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Making Time for Meta Moments: Effective Closure for the Secondary Classroom

Abstract

Despite its importance, many teachers overlook a vital component of the lesson cycle—closure. This article explains how a high school English teacher implements Meta Moments, a systematic time for closure that fosters metacognitive habits in students.

Keywords: metacognition, closure, reflection, lesson cycle, self-efficacy

"Can I talk to you about your Meta Moment from yesterday? It looks like you're stuck after your introduction." After this quick conference with a student, she problem-solved her way through a writing block.

Too often I used to hear, "I don't know what to write!" or "I don't remember what we were doing yesterday!"—frustrating responses that many teachers have heard before. As a reflective practitioner, I asked myself *why do students seem unable to transfer their learning from moment to moment, from class period to class period, and from day to day?*

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Thinking of a flashy hook for our lesson seems like more fun than planning time for closure. But closure, an often overlooked component of the lesson cycle, is a key component to our students' ability to transfer knowledge (Lynch & Warner, 2008). It is the closure segment of the lesson cycle that has become key to creating self-directed learners in my own classroom.

Teachers must be leaders for their students, but we need to create an environment where students can take control of their own learning. In an era when expectations for student achievement are higher than ever, teachers can no longer allow students to passively say, "I don't remember." If learners are to lead the way, then teachers have to provide the opportunities for them to do so. These opportunities exist within an underutilized component of the lesson cycle where students can become more self-directed, engaged learners.

Teachers spend hours planning classroom instruction, but some favor the more exciting parts of the lesson cycle at the cost of

others, despite the importance of each. Thinking of a flashy hook for our lesson seems like more fun than planning time for closure. But closure, an often overlooked component of the lesson cycle, is a key component to our students' ability to transfer knowledge (Lynch & Warner, 2008). It is the closure segment of the lesson cycle that has become key to creating self-directed learners in my own classroom.

If many teachers are like me, they are guilty of leaving out closure because the guided and independent practice seem so much more important, or because they simply run out of time. We have all experienced that moment when the bell is about to ring and pencils are scribbling furiously across papers in order to finish an assignment. Any teacher would hate to interrupt such hard work, but what happens to that learning if students are not given a moment to find closure? To combat this difficulty, I began an experiment to build in time for closure. I called my experiment "Meta Moments." Meta Moments are short amounts of time built in at the end of each class period where students can apply their metacognitive skills. Meta Moments have become central to my teaching practice, and through Meta Moments, students have been able to take control as self-directed owners of their learning.

Metacognition is thinking about your own thinking (Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994). It is a concept often used during reading, but it has equally useful applications for learning more generally. Researchers report positive results when students apply metacognitive skills and strategies. Askell-Williams, Lawson, and Skrzypiec (2012) based hypotheses in their study on the idea that "the quality of students' knowledge about how they learn influences their engagement in self-regulated learning and consequently, their learning achievement" (p. 413). Another two-year longitudinal study showed that metacognitive skills lead to increased performance and that the achievement is, in part, independent of prior intellectual ability (Van der Stel & Veenman, 2010). Both studies recommend the use of explicitly planning metacognitive strategies and the teaching of metacognitive skills to students. Meta Moments are a way to capitalize on research that shows the benefits of metacognitive practices.

Implementing Meta Moments

The first step I took to implement Meta Moments was to explicitly teach students about metacognition. To introduce the concept early in the year, I began with a unit that required students to examine their own beliefs about the nature of thinking itself. I began with a lesson that requires a reading-writing connection based on cognition and metacognition. There are probably a lot of choices that a teacher could make, but I chose to begin with *Allegory of the Cave* written by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Even with the many struggling readers in my classes who might be intimidated by such heavy material, we were able to study important ideas in the text. *Allegory of the Cave* asks readers to consider what knowledge is and how a person can be sure he or she knows something. In small groups, students are asked to discuss the message of the allegory. After small group discussion, I pose questions to the whole class:

Of all the knowledge that exists, how much do humans know? Of all the knowledge that exists, how much do you know? How do you know that you know it? Answers vary, of course. However, it is not difficult to steer the dialogue toward strategies such as being able to predict, being able to summarize, or knowing when we are confused. After thorough discussions of Plato's allegory, the class writes their own allegory for knowledge. In order to get students started, I borrow an opening line from a poignant commencement address given by author David Foster Wallace (2009). He opened his speech this way:

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?" (pp. 3-4)

The assignment is for students to think of what they learned while reading *Allegory of the Cave* and write their own allegory by finishing the story about the young fish. Students explore their own ideas of knowledge and awareness of knowledge by writing their story. After the class has composed their allegories, students share and compare their new ideas about knowledge. This lesson becomes a jumping off point for practicing a habit of taking time to be metacognitive, and from this lesson forward, students take time to do a Meta Moment each day.

The concept of metacognition can be difficult for students at first, but it didn't take much time for it to catch on. "It's like that movie *The Matrix*!" they would say. When they did become comfortable with the concept and the label, they enjoyed the polysyllabic nature of the word, and began to use *metacognition* in sentences to show off.

Some simple modeling helped them catch on to the idea. At first, many of my students found the process easier when they were provided sentence stems to assist their thinking. I provided an extensive list of sentence stems that would help them down various avenues of metacognition, such as "Today I was stuck when …" or "I know I understood ___ because …" (see Figure 1). I began to take away one sentence stem each day, but students seemed to abandon them faster than my scaffold of removing them. Within a few short weeks, when students had adjusted to the procedure, students were writing useful Meta Moments on their own.

Building in the Time for Meta Moments

I have always felt that the enemy of teaching is time. Teachers constantly lament not having enough time to truly help students understand a lesson, along with not having enough time to cover all the content in a given year. It is understandable that teachers may resist new things they perceive will take more time.

Steps to Implement Meta Moments	Benefits of Meta Moments
1. Explicitly teach the concept of metacognition. *Use a reading-writing connection that will stimulate student thought and awareness of knowledge.* 2. Set aside time at the end of each class. *Set an alarm on an iPad or a watch. It can be difficult to stop a lesson and make time for metacognition, but the time for student self-reflection is worth it.* 3. Build in a system for feedback. *Meta Moments are a great tool to check for understanding. Use warm up time in the next class to follow up when necessary.*	• Students receive time to find closure with their learning. • Students transfer knowledge from day-to-day. • Teachers have a systematic tool to check for understanding.

Sentence Stems	Question Bank
• I know I accomplished our objective today because… • I still don't understand… • I lost track of everything except… • I figured out that… • I first thought… but then I realized… • The time went quickly because… • Something I definitely learned today was… • While I was reading… • I got confused when… • I was distracted by… • I started to think about… • I got stuck when…	• What am I thinking about what I'm learning? • Do I understand what is going on in class? • Do I need more help with something? • How is my reading going? • Am I satisfied with my writing?

Figure 1. Strategies for building Meta Moments.

The beauty of Meta Moments is that they do not actually require a lot of time. I set the alarm for three minutes before the bell rings to signal the end of class. This consistently gave me enough time to walk around the classroom with a sticky note for each student, for students to take a moment to think about their thinking and learning, post their Meta Moment to the designated board, and then pack up and clean up. Three minutes isn't a lot of time, but over the course of a school year, it can add up to more than six and a half hours of self-reflection and metacognition. Considering the potential for shortening the review at the beginning of class, Meta Moments are a real timesaver.

A System for Meta Moments

The key to making Meta Moments successful is setting up a system. Their metacognition didn't mean anything for the student or for me unless I could follow up when necessary. With more than 120 names on my roster, this could be a potential problem. The solution was creating a station on the wall where students could leave their Meta Moment comment on a 2"x2" sticky note for me to read at the end of the day. Each class period had its own grid of 4"x4" squares made on butcher paper, and each square had a student's name in the middle (see Figure 2). At the end of each school day, I could quickly grab each student's sticky note to see what he or she

was thinking that day. Reading all of the notes would take only 10 to 15 minutes each day, and it truly informed my lessons for the next day.

The Benefit of Follow-Up Conversations

Following up on Meta Moments has been the most essential part of the process. While I hope that I'm teaching my students toward a healthy habit of metacognition and helping them develop a better awareness of their own learning processes, for me, I've never had a more accurate picture of what students did or did not learn during a lesson. I've had some pretty important conversations with students based on their Meta Moments. It isn't feasible to have a personal conference with each student each day, but I do make a point to follow up with a few students during their warm-up time.
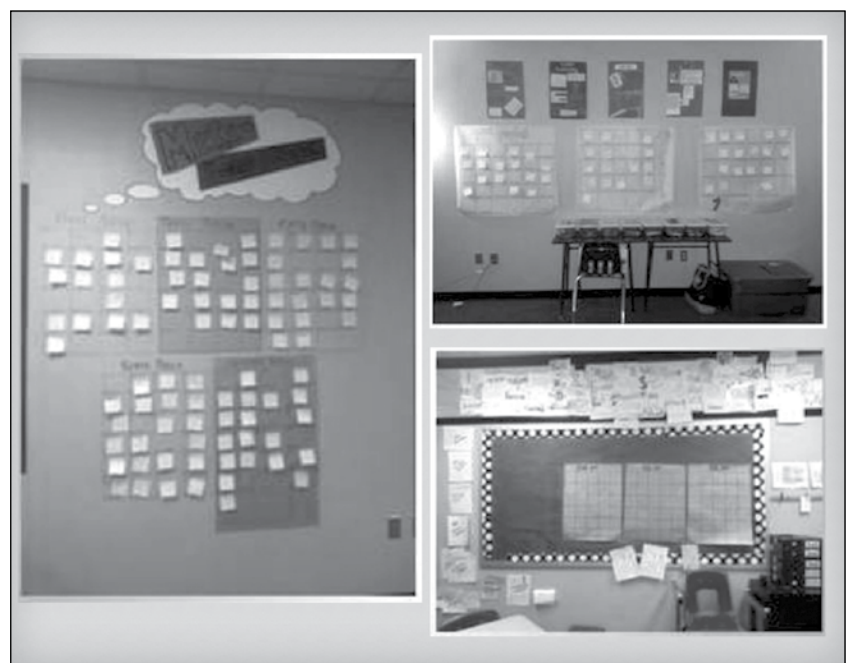
As I would read the day's Meta Moments, I could decide which students needed follow-up. For example, one of my students, Fabiola, wrote, "I knew exactly what I wanted to write about today so I got started." I knew she needed very little follow-up the next day. I wrote on her sticky note, "I like the topic you picked," and simply left it on her desk during warm-up time. Another student,

Figure 2. Examples of Meta Moments grids.

Through qualitative observation, it is clear that Meta Moments were beneficial to my students' ability to transfer knowledge from day to day, to keep track of their own learning and progress, and to their level of self-efficacy. They have become more self-directed and engaged learners.

Janie, wrote, "Tone words were easy today. I knew exactly which words to circle." Janie really didn't need any follow-up at all.

More often than not, a Meta Moment won't require me to specifically conference with a student. The students whose metacognitive comments show they are on-track begin the class period the next day without missing a beat. They can get themselves started on their work or engage in new content with no problem.

Sometimes a student posts a Meta Moment that needs a bit more feedback. One student, Ramello, once wrote, "I'm stuck today and I don't know what to do." We were writing an expository essay and Ramello didn't understand the prompt. I was able to conference with him the next day during warm-up time, and when it was time for students to pull out their prewriting, Ramello was able to go on independently. The Meta Moment conferences ended up becoming an effective way to determine when more scaffolding is necessary in order for certain students to understand a lesson.

Other times, I would see entire patterns across the Meta Moments in one class period or across all students in an entire day. There was one day when students were posting Meta Moments that indicated that they were having a difficult time finding a way to begin an essay. This pattern didn't occur in just one class, but I saw the same feedback from every class period in as many as one-third of the students. By noticing this pattern, I determined students needed a minilesson the next day on the function of introductions in essays. Without the insight of the Meta Moments, I might have let students struggle on for days without the benefit of this needed lesson. In other instances, patterns became apparent that let me know whether a certain reading we have done or strategy we have used in class has been effective overall. For instance, I tried a new strategy with my students that divided the class into discussion groups once a week. On the days where the discussion groups met, I would get Meta Moments from students like Manuel, who said, "When I discuss the novel in my group, I understand it better" or Naomi, who said something similar, "I like it when we discuss the book in groups. Today we talked about what the cover meant, and I wouldn't have thought about that." When I see patterns like these in Meta Moments, I am able to reinforce instructional decisions, whether it is including a lesson students need—as in

the case of the minilesson on introductions—or the confidence to know something works—as in the case of discussion groups.

Other times, the Meta Moments let me know about knowledge gaps my students have that I would not expect, and I am able to utilize a teachable moment that comes up naturally. In one example of these cases, I was following up with a student whose comments had confused me. Kelly misused quotation marks in a Meta Moment, and her comments were communicating an irony that she did not intend. It wasn't part of the lesson plan for that day, but I took a few minutes to teach her the correct use for quotation marks. Unexpectedly, another student, Konner, made a similar mistake a few days later. I had Kelly teach Konner the same lesson I had taught her, and this cleared up a misunderstanding of writing that may not have revealed itself otherwise.

I have also been able to catch other misunderstandings before they cause trouble. One time Jessica got confused when reading Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night.* Her Meta Moment said, "Cesario was really unmanly for choosing not to fight Sir Andrew." Jessica had been absent and missed a concept central to the play: Cesario is actually a woman named Viola, who is dressed up like a man. When I corrected her misunderstanding the next day, we had a good laugh, and she was able to comprehend and enjoy the play much more.

Other times, it was clear that students were enjoying *Twelfth Night* when one of them left a Meta Moment that said, "Today I was thinking about, how did Shakespeare come up with all this stuff?" (See Figure 3.)
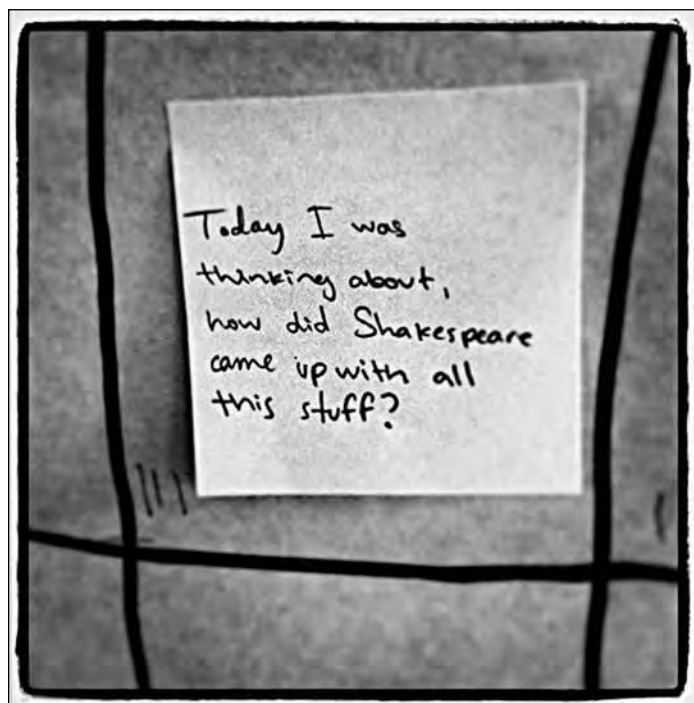

Figure 3. A student example of a Meta Moment.

Leading the Way Through Meta Moments

When I started this experiment, I was expecting the strategy to become cumbersome and lose its novelty quickly, but it never lost its steam. As Meta Moments became the routine, never once did I hear a groan when the alarm sounded or when I slapped a sticky note down on a desk. Meta Moments just became a natural part of the class period. The closing strategy even cut down on the amount of packing up students did in anticipation of the bell, since there was no point in packing up until they had finished writing their Meta Moment for the day.

I have never felt so in tune to my students' thought processes. Checking for understanding has never been so systematic or thorough. Through qualitative observation, it is clear that Meta Moments were beneficial to my students' ability to transfer knowledge from day to day, to keep track of their own learning and progress, and to their level of self-efficacy. They have become more self-directed and engaged learners. By teaching students a healthy habit of being aware of and examining their own learning processes, students can lead their own way.

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