



COMMENTS *from Evelyn*

Creating Metacognitive Conversations with Teachers and Students

By Evelyn Maycumber

Talking with students about anything these days is both delightful and frightening, depending upon the subject—and the choice of vocabulary, of course. Secondary students have their own language now, and they change it frequently so “outsiders” like adults will not know the topic of conversation. So when talking about metacognition, a good first rule is be sure you have more information at hand than you need. The purpose of this “conversation” with you is to help you talk effectively with your students about becoming metacognitive. Since we are having a rather one-sided conversation, I thought we should together “bone up” on what a metacognitive conversation might include. You will need your CRISS manual at hand for our conversation.

First, re-read Chapter 1 in the CRISS manual, 3rd edition, with this perspective: *look at how the idea of helping students “think about their own thinking” develops in this chapter.* Think about the following ideas (or similar ones) as you read:

- ▶ helping students internalize their own theories about learning
- ▶ engaging students and encouraging curiosity
- ▶ talking about discoveries with colleagues
- ▶ creating knowledge seekers and questioners
- ▶ helping students to create meaning for themselves
- ▶ adapting to meet students’ needs
- ▶ making assessments a learning experience for students

If you really want to dig deeper, create a learning log and write down each phrase. After the phrase, record your personal thoughts relating to a possible conversation with your students and/or possible changes in your teaching philosophy.

Now, let’s look in another place in the 3rd edition CRISS manual. Turn to and re-read Chapter 7, Informal Writing to Learn, that starts on page 154. One powerful way to have a conversation with students or for students to converse with each other is to link the talk to writing. When students can write freely about their thoughts, rich understanding often evolves. I have seen “writing down something first” help struggling readers modify their thinking about comprehension because they were forced to focus and try to clarify their thoughts. As you peruse the chapter, note the sample “Thinking Prompts” at the top of page 161. Further down on that page, starter statements are given (see #2) to help students express their ideas in Dialogue Journal conversations. Next, ponder the following words, “Writing touches the heart of learning by penetrating the external shell of memorized facts and superficial understanding. When we can explain concepts to ourselves and to others we can claim new knowledge as our own.” (page 190, 3rd edition CRISS manual)

Now, we are going to read one of the most powerful sections in the CRISS manual, the section entitled “Students as Researchers of Their Own Learning” on pages 238-248 in Chapter 11 of the 3rd edition CRISS manual, which deals with teachers and students as researchers. Just a reminder, be sure to have your CRISS manual open as you continue to read my column. After you have read through these pages, return to page 239, and carefully read the student’s graph and journal entries at the top of the page. The final prompt given by Sandra Bradford was, “examine [your] own learning results and determine which of the strategies worked best.” Read Friday’s sample response. Note the rationale given by the student for her choice. Ms. Bradford is teaching metacognition here.

In the Seventh Grade Longitudinal Study by Sue Dailey beginning on page 242, you will find powerful questions to ask students to help them examine their own thinking and learning and great beginning questions for metacognitive conversations. Sue’s depth of knowledge in this subject is awesome; note the questions she poses for Pre-Reading, During Reading, and After Reading. Reflect on the student responses. Pay special attention to Sue’s use of the words “why” and “how.” Sue’s students were not recipients of the learning process, they were participants in a learning process that Sue guided. She insisted on students making their own meaning.

Thank you so much for your willingness to “converse” in a one-sided conversation about creating metacognitive conversations. Here are some specific questions to help students as they start the process of thinking about their thinking:

- ▶ What evidence/proof can you present for your answer? How did you select your evidence?
- ▶ What would you predict/infer from . . . ? Why did you make that prediction?
- ▶ How would you decide about . . . ? Explain the process you used to decide?
- ▶ Use the “5 Whys.” Ask a “why” question, then respond to it. Develop another “why” question relating to your response, then answer it (2nd “why” question). Continue the process until you have asked and answered 5 *whys*.
- ▶ Summarize the class discussion on . . . ? How did you choose what to include? What to exclude?
- ▶ How did you get that answer? Write out the steps and tell why you chose them.
- ▶ Unpack your thinking: tell us how you arrived at that answer.
- ▶ There is not only one answer to this question. Consider alternatives and explain how you arrived at each one.
- ▶ On this test, explain why you chose your answer (multiple choice) and why you did not choose the other choices.

In addition to CRISS, some of these I learned from my dear friend Jay McTighe (co-author of *Understanding by Design*, ASCD, 1998) and others from working with professional trainers. These are the kinds of questions industry and corporations use in their trainings and problem solving sessions.

Finally, I would like to share what a friend of mine who teaches in a middle school does to promote metacognitive conversations. On the first day of class, she has a computer paper banner across the top of the blackboard that says, “Be a metacognitive student.” By the time late October rolls around, the majority of her students have gained understanding of the statement. They talk freely about their learning using the term *metacognition* with accuracy. Can you predict how many times Mary Pat talks with her class about metacognition, how many times she models the process, how many lessons involving guided-practice she teaches, and how many times she makes the connections for her students? Her class is a delight to observe as they talk about metacognition in small groups. Before Christmas comes to Florida, her students are well on the way to monitoring their own learning process.

About the Author: Evelyn Maycumber is a CRISS Master Trainer and an educational consultant from Gainesville, Florida.

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