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Revaluing Readers

Introducing RMA

I told you. I can't read . . . just check my test scores! You'll see.

—Watson, 2008

This chapter will do the following:

- Provide an introduction to the rest of the book
- Present the traditional and current trends in Retrospective Miscue Analysis (RMA)
- Highlight the value of miscue analysis and RMA to teachers and readers

INTRODUCTION

In a recent National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) summer institute, Dorothy Watson presented some of her most recent work with young readers who did not conceive of themselves as successful readers. One youngster, after Dorothy patiently tried to get him to tell her what kind of reader he thought he was, finally said not without some aggravation, “I told you. I can’t read . . . just check my test scores! You’ll see” (Watson, 2008). In listening to Watson’s stories about children who clearly knew what it was to be a good reader but did not characterize themselves as such, we are reminded that the reason for exploring language and miscues with children is to empower the reader to understand that reading is a process not a subject to be taught. Everyone may learn to read differently, and every reader’s interpretation of text is grounded in his or her personal and social identities. Finding ways of showing

readers that reading is making sense of text, not getting one phoneme at a time, is at the heart of RMA discussions.

The idea for inviting whole-class participation in small-group reading conversations about their oral reading miscues and retellings evolved from an experience that Vicki had with her fifth-grade class the previous year. Struggling readers were grouped to discuss their miscues and retellings; Vicki facilitated these groups while the rest of the students were supposed to be working on other assignments. Instead, she found those not involved in the RMA reading groups more interested in what was being said in the reading groups than in other work. Vicki recalled how later her more proficient readers asked if they could also talk about their miscues and retellings and the meanings behind them. The results were so positive that we decided to develop a strategy that would allow Vicki to set up RMA conversations among all the readers in Vicki's new third-grade classroom. We organized it so that there were regular opportunities for all reading groups to listen to one another's discussions about miscues of pronunciation and meaning using the inner and outer circle models associated with the original Socratic Circle model (Copeland, 2005). The results were empowering and built classroom community like nothing we have seen before. How miscues are gathered and organized for RMA conversations and how these conversations are shared with the entire classroom community are explained and explored in subsequent chapters.

TRADITIONAL AND CURRENT TRENDS IN RMA

There have been many studies and uses of RMA in classrooms since the mid-1970s, but to our knowledge, RMA was never paired with Socratic Circle methods. Traditional RMA adheres to the principles held by Yetta Goodman and Ann Marek (1996). It was designed to be an evaluation tool for an adult student's oral reading and associated thinking processes, the purpose being to *revalue* what the reader knows about reading and strengths the student brings to the acts that take place during reading. In the tradition of miscue analysis, the term *evaluation* was redefined within the paradigm that values the reader. In addition, we define assessment as a "continuous examination" or a continuum of reflecting, assessing, and evaluation of each reader's progress much like the approach used by Kathleen and James Strickland (2000).

RMA has evolved from a protocol to be administered by a teacher with an adult struggling reader to an assessment and teaching strategy that may be used to support a range of reading abilities. RMA can be adapted to any classroom environment dependent on the needs of the students and the teacher's purpose for using RMA. In the past, Rita used RMA with

struggling readers who puzzled their teachers. Her experiences were primarily through what are commonly called “pull out” programs where small classes of students are taught literacy skills in small groups.

Vicki too has used RMA in this manner as well as in private tutoring sessions; however, in a classroom, RMA can be used with a group of readers who struggle or with the entire class, as demonstrated in this book. Vicki implemented RMA with a small group of struggling readers in previous years. Each of the readers within the group brought unique strengths to the discussions because all of the readers struggled in different ways but were also successful in diverse ways. The insights those readers offered to their peers in RMA discussions were remarkable even though the students seemed an unlikely mix of abilities. In this book, we invite readers to consider the many ways that RMA may be integrated into literacy instruction in any traditional classroom setting. Its use is flexible.

The RMA process we are discussing in this book has roots in traditional RMA—particularly the underlying beliefs that the process values and empowers the reader. Differences are structural and include students being responsible for tape-recording their own readings of the text along with the retelling rather than with a teacher present. After reviewing the tapes and marking miscues for discussion, readers are provided with an organized protocol and the opportunity to discuss the miscues that the teacher has highlighted and others they notice. Vicki facilitates the discussion providing further probing and guidance only when needed. This process is sometimes referred to as CRMA or Collaborative Retrospective Miscue Analysis explained further in the work of Moore and Gilles (2005). The emphasis in CRMA is on students collaboratively discussing their miscues with the teacher moving from group to group to listen to discussions or take notes on what is said. It may also be compared to Over the Shoulder Miscue Reflection (Davenport & Lauritzen, 2002), which takes on similar aspects of teacher-reader participation and conversation. In traditional RMA, the teacher in collaboration with a single student discussed oral reading miscues as they listened to previously recorded readings of the reader. While the benefits are well established for traditional RMA, the process we describe in this book involves small group discussions among readers we characterize as “developing, striving, and proficient readers.” Each student belongs to an RMA group, and RMA is part of the overall literacy curriculum.

The process we adopted is actually based on Dorothy Watson’s (1978) early work in Reader-Selected Miscues (RSM). Watson, a pioneer in miscue and retrospective miscue, has worked with hundreds of children as they listened to their reading and discovered themselves as readers. We believe her work may predate some of the work of Goodman and Marek in that it first introduced the notion of readers selecting their own miscues for

discussion as a means of valuing and empowering the reader's participation in the literacy and learning process.

In the process of RMA we use, the RSM are those that the readers choose to focus on during the discussion time based on what they have plausible explanations for or concerns about as they reflect on their reading. As in RSM, hearing from the readers about their miscues, their interpretations of text, and their understanding of what "works" for them as readers (Watson, personal communication, March 15, 1995) frames our presentation of RMA. In addition to the reader's voice, peers are invited to contribute to possible explanations of miscues from their own reading experiences and perspectives. Together, the discussions held within the group enrich the students' awareness of reading miscues and retellings. We have found this approach to literacy acquisition and reading in general demonstrates to students that reading is an ongoing, cognitive process that develops over time based on knowledge and experiences rather than a discrete set of skills to be mastered. Efficacy in reading rests on the extent of the reader's prior knowledge and experience with language. Talking about and sharing knowledge and experiences with language benefits all readers and makes it much easier for teachers to demonstrate the value of reading across the curriculum.

THE VALUE OF MISCUE ANALYSIS AND RMA TO TEACHERS AND READERS

Teachers who have conducted miscue analysis on children's oral reading and retellings never listen to children or adults read in the same way again. They hear reading miscues that provide insight into what the reader is thinking about as one reads. Here's a quick example: One young reader read "caffeine table" for "coffee table" then quickly corrected his miscue. When asked why he might have made that substitution he replied, "Because coffee has caffeine in it." RMA extends the invitation of linguistic exploration to all readers, empowering them to examine for themselves the reading process and how they utilize knowledge of language, culture, and experience to interact with the text as they read.

Those teachers who have not conducted miscue analysis need to know that miscues are a different way of looking at reading errors. Miscues are missed, misinterpreted, or misunderstood cues of language. They occur because a reader is struggling to make meaning from the text. In this way of thinking, they are "unexpected responses to text" that may or may not alter the meaning significantly. While there are subtle nuances of meaning associated with any reading substitution, when the miscue does not fundamentally change the meaning of the sentence, it is called a high-level

or *smart* miscue. A *low-level* or *okay* miscue may change the meaning of the sentence but still maintains the readers' ability to move ahead because it acts as a placeholder. To varying degrees, low-level miscues change the meaning of the sentence, but proficient readers will likely correct low-level miscues as they continue to read. When encouraged to talk about these miscues, less proficient readers learn how to recognize and correct low-level miscues. Miscues are not mistakes; they are linguistic occurrences that always provide teachers with a glimpse into how the brain works to make sense of the written word.

As you will see in subsequent chapters, particularly Chapter 4, miscues of word recognition are discussed during RMA conversations as readers postulate reasons for the miscue, such as "the words *house* and *home* look similar, and some people say, 'Come over to my house' and mean 'Come over to my home.'" Rich discussions about tone, meaning, and various nuances of language such as code switching and dialect engage readers as they discuss and compare their individual miscues. The discussion then ranges to the retellings of text, noting interpretations, details, miscues of understanding, and so much more.

Valuing the Reader's Strengths

The RMA process guides instruction in a fluid, authentic manner. The reader is a full participant in the process. During a recent online discussion among reading professionals, Yetta Goodman (2007) explains the value of miscue analysis:

Miscue analysis shows us how smart the brain is as it reads a whole story or article or headline. . . . Teachers discover that readers know grammar as they substitute the same part of speech that is in the written story or article. They discover that kids are predicting what is going to happen next in the sentence based on what they already know as learners. Or the prediction fits with the sentence up to the miscue and the reader stops, hesitates, and/or self-corrects. Teachers find out that readers are monitoring what they are reading—searching for meaning when they self-correct a prediction that was acceptable up to the point of miscue. . . . These show readers' strengths.

When teachers know readers' strengths, they begin to build on the strengths rather than focus on weaknesses. For example, a child strong in word recognition may not always have proficient recall of the text. Building on word recognition, talking about the word, and asking the reader if the word makes sense in a specific context helps the reader develop a sense of

organization while reading. The work of Keene and Zimmerman (1997, 2007) strongly reflects the notion that proficient readers know how to use comprehension strategies like these. For some, developing effective reading strategies comes naturally, but for others, they must be learned and supported. RMA provides the structure for that support.

The reading process is all about strategies for making meaning. Think about what you do as you pick up a book you have long wanted to read or one that you may not be sure you want to buy. The strategies all readers rely upon, regardless of language or culture, when they begin to read a text are sampling, predicting, and confirming (or self-correcting if the prediction was wrong). The systems of language that will be explained further in Chapter 2, including the graphophonic system (graphics and sounds), the semantic system (meaning), and the syntactic system (grammar), support these strategies. The reader sticks with the word if it makes sense semantically and syntactically.

REFLECTION

Teachers who use RMA in their regular reading instruction see marked changes in their students' critical thinking processes as well as their understanding of reading. Students begin to realize that reading is more than decoding words for fluency; it involves making sense of text using a variety of appropriate strategies—a process that often confounds struggling readers. Fluency is an attribute of oral speech that for most requires practice using familiar text. The miscues that occur prior to the reader being able to read “fluently” actually point the reader toward becoming fluent. When the focus of fluency instruction is on repetitive practice aimed at speed, pace, and expression, students are not given opportunities to reflect on their reading habits and miscues. Fluency is expected in drama and the arts—when reading has been practiced. Miscues occur during “cold reads” of unfamiliar text to give us a window on the reading process.

Using RMA helps students better understand the reading process and become better, more confident readers. Moreover, the use of RMA to integrate content across the curriculum is powerful. Teachers will enjoy the opportunity to connect good children's literature, both fiction and nonfiction, to other content areas as they choose RMA reading selections. Through RMA conversations, readers will then begin to make connections between a variety of texts and content in authentic and meaningful ways that involve inquiry into their own understanding of the reading process situated in a variety of contexts both as individuals and collectively as a classroom community.

In summary, when readers examine their miscues and retellings, they look at the reasoning behind the miscue drawing from their intrinsic knowledge of language systems. Teachers who view miscues as evidence of the reader's attempts to construct meaning will never listen to a child read in the same way again.