Matt said what we all long to hear from a middle schooler: “I just can’t harness it. I gotta let the world know about my love of reading and writing.” Ah, if all the classrooms were filled with a lot of Matts, our jobs would be ever so much easier. Matt, precious though he is, is the rare middle schooler. Most of us teach students more like Mandy: “Reading? It’s a do-nothing.”

When we face the Mandy’s of our schools, we find that teaching them a strategy called Say Something (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988) helps them stay focused on their reading, move beyond surface level reading, and bring their questions and comments about a text out to the visible level. This strategy builds on middle school students’ passion to talk with each other. Talking about texts in a conversational environment, during and after reading, allows students to think about a text and think about their thinking at the same time.

We demonstrate the power of Say Something by reading aloud and pausing to say something often as we read. We call the comments we make “conversation sparks,” and we push students to make a variety of types of comments that include predictions, questions, connections, clarifications, and inferences (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). We keep long lists of all the different types of sparks, both on the classroom wall and on bookmark-sized copies we keep in our books as we read (see Figure 1). As part of ongoing assessment, we sometimes photocopy a page from a class read-aloud on which a teacher has jotted conversation sparks; students then need to label each spark’s type. Is it a self-to-text connection? A question about a character’s motives? A prediction?

Just as one of us will jot down our conversation sparks on the page so that the students can read and analyze the type of spark it is, we begin asking students to also jot their sparks down quickly on sticky notes before they begin talking. We’ve found that our students are quite open to this once they realize that it is a useful process—not just something they have to do because we said so. In their reflections, we find they internalize the importance of talking well about a novel when they are reading with a part-
ner, book club, or full class. They become encouraged by each other. Jennifer commented about reading with a partner: “Since Sam writes a lot of sparks, it urged me to have more idea sparks, and pretty soon my book was filled with sticky notes. I like the fact that I could share my thoughts with someone else.” At this age, students want and need to share their ideas with each other as they work to formulate their thinking.

When we look closely at the types of conversation sparks they are writing (see Figure 2), it is much easier to assess how much students comprehend as they read. In some assessments, we ask them to reveal what they are thinking as they read a text we’ve read together in class; other times we ask them to record their conversation sparks while reading a text they haven’t previously read. Another assessment we tried this year was intended to strengthen the kids’ abilities to articulate the purposes behind jotting a particular spark. We gave them a sheet that had squares drawn on it where students could place any sticky notes they chose. Next to each square, there were three questions: 1) What type of spark is this? 2) Why did you jot it? 3) What does this particular spark show about your thinking process when you read? In hindsight, the third question could be interpreted in different ways and probably elicited more superficial answers than we had intended, but all three questions were useful for discovering what students were thinking about their own conversation sparks. It was probably useful for them to engage in some sort of metacognition about thinking as they read, but we are still working out the kinks regarding what exactly these questions reveal about each reader’s thinking. Of course, these comprehension assessments taken together helped us in any case; they provided a window into the minds of the students as they read, and helped us to pinpoint who was struggling to comprehend and who was still reading in a superficial way.

Giving students the room to pause and say something about a text creates a focused opportunity to make predictions, make connections, and ask questions. This strategy not only sparked interesting conversations, it helped improve students’ comprehension as they found themselves actively engaged with a text. As one student explained, “You can’t say something if you are thinking nothing.”

References

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