to the neglect of the text, or focusing on the text to the neglect of the reader, is problematic. To encourage and expect nothing more of students than unexamined statements of feelings is to encourage intellectual laziness. And to encourage only extracting of information, memorizing of details, and the like, is to reduce reading to an unrewarding exercise.

In an effort to encourage responsible attention to the text, the profession has sometimes allowed us to reduce the reader to a subordinate, and almost insignificant, position. In an effort to encourage students to read carefully and closely, we may have suggested that the reader's job is little more than that of extracting, accepting, and assimilating what the text offers. It seems to us that responsibility to the text might be differently conceived.



Bob listens as this student explains what in the text caused her response.

Certainly it involves trying to figure out and acknowledge what the text says. To impute to the text any assertions it does not make is simply to perpetrate a fraud. To deny or ignore assertions that the text does make is equally irresponsible. Those intellectual failings become more obvious—and dangerous—when confronting significant issues. Texts dealing with human rights, climate change, clean water, and other such important matters may have great consequence in our lives. They merit serious and responsible attention. And to think our students don't consider such issues is wrong. In Chapter 12, we share tough issues students want to discuss. Our democracy is best served when we encourage students to begin at an early age to pay close attention both to what the text says and to what they feel and think as they read. Not one or the other, but both.

To impute to the text any assertions it does not make is simply to perpetrate a fraud. To deny or ignore assertions that the text does make is equally irresponsible.

Learning to Question the Text

What we see is that our young readers are inclined not to question a text. Parents and teachers and other adults they trust tell them things they need to know. Why wouldn't a text do the same? Consider this conversation with a second grader. He's discussing an article he just read titled "Are Trampolines Dangerous?"

Kylene: What did the author decide? Are trampolines too dangerous to jump on?

Darius: I think it said too dangerous.

Kylene: Why is that?

Darius: It said that the little girl broke her tooth. And now her parents won't let her jump on her friend's trampoline. My friend has a trampoline and my parents won't let me jump on it. They say it is too dangerous. They heard about a boy, he was jumping, and he fell off and now he can't walk.

Kylene: Did the author mention how to make jumping on a trampoline safer?

Darius: [Darius looks back through the text.] Yes. You can just have one person jump at a time. And no flips.

Kylene: So, does this author think they are safe to jump on?

Darius: They aren't. You can't jump on them.

Kylene: I agree with your opinion and what your parents have told you. But does the author have an opinion?

Darius: He thinks they are bad.

Kylene: What about this section where he discusses how to make jumping on them be safer?

Darius: I don't know. Maybe he is saying they *could* be safe. I think the author maybe he doesn't know.

Darius is young and he's just beginning to learn how to examine a text. We aren't concerned that it took a nudge for him to recognize that his opinion of the danger level of trampolines wasn't emphatically shared by the author. Asking younger students to critically examine their response requires we stay alert to the comments they make. When students make assertions that are not supported by the text, rephrasing those comments and asking them to find support in the text help them understand what's in the text and what is not. It's far too easy, for children and adults, to add to the text what is not there. Asking for evidence to support a response is always important.

Our democracy is best served when we encourage students to begin at an early age to pay close attention both to what the text says and to what they feel and think as they read. Not one or the other, but both.

We're more concerned with the following conversation with a fourth grader about an article regarding headphones and loud music. This student has decided what the author believes based solely on what he, the reader, thinks.

In this article ("Doctor Says It's Best to Keep Volume at Medium or Lower with Ear Buds"), an ear surgeon outlines the pros and cons of three types of headphones that people wear while listening to music. His final conclusion is that there are benefits and problems with all types of headphones and the best thing to do is to keep music at a low volume.

Kylene: Did anything surprise you about what Dr. Pearlman said?

Luke: I was surprised that he said it doesn't matter if you wear headphones or ear buds. They are both okay.

Kylene: Did Dr. Pearlman say they are both okay?

Luke: Yeah. They are both okay.

Kylene: Can you show me where it says that?

Luke: It says, "Pearlman can't tell patients what kinds of headphones to use."

Kylene: What does the next sentence say?

Luke: "All of them have different benefits and problems."

Kylene: Did you read the different benefits and downsides?

Luke: He doesn't say don't wear ear buds so I wear mine.

Kylene: What did he say about the volume of music?

Luke: He doesn't like music.

Kylene: I didn't see that. Where did you find that?

Luke: Well, he says to keep the volume down.

Kylene: Right.

Luke: Everyone who likes music likes loud music.

Luke's opinion about the value of loud music was so strong that he drew conclusions about Dr. Pearlman that the text did not support. While Darius was willing to distinguish between what the text says and what he thought, Luke was not. We aren't asking readers to let go of their own opinions, but we do want them to recognize the distinction between what they bring to the text and what the text has brought to them. And, when warranted, we want them to be willing to

change their minds. When readers are aware of the contribution both they and the text make, comments might look like this:

- This word caused my confusion.
- This assertion caused me to distrust the author.
- This allayed my doubts and convinced me that the author may be right.
- This makes me suspect of the author's intentions.

Okay. We know of no elementary-aged child, well, actually no child of any age, who will use this language. Here's what you're more likely to hear and how you might respond:

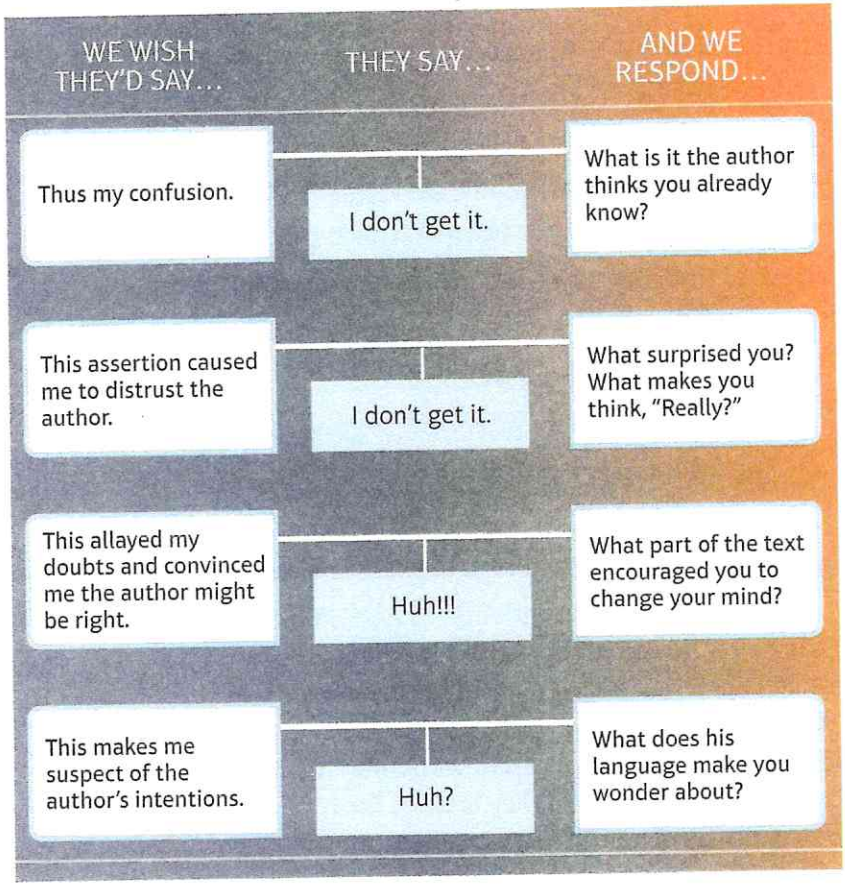
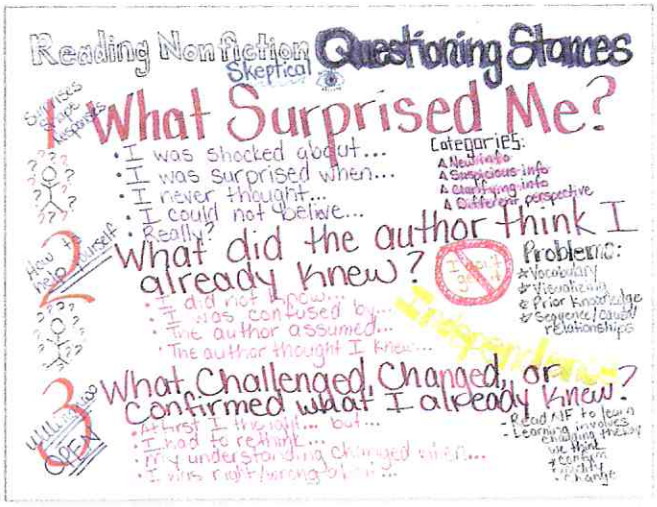


CHART B Conversations We Have With Students About Texts

We encourage this responsibility to the text by asking kids to keep three big questions in mind.

- What surprised me?
- What did the author think I already know?
- What changed, challenged, or confirmed my thinking?

These prompts most certainly require that students think about their own responses, but they are responses that come directly from the text. Don't be reluctant to ask children to "Show me what in the text caused that surprise" or "Where did the author need to tell you more?"



Megan Clappin shared her Three Big Questions sketch notes with us.

Responsibility to Oneself

That close attention to the words—the responsibility a reader shows to the text—implies and requires a responsibility to oneself as well as the words on the page. That responsibility consists not only of a willingness to acknowledge and defend one's own thoughts and values, but to change thinking when evidence or reason dictates. A second grader, who read a text about the critical importance of bees in the food chain, adamantly contended, "I don't like bees because they sting. We don't need them." His strong feelings about bees led him to dismiss what he might have learned if he had read more responsibly. Equally irresponsible is the third grader who read about climate change and responded, "I don't believe in it. My friend said it isn't real." If that child wants to argue with the science presented in the article, that's one thing. But to dismiss the article because it contradicts what a friend has previously stated is not responsible reading.

Take Two: Three Big Questions
Join us as we discuss the Three Big Questions in more detail: scholastic.com/BeersandProbst

Our students are not too young to learn to respect both the words on the page and their own thoughts and values. We seldom have difficulty persuading them to hang on tightly to their own ideas. They come to class, too often, ready to assert that whatever they think, whatever they have come to believe, is flatly, simply, indisputably true and correct. They are often much more willing to defend their thoughts than to reconsider and perhaps modify them. And they should, of course, defend and protect what is reasoned and defensible. But to hold on to ideas when evidence and reason suggest that a change is sensible is to fail to be responsible to oneself. Somehow, we need to teach them to value change. Not change for change's sake, but change that results from more information, a richer understanding, a sharpened perspective.

But to hold on to ideas when evidence and reason suggest that a change is sensible is to fail to be responsible to oneself.

They should begin learning, as early as possible, not to misrepresent the text. To do so is to fail in their responsibility to the text, certainly, but even more significantly it is to fail in their responsibility to themselves. To assert that the text says what it does not say, or that it does not say what it, in fact, does say, is to deny themselves the opportunity to think or to learn. Regardless of their age, students are not too young to learn to defend their position when it is defensible and to change it when new information, insight, or reasoning persuades them.

Responsibility to Others

The apparent increase in what has come to be called "fake news" makes the issue of responsibility to others even more important. It has perhaps always been easy to allow ourselves to be led astray by inaccurate or dishonest texts, especially when our emotions are aroused.

If we find that a text angers us, or, on the other hand, greatly pleases us, then we are likely to react quickly, perhaps without checking to see if either the anger or the pleasure is warranted. Now, however, not only can we be led astray by irresponsible texts, but we have the capacity, through social media, to help that text lead hundreds or thousands of

others astray. The simple act of retweeting or sharing something online can vastly compound and extend the damage.

News: Fake or Real?

We could spend chapters discussing the differences between news that is reported and news that is invented; in parsing the difference between false and fake. We could take up the struggles that social media sites now face as they decide how to avoid promoting fake news without acting as self-appointed censors. Our right to free speech is a valued freedom in this country and any group that decides to ban this news or that news because the site is deemed "fake" will face scrutiny. The lines between satire, bias, humor, falsehood, and deceit, and how a text is labeled, will grow blurrier as news sources worry more about high ratings than reliable reporting.

Satire has, of course, been a part of our discourse for a long time and most of us have probably had the unsettling experience of momentarily being taken in by something in *The Onion* or by a Borowitz tongue-in-cheek column. There is some satisfaction in seeing through the satirist's invention to the truth that lies beneath it or behind it. The satirist expects the reader to be sharp enough to see the joke, recognize the exaggeration and invention, laugh at the humor in it all, and not be corrupted or misled by the fictitious elements.

Where the writer of satire relies on the reader's intelligence and skepticism, the writer of fake news seems to rely instead on the reader's gullibility and laziness.

Fake news, however, seems to have gone one or two steps further. It has moved across the line from humorous exaggeration intended to amuse and promote thought, into lies and deceptions quite likely intended to make the author money by inviting readers to click on the site and therefore attracting advertisers (Dewey, 2014; Silverman, 2016). Where the writer of satire relies on the reader's intelligence and skepticism, the writer of fake news seems to rely instead on the reader's gullibility and laziness.