

MINI-INQUIRY

Self-Selected Inquiries: Sharks

—Barb Smith, Slavens Elementary, Denver, Colorado

“Look, its skin has sharp little bumps. I never knew that before; I thought shark’s skin was smooth,” Jake said.

“Yeah, me too. What are we supposed to do again?” Alex asked.

“Put an *L* on the Post-it note when we learn something new and write down our new learning. So we can put an *L* here by this bumpy shark skin,” Jake said as he wrote his comment on a tag and marked it with an *L* for learn.

“I wonder why their skin is so bumpy,” mused Alex.

“Good question. Maybe we will find out if we keep reading,” said Jake.

Steph and second-grade teacher Barb Smith moved about the room conferring with students as they read a kids’ magazine article on sharks. Steph had just modeled a nonfiction strategy lesson with these second graders, who were now reading and talking in small groups and pairs. Barb, their teacher, was planning a small-group mini-research project, and together she and Steph had decided to teach a lesson on “STR”—stopping, thinking about, and reacting to new information when reading. Too often kids just run their eyes over the page without taking a moment to stop and think about the information. When kids really slow down and think about new information they encounter, they have a much better chance of understanding, remembering, and applying it. Often they generate new questions, as these two boys did, and sometimes even clear up a misconception.

Steph modeled with a book about sharks. She shared that learners, whether they are reading, listening, or viewing, need to merge their thinking with the information, not merely read the words without considering them. When she read that sharks were very picky eaters, she stopped and wrote, *Wow! I never knew sharks were very picky eaters, I thought they ate anything in sight!* and marked that Post-it note with an *L* for *learn*. She explicitly showed how she stopped and merged her own thinking with the information by adding a thought that she now realized was incorrect. “Wow,” she said. “I just learned something new. I used to think sharks would eat anything, but now this information just taught me that they like to eat only certain things. I had something we call a *misconception*. A misconception is really just a misunderstanding. We have them all the time. And the best way to clear them up is by reading, talking to others, and doing research. Now I

know that sharks are very picky eaters. I don't think I'll forget that, because I was really thinking about the information while reading and taking time to write down my reaction. Alex and Jake read that shark skin was bumpy, not smooth as they thought before reading the article, so they cleared up a misconception too! How cool is that? That's why reading makes us smarter. The more we read, the more we learn, and the more we learn, the smarter we get!"

Steph noted that when she came to some new, surprising, or cool information, her inner voice signaled the new learning with words and phrases such as *I never knew*, *WOW*, *no way*, and *awesome*. She explained that she wrote down or drew that new information and her reactions to "hold" her thinking so she wouldn't forget it. Now the kids were practicing with partners.

Steph and Barb conferred with kids as they were discussing and jotting down what they learned about sharks. During the sharing session, the kids shared their new learning about sharks and their reactions.

Merging thinking with new learning is foundational. When kids stop, think, and react to information, they are far more likely to integrate it and build knowledge. Their reactions could be a question, a connection, an inference, or an emotional response. The more kids think when they read, the more they learn and remember.

The next day, Barb built on both the questioning strategy and the new learning lesson as she modeled her own inquiry about explorer Ernest Shackleton. She showed how she sometimes asks a question and reads to find the answer. She also modeled how sometimes as she meets new information, she wonders about it. Often when we learn something new, a question follows quickly on the heels of that new information. So learning happens both ways; we can start with a question and find the answer, or we might stop and think about new information, get a question, and track down the answer. Barb's second graders went on to research questions on topics of interest in small groups that week. They investigated deep-sea life, penguins, army tanks, quarks, and atoms. They asked a question and then used the strategy of stopping, thinking, and reacting to information by marking Post-it notes with an *L* when they learned something new. Frequently their new learning spawned new questions to keep in mind as they continued their research. When researchers interact with the text and each other in this way, they engage more in the research, learn more about their topic, and find out information. For more information on the inquiry projects in Barb Smith's second-grade classroom, see Steph and

Anne Goudvis' video *Think Nonfiction* (2003).

So far, we've focused on modeling and guiding kids as they ask and answer questions and stop to consider new information. Some kids—like those who jumped on the Internet to learn how mosquito bites itch—got their questions answered quickly. Others surrounded themselves with texts on a common topic, reread, and read on to find answers. Still others learned to take their time to stop, think, and react to new information and clear up misconceptions (remember Alex and Jake, who discovered that shark skin is bumpy, not smooth). Most of these mini-inquiries involved having an authentic question, getting it answered relatively quickly, and then sharing the information with others in the class.