

INTERACTING WITH HISTORY USING TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

By Dr. Nancy Boyles

There are two things that classroom teachers of reading never seem to have enough of: strategies and resources—best practices to engage students with literacy, and high quality texts to make reading come alive. As an author of several professional books and consultant for many districts, I spend a lot of time in classrooms modeling the use of both strategies and resources. This year, much of that work has revolved around the close reading of complex texts with text dependent questions.

The right resource

More by accident than intent I happened upon a set of Capstone resources that have become my go-to texts when showing the power of close reading with small group instruction in the intermediate grades: *Interactive History Adventures*. There are numerous titles in this series, all of them well-crafted, though the one I've taken into classrooms most frequently is *The Underground Railroad* by Allison Lassieur.

Here's how these books work, and why they've become instant best-sellers with both the teachers and students with whom I work. These are essentially "choose your own adventure" stories that probe significant moments in American history. There are always three paths readers can take. In the case of the *Underground Railroad* readers can choose to be a slave, a slave catcher, or an abolitionist. At designated points, they make choices that lead them deeper into the book to a positive outcome—or to trouble. Ultimately, the tale yields sixteen possible endings with thirty-seven choices along the way.

For example, taking on the role of a slave, should you stop to speak to the stranger you meet along a dark road one night in your attempt to escape? Is he a slave catcher who will return you to your master, or an abolitionist who will aid you in your pursuit of freedom? "I told you we shouldn't have talked to that guy," one fifth grader admonished his peers around the reading table, distressed that their character (a slave) was now recaptured and would never make it to Canada. These books also grab students' attention with their inclusion of primary source photographs and other graphics that convey a sense of time and place visually.

Kids love these books because they become participants in the process; they actually make history. This is very different from the way history is typically approached where students observe from the sidelines, reading about the choices that other people have made. Now they are *invested* because they recognize that the choices they make do, in fact, make a difference.

The right strategy

My book *Rethinking Small Group Instruction in the Intermediate Grades* (Capstone Professional, 2010) identifies lots of strategies for supporting students' comprehension through their small group work. However, the one I apply most often with these interactive history adventures is standards-based text-dependent questions. Below are some generic questions that can be used with any of these interactive history adventures to help students become more proficient with the Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading. Remember that for close reading we want to ask text dependent questions periodically *during* reading to guide students systematically through text. Use your discretion about which questions make the most sense at each pausing point.

Text Dependent Questions to Align the Common Core with Capstone *Interactive History Adventures*

Standard 1 (Finding evidence): Were there any details here that surprised you? Why do you think the author included this particular detail? What do you know now that you didn't know before?

Standard 2 (Theme, main idea, summary): In your own words, what is the author saying in this part of the text? (Paraphrase) What is this story *beginning* to be about?

Standard 3 (Connection between parts of a text): How did one action lead to another action?

Standard 4 (Word choice): What are the most powerful words in this part of the text? Why do you think the author chose these words?

Standard 5 (Structure and Genre): This text is an example of historical fiction. What elements of historical fiction do you notice in this part of the text?

Standard 6 (Purpose and point of view): Now that you've taken on the role of [____], what new insights do you have about what someone in this position *valued*?

Standard 7 (Alternate text formats): Look at one of the photographs in this book (or some other graphic). How does this picture add to your understanding of this topic or time in history?

Standard 8 (Critiquing a text): What does the author do to encourage you to like or dislike a particular character? Do you think the author is being equally fair to all characters? Explain.

Standard 9 (Text-to-text connections): Read another source (poem, article, story) about this topic. What else did you learn? Where could that information have been added in *this* story?

The right outcome

As we finished discussing our last text dependent question related to the *Underground Railroad*, and I was collecting the books, one student was reluctant to hand back his copy. "Do they have these books in the library?" he wanted to know. His teacher was astounded: "That kid hasn't taken a book out of the school library all year." I decided it had been a successful lesson.

Dr. Nancy Boyles is the author of *Rethinking Small-group Instruction in the Intermediate Grades: Differentiation That Makes a Difference*, 2010, Capstone Professional.

Also by Dr. Nancy Boyles:

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**Rethinking Small-group Instruction in the Intermediate Grades:
Differentiation That Makes a Difference** ■ 978-1-934338-86-5

2010, Capstone Professional \$34.95

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