# 3. Getting Higher-Level Responses to Reading Passages in Classrooms

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, University of Minnesota/Twin Cities professors Debra Peterson and Barbara Taylor describe how elementary teachers can improve on this kind of teacher-directed text discussion that uses mostly lower-level questions:

Teacher: Before you turn the page, what are the two things you should listen for?

Student: Things that are fantasy.

Teacher: So we are looking at fantasy and what else? What’s the opposite of fantasy?

Student: Real.

Teacher. Turn back to page 312. What were the details you noticed on that page that were fantasy?

Student: Mice don’t wear hats.

Teacher: What else?

Student: Summer.

Teacher: Summer is real. What else?

Student: Mouses don’t cook barbecues.

Teacher: What is the plural of mouse? Mice.

The same teachers began to ask for higher-level talk and writing in their classrooms. “Higher-order questioning requires students to think at a deeper level and to elaborate on their oral and written responses to literature,” say Peterson and Taylor.

Here are some examples of higher-order questions or prompts on common curriculum themes:

* Persistence: Describe a time when you were persistent, when you tried to do something that was hard for you but you kept trying until you could do it.
* Friendship: How do you know that someone is your friend? What does he or she do or say? Can you be friends with people who are different from you? Why or why not?
* Character interpretation: How did the character change from the beginning of the story? What do you think led to this change? Please cite specific examples from the text to support your ideas.
* Why do you think the character made the decision she did in this situation? What in the text makes you think that? What would you have done in the same situation? Why?
* Connections to students’ lives: In our story, we see the main character struggle to fit in and make friends. Think of a time in your life when you struggled to make new friends. What did you do? How did you feel? How was your experience the same or different from our story?
* The main character is very sad because his grandfather died. Think of a time you experienced a loss. Describe what happened and how you coped with your loss. How does this help you relate to other people who are grieving?
* Describe a time in your life when someone told you that you couldn’t do something you really wanted to do. How did you respond? Did you keep working to follow your dream or did you change your goals? Why?

At first, this is difficult for many students. To get the ball rolling, Peterson and Taylor suggest that teachers pose good questions to students about a text they are reading, model a response, have students write briefly, get small groups of students discussing the questions, monitor the conversations and ask probing questions (“Please tell me more about that”, “What happened then?”), and then have students share their ideas with the whole class.

How did teachers change from lower-order questions fired at individual students to student-to-student discussions of higher-order concepts? Here’s what Peterson and Taylor found:

• Teachers worked in grade-level team meetings to compare student assessment results and share higher-order questions they were writing – or their students wrote.

• Teachers met in cross-grade, teacher-led study groups to read research, share videos of their students’ discussions, reflect on observation data, and discuss student work. From these meetings came a gradual process of classroom change.

• Teachers worked with literacy coaches in their buildings to apply insights from teacher meetings to their classrooms.

“We have found that engaging students in high-level talk and writing about texts takes time,” say Peterson and Taylor, “but it’s worth it!” Students in the classrooms of the teachers they studied consistently grew more in reading achievement than students in conventionally taught classrooms. “I love to see my students’ faces light up when they read and talk about books!” said one teacher. “Increased reading scores and enthusiastic readers,” conclude Peterson and Taylor, “what teacher doesn’t want to make that happen in her classroom?”

“Using Higher Order Questioning to Accelerate Students’ Growth in Reading” by Debra Peterson and Barbara Taylor in *The Reading Teacher*, February 2012 (Vol. 65, #5, p. 295-304),

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