Active Reading – Having a Conversation with the Author

By Marsha Familaro Enright with help from Matt Copeland, *Socratic Circles*

For the most effective reading and learning, the reader must be an active participant, as if he or she is in a conversation with the author. This involves noticing when you do or don’t understand something, whether it be a word, phrase, assumption, theory, or conclusion, and formulating a question that embodies your understanding or lack thereof.

Annotating the text while you’re reading, noting issues as you read, is a good way to begin active reading and to keep a record of your thoughts about the reading, including doing some of the following:

* Circling any vocabulary words with which you are unfamiliar or would have difficulty explaining to others.
* Underlining key phrases.
* Keeping track of the story or idea as it unfolds.
* Noting word patterns and repetitions or anything that strikes you as confusing or important.
* Writing down questions in the margins, as many as you think of, without worrying about their quality.

Some questions to ask yourself as you read the text:

* Do I understand what this word/sentence means?
* If not, what part of it breaks down for me? Be specific, try to identify which words or ideas don’t make sense.
* Do I follow the logic of the author’s argument, how one statement is connected to another and does (or doesn’t) provide ideas or evidence for the next idea/set of ideas?
* If the work is fiction, does the story make sense? If not, why not?
* What do I think of this idea or argument?
* Does it ring true with my own experience? For example, with my own upbringing, with my family life, with movies I’ve seen, with people I know, with events I’ve studied.
* Why or why not? What specific experiences or facts support or oppose this idea?
* How does this idea relate to other ideas I know?
* What do I think of the author’s style?
  + Is it clear and easy to follow?
  + Is it dry and boring?
  + Is it lively and colorful?
  + How does the author’s style affect my ability to understand the text?