

“Walking the walk” with teacher education candidates: Strategies for promoting active engagement with assigned readings

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Teachers can use active engagement strategies to help teacher candidates interact meaningfully with assigned readings for literacy methods courses.

The classroom is buzzing as students share their ideas about the assigned reading. The teacher circulates around the room listening and participating in the small-group discussions as students share the parts of the text they felt were the most important and interesting. Some students discuss connections they made with the text while reading, and others pose open-ended questions that result in continued discussion and debate with their peers. Students are alert, excited, and completely engaged with the assigned reading and the concepts contained therein. Where is this classroom and how did it get to be this way? This classroom description is not from a middle school, high school, or adult literacy program; it is a reading methods classroom for teacher education candidates. Such engagement with text in a teacher education classroom serves two key purposes:

1. Candidates are able to learn content, concepts, and processes from the text.

2. Candidates are able to experience, as learners, the techniques, strategies, and processes advocated for use in K–12 classrooms.

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The fact that many of our candidates understand the importance of these engaged teaching methods is evidenced by the following comment, representative of many comments shared with us after class sessions:

That activity was so helpful. It’s nice to have a class where the professor doesn’t just tell us how to teach; we actually learn how to teach by your modeling and by applying the strategies to our own reading. You know, it’s like you don’t just “talk the talk, you also walk the walk” in this class.

The main purpose of this article is to describe active engagement strategies that we have used successfully with our preservice teachers in literacy methods classes over the past decade. We believe that as teacher candidates complete teacher education programs, they must acquire and develop the knowledge, practice, and reflection to become effective teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1996). We have found that one of the most effective ways to help teacher candidates understand, value, and thoughtfully apply research-based practices in their clinical experiences, student teaching, and ultimately in their own

classrooms is to have them experience and apply the strategies in the coursework in their teacher education program. Based on this premise, we will share several strategies that help teacher candidates become actively engaged with assigned readings in their classes. The discussion of each strategy will include a rationale as well as suggestions for implementation. In addition, we will offer ideas for using each strategy in K–12 classrooms. The strategies we present in this article are Alpha Boxes, Making Connections, Double-Entry Journals, Text Coding, and Teachers as Readers.

Rationale for our approach to promoting engagement with text

Reading is an active process wherein readers use prior knowledge to understand new information; ask questions before, during, and after reading; make inferences; monitor their understanding; and determine what is important as they read (Pressley, 2002). Research on the processes and characteristics of skilled readers concludes that such active involvement, or engagement, with text is a common feature of good readers (Pressley). When discussing comprehension, the National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) identified seven research-based strategies that are highly effective for helping learners to comprehend. These strategies are comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, graphic and semantic organizers, question answering, question generation, story structure, and summarization. The need to use these strategies does not end in high school. Many college students still need guidance in comprehending their assigned texts (Nist & Simpson, 2000). In addition, teacher education candidates need to understand comprehension strategies so they are prepared to help the children and adolescents they teach to comprehend text well.

Alpha Boxes

Reading is a transactional process among the reader, the text, and the context (Rosenblatt, 1978). Readers understand and interpret texts based on the background knowledge, stance, purpose, and goal they bring to the reading situation. In addition, the readers' motivations, which include their personal goals, values, and beliefs (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), influence whether engagement with text occurs.

While reading required texts for class, it is imperative that learners become engaged with text. By engaging with text, they are thinking as they read, which results in strong comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). The Alpha Boxes strategy (Hoyt, 1999) is a postreading strategy that can be used to help learners summarize key ideas from assigned reading by identifying concepts, connections, and examples that correspond to each letter of the alphabet. Because learners must identify at least one idea related to each letter of the alphabet, they are required to move beyond the first few thoughts that pop into their heads to those ideas that require deeper thinking, revisiting the text, and connecting prior knowledge and experience to the text. This process encourages learners to think from a variety of perspectives, which leads to rich comprehension (Block & Mangieri, 1995). Furthermore, when learners share their Alpha Boxes in class through cooperative learning activities, they can become participants in meaningful discussions that allow them to learn from and with their peers.

How we've used Alpha Boxes with our teacher candidates

In conjunction with an assigned reading from a literacy education methods class, we sometimes ask candidates to complete the Alpha Boxes sheet (Figure 1) as a homework assignment. We typically use this strategy with dense texts such as long chapters from foundational reading methods textbooks. When implementing this strategy,

Figure 1
Sample Alpha Boxes sheet

Alpha Boxes

Name Jessica Anderson Topic Strategies for Reading
Chapter 5 Information

A Activate background knowledge to get students ready to read p. 91	B Background knowledge helps the reader comprehend p. 91	C Compare/Contrast organization pattern p. 101	D Diagrams — students need to learn to read diagrams pp. 93-5
E Engagement = active involvement with text p. 92	F Features of informational text — table of contents, index, headings pp. 93-4	G Graphic organizers visually arrange information p. 96	H Headings help the reader figure out main ideas in a text pp. 93-5
I Inquiry chart helps students use multiple sources of info. pp. 112-3	J Jigsaw strategy helps students read a text cooperatively p. 97	K KWL (What I Know, What I want to know, and what I learned) pp. 107-111	L Literal level is the lowest level of comprehension p. 118
M Motivation — Reading is motivated by our interests p. 88	N Nonfiction another name for informational texts Ch. 5	O Organization of informational text can be taught to aid comprehension p. 94	P Preview If students preview a text, they will have better comprehension p. 94
Q Questions Using one's own questions is a good way to guide reading pp. 104-5	R Reciprocal Teaching = Summarizing, Questioning, Clarifying, Predicting pp. 114-6	S Sequence of Events is a common organizational pattern p. 101	T Textbook Students need to learn how to read their content textbooks pp. 93-4
U Units Integrated units motivate students to learn in-depth about a topic pp. 92-3	V Visual orientation of text is how graphics and text are arranged on a page p. 99	W World Wide Web is a resource for informational text p. 88	XYZ Yes! We have to teach our students how to read informational text p. 92

Note. Text used: Blachowicz & Ogle (2001).

we explain to candidates that as they read their assignment, they will fill out the Alpha Box sheets with at least one idea per letter. We tell them that as they fill out the sheet, they can use key vocabulary terms, important strategies, relevant concepts, connections, and examples related to the assigned reading. We also ask candidates to include a short note and/or page number from the text to help them remember why they selected the idea. We always model strategies for our candidates prior to asking them to apply the strategies to their own learning so they will understand the process well enough to complete the strategy successfully and so they will follow this pattern in their own teaching. In the case of Alpha Boxes, we typically model the process using examples from a chapter the class has already read so candidates understand how the strategy works when applied to familiar content. At this point, our candidates are then ready to use Alpha Boxes with their assigned reading for an upcoming class.

When candidates come to class with their completed Alpha Boxes sheets, we explain that they will be working together to create a class Alpha Box display to show the group's knowledge, ideas, and connections. Using index cards with a letter written on each, we ask candidates to select a card. Each candidate then prepares a display on a sheet of paper. Each display should contain the letter, idea (with brief note and or page number), and a visual (related to the idea). See Figure 2 for a sample display.

Starting with *A* and continuing through the alphabet, we ask each class member to share his or her sheet, explaining the idea, why it was selected, and what the visual represents. We have found that it is also helpful to ask other class members for additional ideas for each letter to identify other key ideas or concepts from the reading. We typically display the candidates' sheets to make a bulletin board in the classroom to surround candidates with the important ideas from the reading.

Connections to the K–12 classroom for Alpha Boxes

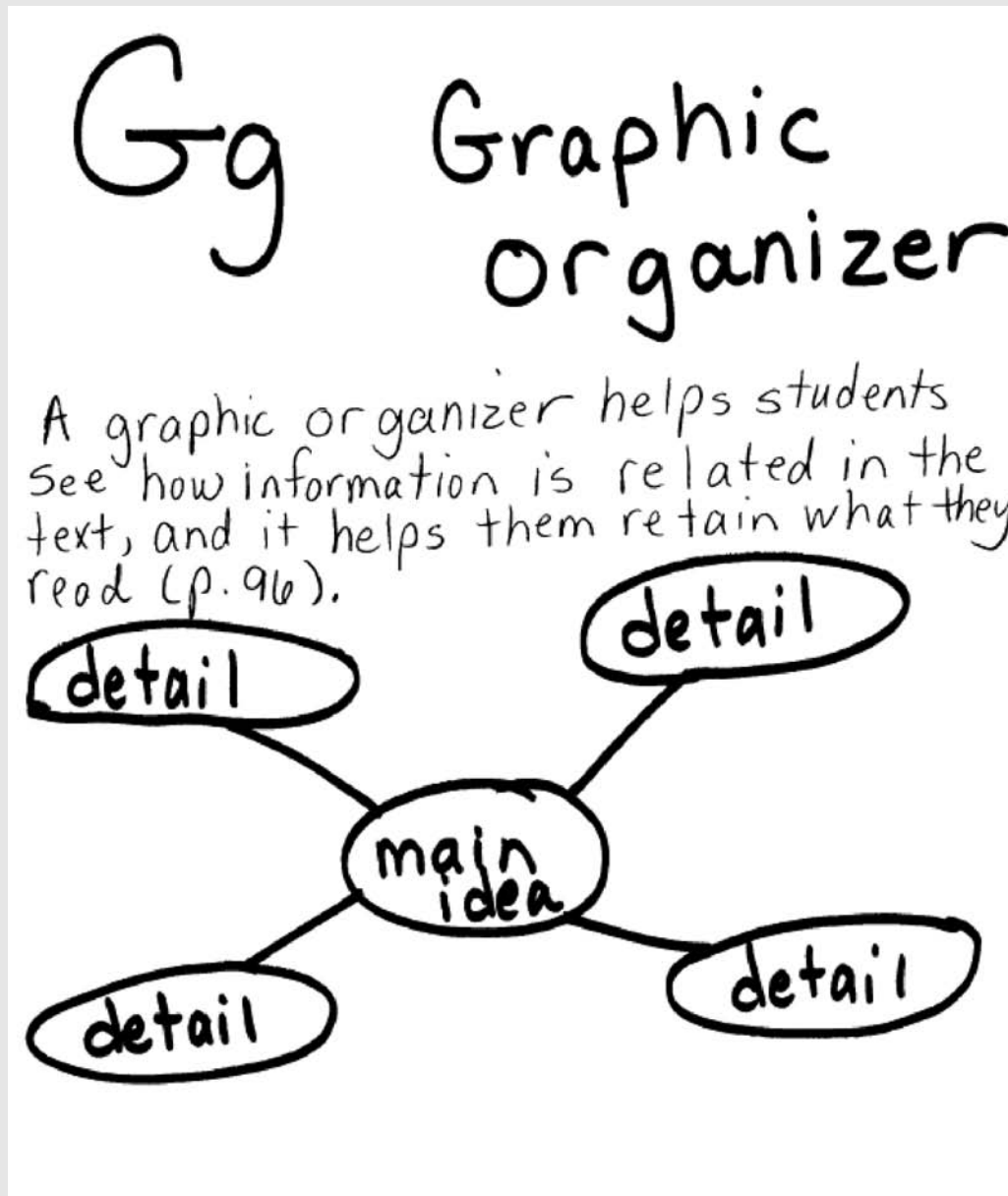
Each of the strategies in this article also has direct application to K–12 classrooms. After we complete the Alpha Boxes strategy, we discuss with our candidates how the strategy can be applied in K–12 classrooms. One of four key ideas that we typically discuss with our candidates about Alpha Boxes is how this strategy works well as a culminating activity related to a text or unit of study. Second, we also discuss how it can be used as a prereading activity for students to brainstorm ideas they already know about a topic to be studied. Third, we explain how, if students are reading a lengthy novel or completing a long unit of study, it may be helpful to create a bulletin board of ideas organized around the letters of the alphabet, adding new ideas periodically. A fourth option that works well is to begin with the Alpha Boxes sheets students create as a prereading activity and revise the information as they learn more about the topic, illustrating that first ideas can be incomplete or inaccurate, but that reading and learning can refine and expand our knowledge and understanding.

Making Connections

During the reading process, readers use their prior knowledge and previous experiences to understand and interpret the text. The mental representations of concepts, events, and experiences that learners hold in their memories are called schemata (Rumelhart, 1980). Readers use their schemata to interpret their experiences, materials they read, and world events. Each new concept we learn or experience we have can be stored in our brains to help us interpret new texts and events. Furthermore, the more in-depth schemata we have about a topic, event, or character in a text, the more understandable the text becomes for us (Pearson, Hansen, & Gordon, 1979).

One way to help readers activate and use their schemata while reading is through making connections (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). The

Figure 2
Sample sheet for class display of Alpha Boxes



Note. Based on Blachowicz & Ogle (2001).

Making Connections strategy enhances comprehension by helping the reader make three different types of meaningful associations with a text. The strategy includes making text-to-self connections that address the reader's personal experi-

ences, thoughts, and feelings. Text-to-text connections focus on how the target text is related to other texts the reader has encountered. Examples of text-to-text connections include comparing characters, plots, themes, writing style, and treat-

ment of similar content. The third type of association is the text-to-world connection. This type of connection encourages the reader to relate the text to issues, events, and people in the world beyond the lived experiences of the reader. Examples of text-to-world connections include relating a text to a current event, an historical event, or a famous person.

As teacher candidates read required texts for their methods classes, they can apply the Making Connections strategy by using the Connections Chart. This process requires them to read the text closely and connect the text to their schemata, thus enhancing their comprehension (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

How we've used the Making Connections strategy with our teacher candidates




Before we ask candidates to make connections during their independent reading, we describe the three types of connections and model each of them several times using ideas, concepts, and examples from the class readings. With this foundation in place, we then assign a reading that we particularly feel lends itself to making connections. For example, the article "Tapping the potential of teacher read-alouds in middle schools" (Albright & Ariail, 2005) lends itself to the Making Connections strategy. The candidates can make text-to-self connections as they reflect on the read-alouds they listened to when they were elementary and middle school students and those they have observed during their fieldwork. They are encouraged to make text-to-text connections when they compare the ideas from the article to those presented in the course textbook. Finally, when focusing on text-to-world connections, they might discuss how U.S. First Lady Laura Bush has been seen in recent newscasts strongly advocating of the use of read-alouds by parents. As candidates read and think about the material, they are encouraged to use sticky notes to mark the places in the text that prompted each connec-

tion and to jot down a few words to help them remember the connection.

Once candidates complete the reading, we explain that they should return to their first sticky note and begin to fill in the Connections Chart. (See Figure 3 for a sample Connections Chart completed by a preservice teacher in a reading methods course.) Candidates are to record the excerpt from the text (and page number) that caused them to make their first connection. The excerpt should be written in the first column. Then, in the second column, they are told to write their connection for that text excerpt. They may find that using the sentence stem, "That reminds me of..." is a good way to think about recording their connections. In the third column, they will note the type of connection they made for that excerpt. We also remind them that making text-to-self connections is the easiest to do, but they should be sure to concentrate on making text-to-text and text-to-world connections as well. We tell the candidates that they should follow the same process for each excerpt that caused them to mark a section with a sticky note connection. For candidates who tend to make numerous connections, we recommend that they include the five or six most significant connections on their Connections Charts.

Discussion of the assigned reading can be done as a whole-group activity or in small groups. When done as a whole-group activity, we often ask the candidates to read sections that have prompted text-to-self connections first, as these may be the easiest to discuss. When candidates report connections related to the same section of text, they are able to see how differences in prior knowledge and experiences affect the connections that are made. We then continue with text-to-text connections; these often provide an opportunity to review some of the important ideas from readings completed during this and other classes. Finally, we discuss text-to-world connections; these help us emphasize the importance of thinking about how the ideas in the reading have an impact beyond their coursework and clinical experiences.

Figure 3
Sample Connections Chart

Connections Chart		
Text-to-self 	Text-to-text 	Text-to-world 
<p>Quote from text (and page #)</p> <p>“Little books are designed especially for use with beginning readers, sometimes starting in kindergarten and continuing through first grade.” (p. 31)</p> <p>“There are two sound reasons for using informational texts. First, they present information about the world around us. Because many children are curious about their surroundings, these texts provide motivating and interesting reading material. Second, the structures used to write information texts differ from those used to write fiction. To become competent readers, students need to learn how to read all of the different types of texts.” (pp. 36–37)</p> <p>“You may be teaching in a school that has a rich resource of books. You also may be teaching in one that is just the opposite.” (p. 48)</p>	<p>That reminds me of...</p> <p>When I started reading about little books, it reminded me of when I was a child playing school. As the “teacher,” I used the same little book to “teach” all of my students their lessons.</p> <p>Reading about informational books reminded me of an article I read. This article talked about how struggling readers enjoy informational books. They liked these books because they are organized, visually appealing, interesting, real, and easy to write about.</p> <p>This quote reminded me that wealthy districts have an abundance of resources, including a variety of reading materials. These schools, for the most part, score high on standardized tests and receive a lot of funding through property taxes from wealthy homeowners, local businesses, and industries. The less wealthy districts do not have an abundance of resources or a variety of books. These schools are still expected to do well on standardized tests, but they do not have the funding for the materials they need to teach reading. I don’t think this makes sense; I’m upset about how schools are funded in our state.</p>	<p>Type of connection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text-to-self • Text-to-text • Text-to-world <p>Text-to-self</p> <p>Text-to-text</p> <p>Text-to-world</p>
<p><i>Note.</i> Quotes from Opitz & Ford (2001).</p>		

We have also found that small-group discussions of the Connections Charts are beneficial because they provide more opportunities for each candidate to share connections. During a short whole-group debriefing of the small-group work, each group can select one important connection to share with their classmates. If a section that we thought was particularly important is not mentioned during the debriefing, we typically ask if anyone made a connection to that section or we add our own connection to the discussion.

Connections to the K–12 classroom for Making Connections

As is the case with all strategies, it is critical to model and provide guided practice before asking children to incorporate the strategy independently. We remind our candidates to orally model text-to-self connections as they read a text aloud to the students. By modeling the process, children will understand how to use the prompt "That reminds me of..." to connect the text to their own experiences, lives, and feelings.

We demonstrate how text-to-text connections can be taught effectively as part of an author study where students note associations across multiple texts written by the same author. For example, we share with our candidates several books written by Eve Bunting that focus on the reasons why families emigrate to the United States and the hardships that they encounter and overcome after arriving. Text-to-text connections can also be taught in conjunction with a thematic unit that includes multiple texts written by different authors on the same topic. Continuing with the emigration theme, we show our candidates how middle school students can make connections across novels such as *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2002, Blue Sky Press), *The Circuit* (Jiménez, 1997, University of New Mexico Press), and *Journey of the Swallows* (Buss, 1991, Dell). Once students have had experience making text-to-text connections in an author study or thematic unit, they will

be ready to make connections between texts in other settings.

Text-to-world connections tend to be the most difficult for children to make as they may have limited knowledge of the world beyond their lives, families, school, and community. We model, by sharing current events and historical information, how children can develop more schemata to help them make text-to-world connections. We emphasize that teacher modeling and group discussions are important scaffolds to help children make connections between the texts they read and the world.

We show our candidates how, after modeling and guided practice, the Connections Chart can be introduced as a teacher-led activity; this will help children understand the process more fully. After children have participated in this activity several times, they will be ready to begin working on Connections Charts with a partner or independently.

Double-Entry Journal

Writing is a powerful tool for helping you "learn, understand, remember and figure out what you don't yet know" (Elbow, 1994, p. 1). When writing, the learner is thinking aloud on paper (Zinsser, 1993); therefore, writing is thinking and learning at the same time. In other words, the learner often does not know what he thinks until he writes it (Murray, 1985). Because reading and writing are complementary processes, comprehension typically increases when they are used together (Santa & Havens, 1991).

When our candidates read their text assignments for class, we find that providing opportunities for linking writing to their reading results in rich comprehension of the text (Nugent & Nugent, 1987). The Double-Entry Journal is one strategy that promotes engagement with text by connecting reading and writing (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2001). To complete a Double-Entry Journal, learners must read the text closely in order to identify a quote, phrase, or concept from the text

that is important, thought provoking, or confusing. They are then asked to reflect on the information pulled from the text by writing a "note" that shows their reactions, connections, inferences, and insights related to the text excerpts (Alvermann, Swafford, & Montero, 2004). While similar in format to the Connections Chart, the Double-Entry Journal promotes more in-depth reflection of their reading by encouraging learners to go beyond making connections.

How we've used Double-Entry Journals with our teacher candidates

We typically introduce Double-Entry Journals after the candidates have completed one or more Connections Charts. After previewing the reading for the next week, we explain that they will compile a Double-Entry Journal as they complete the assigned reading. We give explicit instructions and show a model of how they can quickly design their own Double-Entry Journal sheet. Some may wish to take a sheet of notebook paper and fold it in half lengthwise to form two columns. They will write the word *Quote* at the top of the left column and the word *Note* at the top of the right column. Other candidates may wish to design the Double-Entry Journal using the table feature of their word-processing program.

Next, we explain that they will select at least three important quotes, excerpts, phrases, or concepts from the text and copy them in the Quote column. Then, for each quote, they should write their reaction, connection, inference, or insight in the Note column. We often demonstrate the entire process using quotes or excerpts from reading material that has been discussed recently. (See Figure 4 for a sample Double-Entry Journal.)

When candidates come to class with their Double-Entry Journals for the assigned reading, we often provide time for them to share their writing with a partner or small group. They also may be asked to share one or more journal entries as the class engages in a whole-group discussion of the material. To obtain a more

comprehensive picture of our candidates' thinking about the assigned reading, we may collect the Double-Entry Journals and provide written comments about each candidate's entries.

Connections to the K-12 classroom for Double-Entry Journals

We have seen this strategy work well with both fiction and informational text in K-12 classrooms. Similar to our teacher candidates, students will benefit from teacher modeling of how to select appropriate quotes and write notes before being asked to complete these tasks on their own. We explain how the teacher can use a think-aloud approach to demonstrate how to select a meaningful quote or excerpt. Next, the teacher can demonstrate the type of thinking and writing required for the note by modeling his or her thought processes while writing on the overhead projector.

Because Double-Entry Journals are tools designed to help students think deeply about text by linking reading and writing, many teachers do not grade them. However, to ensure a high completion rate, some teachers record a check mark (√) for students who complete the Double-Entry Journals on time and a minus (-) for those who do not. We also share ideas about how to provide constructive written feedback or use a rubric such as the one provided in Figure 5.

Text Coding

When learners read course textbooks and other assigned readings, their main purpose for reading is to learn new information and apply it (Nist & Simpson, 2000). As they read their assignments for class, some students discover that highlighting the text, taking notes, and underlining key phrases helps them understand and remember what they have read (Nist & Simpson). We have found that the Text Coding strategy (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), which includes all of these practices, helps learners think, question, and reflect as they read. In the Text Coding strategy, students make notes

Figure 4 Double-Entry Journal

Quotes

"Children who have limited experiences with books and other literacy related materials need an especially rich literacy environment in school. The classroom needs to be a safe place where students feel comfortable and encouraged as they experiment with varying uses of their developing literacies." (p. 159)

"Planning involves more than selecting enjoyable activities about a particular theme or topic." (p. 164)

"Students in the U.S. and English-speaking Canadian schools are assessed via the medium of the English language, the gatekeeper of mainstream education. As we consider the discussion on assessment in this chapter, let's keep in mind the rising number of children whose mother tongue and/or home language is other than that of the mainstream...." (p. 177)

"Informal assessment tools such as student portfolios, anecdotal records, project-based learning, observation of students' interactions within authentic learning situations, and simply asking students to 'think aloud' as they work through a text or activity are examples of ways teachers assess students' reading and writing abilities and content knowledge." (p. 187)

Notes

This made me think of the children, particularly those who don't speak English, who do not get the opportunity to have their parents read to them on a regular basis. It made me think about ways I could set up my classroom to promote literacy for all my students. Some things I want to do are to have a good classroom library, to provide sustained silent reading each day, to have a cross-age reading program where the students will be reading buddies, and to have guest readers from the community and the students' families come into the classroom to share favorite books.

This has been made clear to me through our various assignments and clinical experiences. For example, when I planned an interdisciplinary unit, I had to focus on the state learning goals and district curriculum guide to make sure my lessons were meaningful and appropriate.

I fully understand the issue with assessing students who are still learning English. It is a complicated issue. My boyfriend came to the U.S. from Poland when he was 15. He is very intelligent, but because he took the ACT [a college entrance exam] shortly after he arrived in the U.S., he scored extremely low, simply because of the language barrier. Low scores can cause teachers to make judgments about the intelligence of their students, when it is a language issue not an intelligence issue.

I have heard time and time again that student portfolios are the BEST way to assess students. However, I am not sure why schools have not started doing this yet. This is a question I'd like to ask my cooperating teacher and the principal so I can gain more insight.

Note. Quotes from Alvermann, Swafford, and Montero (2004).

Figure 5
Double-Entry Journal rubric

Basic	Developed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes at least two "quotes" and "notes." • Each "note" restates or summarizes an idea from the quote or provides a general comment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes more than two "quotes" and "notes." • Each "note" provides good insight, deep thinking, meaningful connections, and/or specific reactions.

on the text during and after they read it. By noting things that are important, interesting, and confusing, they are able to engage with a text and understand it more deeply. Codes can be written in the margins of the text or on small sticky notes placed on the pages (Harvey & Goudvis). By coding the assigned texts, students will have more in-depth comprehension and will be more prepared for class discussions and application activities related to the readings.

How we've used Text Coding with our teacher candidates

Teacher candidates are asked to apply the Text Coding strategy with an assigned reading from their methods class. We often find that using the Text Coding strategy with articles from professional journals about "hot topics" in reading instruction or newspaper articles about educational issues under discussion at the national or local level enables our candidates to examine multiple aspects of the issue.

Before assigning the reading, we discuss and model the codes they will be responsible for noting. Categories and codes we commonly use for this strategy include the following: Interesting (I), Connection (C), Important (!), Question (?), Agree (A), and Disagree (D).

We remind the candidates that they will complete the strategy during and after reading the assigned material. They are shown how to code the text by writing in the margins or by using

small sticky notes affixed to selected passages. Candidates are reminded to use each code at least one time. They may insert some codes as they read; these are generally aspects of the text that cause a strong emotional reaction upon first reading. They may find it helpful to reread sections of the text if later passages cause them to reflect upon something that was discussed previously. We recommend that, as they write each code, they write a word or phrase to remind them why they coded that part of the text in the manner they did. (See Figure 6 for a sample coded text.)

When candidates come to class with their coded texts, we typically ask them to share their codes with a small group of peers (2–4 people per group). As they discuss their codes with their peers, they are reminded to share the reasons for coding the text the way they did. Candidates may have selected the same sections but coded them differently; discussion of which parts of the text were coded similarly and differently encourages the candidates to note commonalities among readers and to consider different interpretations and insights. After reflecting upon the ideas shared by their peers, candidates are encouraged to code additional sections of the text. This fosters more in-depth thinking about the key ideas or issues.

As with several of the previous strategies, we frequently facilitate a whole-group discussion after the small group work. In addition to sharing ideas across groups, this whole-group session provides an opportunity for us to present passages that have not been mentioned but that we think are critical and to elicit the codes that vari-

ous candidates may have attached to those passages. For passages that no candidate has coded, we ask candidates to suggest possible codes or we explain why we coded those passages. Once again, candidates should be encouraged to code additional important information, answers to their questions, and new insights. We have seen that many candidates find this strategy so useful that they begin to apply it independently with other assigned readings.

Connections to the K–12 classroom for Text Coding

The Text Coding strategy works well at all grade levels and can work with fiction and nonfiction materials. We discuss with our candidates how, with young children, it is important to model one code at a time and to guide the students through the process during shared reading or guided reading groups.

We also discuss that teachers can create new codes or eliminate codes depending on the level of students and the text they are reading. Kindergarten teachers may have their students code a simple picture book that has been used during a shared reading activity with an exclamation point to represent the most important part of the book and a smiley face to represent the part of the book they liked best. Older students who are reading historical fiction novels may want to add a new code to represent historical facts (HF) that they find within the texts.

Teachers as Readers

Book groups, literature circles, and book clubs have become popular in literacy education during the past decade (Daniels, 2002). These discussion groups may have different names, but they are all designed to allow learners to share their reactions to books and other texts with their peers. As readers get ready to participate in book groups, they read and write notes about their reactions to the text. When the book groups meet, participants

Figure 6
Example of Text Coding

The missing pillars of effective reading instruction

This is one of those questions where responses would surely differ, but I will offer my candidates for the missing five pillars of effective and evidence-based reading instruction. My five have been influenced by what I've observed as common limitations in reading instructional plans I've observed in the past year, especially in schools mandated to apply the principles of scientific reading instruction.

✓ **Classroom organization.** If there is anything less scientific than a one-size-fits-all curriculum, I'm not sure what it might be. Perhaps the most recent studies to note the ineffectiveness of whole-class, single-curriculum reading instruction were the "Beating the Odds" studies of higher poverty schools, conducted by Barbara Taylor and David Pearson and their colleagues at the Center on Improving Early Reading Achievement (www.ciera.org). Effective reading instruction provides a balance of whole-group, small-group, and side-by-side lessons every day.

✓ **Matching pupils and texts.** This pillar is critical for those pupils whose development lags behind their peers. All pupils need texts of an appropriate level of complexity in their hands all day long. The IRA position statement *Making a Difference Means Making It Different* summarizes recent research on this topic and makes it clear that effective reading instruction provides differentiated instruction. Because children differ, no single text nor any single task can be appropriate for all children in a classroom—much less a grade level. Reporting in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Rolanda O'Connor and her colleagues provide another recent demonstration that struggling readers fail to benefit much from lessons using grade-level texts.

?

What are side-by-side lessons?

A and ?

I agree, but how can a teacher possibly do this?

C

I have seen this when my cooperating teacher uses the 3rd grade basal with struggling readers.

Note. Excerpt from Allington (2005).

talk with their peers, listen to others' ideas about the text, debate different perspectives and interpretations, go back to the text to support their ideas, and deepen their understanding and connections with the text.

A specific type of book club has emerged for teachers who wish to read and discuss professional literature. These groups are called Teachers as Readers (TAR) groups (NCTE Teachers as Readers Committee, 1997). In TAR groups, participants read and respond to professional literature in a group format to promote their professional development, reflection, and critical thinking about teaching and learning. TAR groups also develop and promote a community of learners to support the professional growth of all members (Commeyras, Bisplinghoff, & Olson, 2003). As teacher candidates participate in TAR groups, they will be able to experience benefits such as increased motivation to read and reflect on the text, the opportunity to consider multiple perspectives, and a framework for building collegial relationships with their peers (NCTE Teachers as Readers Committee).

How we've used TAR groups with our teacher candidates

In our teaching, we frequently assign supplemental readings beyond the core textbook. These readings are typically articles from professional journals and short professional books on specific topics such as alternatives to round robin oral reading (e.g., *Goodbye Round Robin* by Opitz & Rasinski, 1998) or how teacher talk affects students (e.g., *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* by Johnston, 2004). When we choose these supplemental readings, we look for texts that offer interesting information, challenge preconceived notions our teacher candidates may have about some aspects of teaching and learning, and provide multiple entry points for discussion, reflection, and action.

Before implementing TAR groups, we explain the rationale (as noted previously) to our teacher candidates. We also show a blank TAR sheet and explain that the purpose of the sheet is not to summarize the text but rather to note reactions, insights, connections, and questions related to it. We then display a sample TAR sheet such as

the one shown in Figure 7 to model the type of thinking necessary for filling out the sheet in preparation for TAR groups. Next, we explain that the teacher candidates will be divided into small groups to discuss the assigned text using their completed TAR debriefing sheets as a starting place for their conversations. Finally, we assign the reading and TAR debriefing sheet as homework for the next class session.

During that next class session we are ready to actually implement the TAR groups. We divide the class into groups with three to four members. We typically assign the groups the first few times we use the TAR format to ensure that groups include members who have different perspectives and outlooks. While many candidates would choose to work with their friends if given the opportunity, it can be problematic when all group members have similar ideas and experiences and tend to agree with one another out of habit rather than thinking about ideas deeply.

Once the small groups are formed, we ask each group to sit so they can see and hear one another. We also tell them to bring their TAR debriefing sheets to their TAR groups. We explain to our candidates that their sheets will be the starting point for their discussions, but we also remind them that as other ideas and insights occur to them they can share these too, even if they are not written on their sheets. We clarify that the sheets are an organizational tool to support good discussions in TAR groups, but it is the actual conversation that occurs among group members that is the real benefit and value of using the TAR format.

If TAR groups are discussing a professional article, the group sessions typically take 15–20 minutes. If the text for a TAR session is longer or more complex, it may require more time. While our TAR groups are meeting, we circulate around the room, sitting with each group for a few minutes but being careful not to take over the discussion. This is important because we want the teacher candidates to take responsibility for the discussions and become actively engaged in the

Figure 7
Sample TAR sheet

Teachers as Readers (TAR)

Name Caryn James Text Good-Bye Round Robin - Ch. 1

Debriefing and Discussion Ideas (be sure to note page numbers to tie your ideas to the text):

1. Consider how you would rate the text on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high). Explain.
I rated the chapter as a 9. It was easy to understand, and it was interesting. It helped me realize the importance of silent reading and the problems with round robin reading.
2. Write down something important to share with your TAR group.
I was shocked to learn that round robin reading can actually harm students' reading growth (pages 6-8). This is an important idea to remember so I don't fall into the habit of using round robin.
3. Describe how the text relates to your clinical classroom or other professional experiences.
My cooperating teacher uses round robin in her 4th grade classroom, especially for science and social studies. I'm anxious to learn about the alternatives to round robin so I can try to use some of them during my clinical.
4. Write down any questions you are still considering related to the text.
There is so much evidence that round robin reading is bad, but why do so many teachers still use it in their classrooms? How can I share ideas from this book with my cooperating teacher without offending her since she still does round robin?
5. Write at least one sentence you want to collect for future reference (e.g., favorite sentence or phrase that impacts your thinking).
"If we want to provide children with a realistic view of reading, we need to ensure that the activities we ask them to complete are like those that readers actually do." (p. 7). This made me think of busy work.

***After your TAR group meets, evaluate your TAR in the following areas:

- Something our TAR group did well today: Everyone was prepared for our group so the discussion went well. We also listened to everyone's ideas with open minds.
- Something our TAR group from today needs to work on: We shared lots of our experiences with reading when we were young, but we should have shared more ideas from our clinicals to think about the topic from a teacher's perspective.

process rather than waiting for the professor to lead the conversation.

After the TAR groups have discussed the text, we ask them to complete the group evaluation items on the bottom of the sheet (Figure 7). We have them do this to reflect on the TAR group experience and to share feedback with us about the process. If time permits, we may invite the TAR groups to share key ideas from their discussions with the whole class to see the range of ideas and responses, both common and unique, that arose during the TAR groups.

Connections to the K–12 classroom for TAR

The format and purposes of TAR groups are very similar to literature circles or book clubs that can be implemented in grades K–12. We help our candidates understand how to implement literature discussion groups in K–12 classrooms by sharing useful resources such as Daniels's (2002) book about literature circles. We have also had success helping candidates understand how to use literature discussion groups by implementing literature circles using children's books or young adult novels as part of children's literature classes.

In addition, we discuss with our candidates how they can use the TAR format when they begin their professional careers as teachers. We explain how local schools organize TAR groups around specific grade levels, topics, and school improvement goals as part of the teachers' professional development programs. We share examples of how teachers from various schools can come together to participate in TAR groups organized by professional organizations or clubs (Elish-Piper, 2002).

Final thoughts

We believe it is important to help our teacher candidates understand that reading comprehension does not automatically occur as a person looks at words on a page; reading is a deliberate

act of making meaning that can be taught and practiced (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). We also find that while some college students and teacher candidates may have learned how to comprehend texts fully and study effectively during the middle and high school years, many others come to college without knowing useful reading and study strategies (Pressley, Yokoi, van Meter, Van Etten, & Freebern, 1997). By engaging our teacher candidates with interactive reading comprehension strategies such as those discussed in this article, we are able to guide them through the processes that good readers use so they can enhance their own comprehension and also learn how to support their students' comprehension development. We also find that the interactive nature of these strategies promotes active involvement in class discussions, which results in increased interest, motivation, and learning. The strategies we have described are some of our favorites to use with teacher candidates, but they are certainly not the only ones that work well. We encourage you to consider the strategies you address in your literacy methods courses, and select those that can be applied to the assigned readings in your classes. For example, the strategies Questioning the Author (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997), Discussion Webs (Alvermann, 1991), and Anticipation/Reaction Guides (Head & Readence, 1992) are commonly taught in literacy methods courses and can be readily applied to assigned readings that candidates complete for class.

The benefits of using interactive comprehension strategies in teacher education courses are numerous. As one of our former candidates noted on a course evaluation,

It's great to have a class where the professor actually teaches in the way we are supposed to teach. It makes so much sense to learn the strategies and use them in my own reading first so then I understand how to apply them when I'm teaching.

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