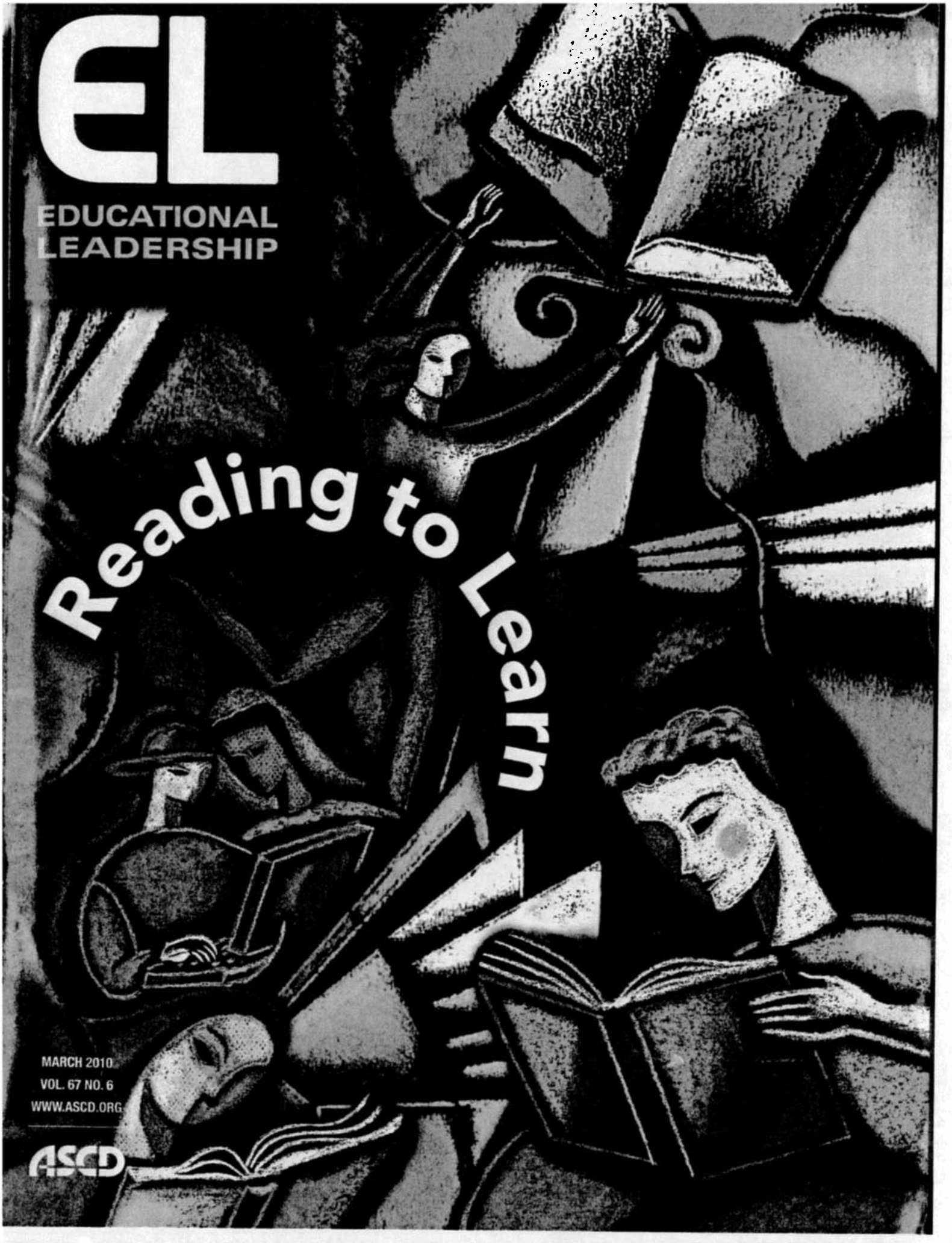
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The Case for Slow Reading

Teachers can enhance students' pleasure and success in reading by showing them how to slow down and savor what they read.

Thomas Newkirk

"Speed her up, 401!"

—*The president of Electro Steel in Charlie Chaplin's* Modern Times

Open any newspaper and you are likely to find a story of some school whose students have read a million, two million—some big number of pages. As a payoff, the teachers wear pajamas for a day, or the principal shaves his head or agrees to eat worms, a reward to the delighted students. Then Pizza Hut or some other franchise that sponsored the event hands out coupons for nonnutritious food to the voracious readers.

reading is always "on the clock." To be quick is to be smart; to be slow is to be stupid.

As a confessed slow reader, I would like to make a case for slowness. By slowness, I don't mean the painful, laborious decoding some students must do or the plodding march through some assigned novels that may take weeks. Any pleasure or success in reading requires fluency and the ability to read with some pace.

But there is real pleasure in downshifting, in slowing down. We can gain some pleasures and meanings no other way. I think of the high-speed trains in Europe that I always wanted to ride, ones that hurtle

through the French landscape at more than 200 miles per hour—that is, until I learned that at these high speeds, even the distant scenery becomes a blur. The retina simply can't take in a clear picture at that rate of movement.

The same thing can happen in reading. I'd like to explore what we miss when we define *good* reading as *fast* reading and to argue for what Ellin Keene has called "dwelling" in the texts we read.

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Author and media theorist Neil Postman provides a foundation for this argument in his classic book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979). Schools, Postman argues, should act on a thermostatic principle; a thermostat acts to cool when a room is too hot and heat when a room is too cool. According to Postman, schools should act to check—and not to imitate—some tendencies in the wider information environment. "The major role of education in the years immediately ahead," he writes, "is to help conserve that which is necessary to a humane survival and threatened by a furious and exhausting culture" (p. 25).

Schools need to take a stand for an alternative to an increasingly hectic digital environment where so many of us read and write in severely abbreviated messages and through clicks of the mouse. Postman frames this imperative as a moral one. But, like the slow food movement, we can make a case on the basis of pleasure. The term *taste* applies to both literacy and eating. And to taste, we have to slow down.

Silencing Reading

First, some background on how we got here. The greatest debate on reading instruction occurred early in the 20th century. The "reader" of McGuffey's famous textbooks was an *oral* reader. Comprehension was part of the picture, but to be an ideal reader, the student had to be able to perform orally. If a teacher addressed the reading rate at all, it was to caution the student about reading too fast. But this approach became increasingly viewed as antiquated, inefficient, and mismatched to the ways people read outside school.

In a classic study of the psychology of reading, Edmund Huey (1921) claimed that oral reading had a ceiling of about four words per second, whereas silent readers could process texts at two or three times that rate—with no diminishment of comprehension. It was time, he argued, for reading to go silent. Lip readers and subvocalizers (like me) were viewed as too stubbornly tied to the sound of words, too limited by the inefficient mechanisms of breath and speech. Huey did claim that silent readers retained a form of inner speech with traces of sound awareness, but at the higher and more efficient speed of reading, readers only sampled sounds—the train was moving too fast.

So reading went silent.

This is the world of reading that we have inherited—one suited to the faster pace of 21st-century life, one better matched to the new abundance of books and magazines. (Who wants to rush through reading if only a few

books are available?) Yet our attraction to sounds, to the rhythms of speech, and to a human voice in the text is primal. We attend readings, listen to books on tape, or feel the presence of a narrator in fiction—all of which return us to the "inefficient" rate of regular speech. Authors like Richard Ford painstakingly read their nearly finished novels aloud; writers continually attest to the importance of finding the right "voice" for their work. Some of us begin our classes by reading a poem aloud, and we ask our students to read their work aloud in workshops. In church, we may listen to and meditate on a single verse from the Bible, one we have heard many times before. And we are alienated by authorless, bureaucratic

letters—like the ones I get from the IRS informing me of my annual arithmetic mistakes.

Slowing Down

So I would like to propose some strategies for slowing down and reclaiming the acoustical properties of written language—for savoring it, for enjoying the infinite ways a sentence can unfold—and for returning to passages that sustain and inspire us. Many of these strategies are literally as old as the hills.

Memorizing

Memorization is often called "knowing by heart," and for good reason. Memorizing enables us to possess a text in a special way. My father tells the story of waiting with my uncle outside a probate office in Covington, Kentucky, after the death of their mother. No one seemed in any hurry to assist them, and Uncle Charles, never known as a great student, sighed, "The law's delay, the insolence of office." At that moment, he called to mind a phrase from one of Hamlet's soliloquies that he had memorized 50 years earlier. We all should *own* some texts in that way.

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is a regular activity in elementary classrooms, but it dies too soon. Well-chosen and well-read texts are one of the best advertisements for literacy. By reading aloud, teachers can create a bridge to texts that students might read; they can help reluctant readers imagine a human voice animating the words on the page. Besides, some passages seem to beg to be read aloud.

One of my favorites comes from Harry Crews's essay, "The Car," where he describes the love of his young life:

> After the Buick, I owned a 1953 Mercury with three-inch lowering blocks, fender skirts, twin aerials, and custom upholstering made of rolled Naugahyde. Staring into the bathroom mirror for long periods of time, I practiced expressions to drive it with. It was that kind of car. (1998, p. 367)

When I read this aloud, I just love the sound of "rolled Naugahyde."

Attending to Beginnings

Writers often struggle with their beginnings because they are making so many commitments; they are establishing a voice, narrator, and point of view that are right for what will follow. These openings often suggest a conflict. They raise a question, pose a problem, create an "itch to be scratched."

Readers need to be just as deliberate and not rush through these carefully constructed beginnings. As teachers, we can model this slowness. Take the memoir of the well-known children's writer Jack Gantos. In his opening paragraph of *Hole in My Life* (2002), he refers to the book's cover, with its repetition of a mug shot of a bearded, mustachioed young man with an ID number stamped across the photo:

> The prisoner in the photograph is me. The ID number is mine. The photo was taken in 1972 at the medium-security Federal Correctional Institution in Ashland, Kentucky. I was twenty-one years old and had been locked up for a year already—the bleakest year of my life—and I had more time ahead of me. (p. 3)

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Clearly, he had committed a serious crime to be locked up in a medium-security prison for more than a year at such a young age. How could a 20-year-old dig such a deep hole for himself? What kind of crime put him there? How did he survive this "bleakest" year of his life? What connection does this experience have to his later success as a chil-

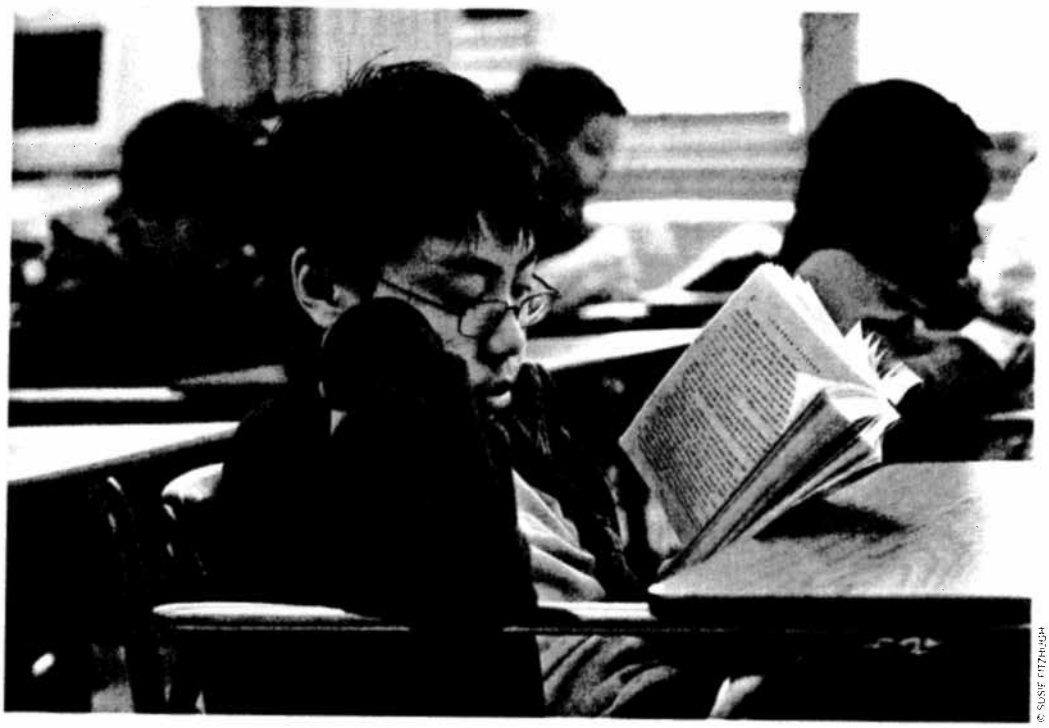
dren's writer? There is also a slowness to this opening, as though he is making his admission, piece by piece. Gantos has given us a road map for the rest of the book—if we pay attention.

Rethinking Time Limits on Reading Tests

We currently give students with disabilities additional time to complete standardized tests; we should extend this opportunity to all students. Tests place too high a premium on speed, and limits are often set for administrative convenience rather than because of a reasoned belief in what makes good readers.

Even as a strong reader, I felt pressed in the reading passages section of standardized tests to exceed my normal reading rate. I would resort to survival strategies I never used voluntarily—skimming, sampling, and beginning with the questions.

For reluctant or slow readers, the testing situation can be humiliating, and they quickly learn that they are set up for failure. They often just fill in (or make designs with) the bubbles on the test. But in the real world, we frequently compensate for our lack of speedy comprehension by persevering and spending more time on a task. These patient, slower workers are often extraordinarily valuable. In the folktale, the turtle always wins.



Annotating a Page

In this activity, students probe the craft of a favorite writer. They pick a page they really like, photocopy it, and tape the photocopy to a larger piece of paper so they have wide margins in which they can make notations. Their job is to give the page a close reading and mark word choices, sentence patterns, images, dialogue—anything they find effective

For example, this sentence appears on the opening page of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996): "Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood" (p. 11). We can hear the way McCourt repeats the words *worse*, *miserable*, and *Irish*, creating an ascending scale of misery. It's a great sentence that deserves attention.

A variation of this activity is a quote-and-comment assignment in which students copy out passages by hand that they find particularly meaningful and then comment on why they chose those passages. Copying a passage slows us down and creates an intimacy with the writer's style—a feel for word choice and for how sentences are formed. At the end of a unit in which my students have done a great deal of reading, we celebrate by selecting passages we want to hold on to and reading them aloud to the class. It always interests me to see which passages the students select.

Reading Poetry

Even in this age of efficiency and consumption, it is unlikely that anyone will reward students for reading a million poems. Poems can't be checked off that way. They demand a slower pace and usually several readings—and they are usually at their best when read aloud.

My colleague Tom Romano begins every one of his classes by reading a poem aloud. He invites his students to comment on images or lines that strike them, although without engaging in the overanalysis that killed poetry for many of us. More than any other genre, poetry calls on us to see the world differently, to break out of conventional perception: Images can "arrest" us—they can, as

Webster's online dictionary says, "cause [us] to stop."

Take the ending of Emily Dickinson's famous poem, "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," where she describes the moment of panic when she sees a snake:

> But never met this Fellow
> Attended, or alone
> Without a tighter breathing
> And Zero at the Bone—

We might comfortably have expected "Numbness at the Bone." But *zero* arrests us and forces us to feel something new, the momentary weakness or helplessness we may experience when seeing a snake. We can't help but pause.

Savoring Passages

Children know something that adults often forget—the deep pleasure of repetition, of rereading, or of having parents reread, until the words seem to be part of them ("And Max said, 'BE STILL!' and tamed them with the magic trick..." [Sendak, 1963]). There are passages that continue to move me, like the ending to James Joyce's short story "The Dead" (1916/1967), which I read each winter. The main character, Gabriel, confronts his own emotional failings:

> Yes, the newspapers were right, snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. (p. 651)

I am always touched by the dark beauty of this ending, by the deep sadness of Gabriel as he contemplates the snow, the early death of his wife's first love, and the remains of his life.

We never really "comprehend" these anchoring passages—we're never done with them; we never consume them. Like sacred texts, they are inexhaustible, continuing to move us, support us, and even surprise us (until I wrote out the passage, I had missed the word *mutinous*).

Schools need to take a stand for an alternative to an increasingly hectic digital environment where so many of us read and write in abbreviated messages.

This is, after all, the way people have read for centuries—and it is a way that my father read near the end of his life. He was never a religious man in the churchgoing sense, but in his last years he returned every day to Psalm 46 in the King James Bible, which begins:

> God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.

It was the passage my brother read and reread to him as he lay dying, as his earth was being "removed." By this time, his Bible was so worn that it had to be held together by rubber bands. As the minister said at his memorial service, "Here is a book that has seen some use."

Not all our reading, nor all our students' reading, can or should have this depth. We read for various purposes. But some of our reading should have such depth, inefficient as that might be. EL

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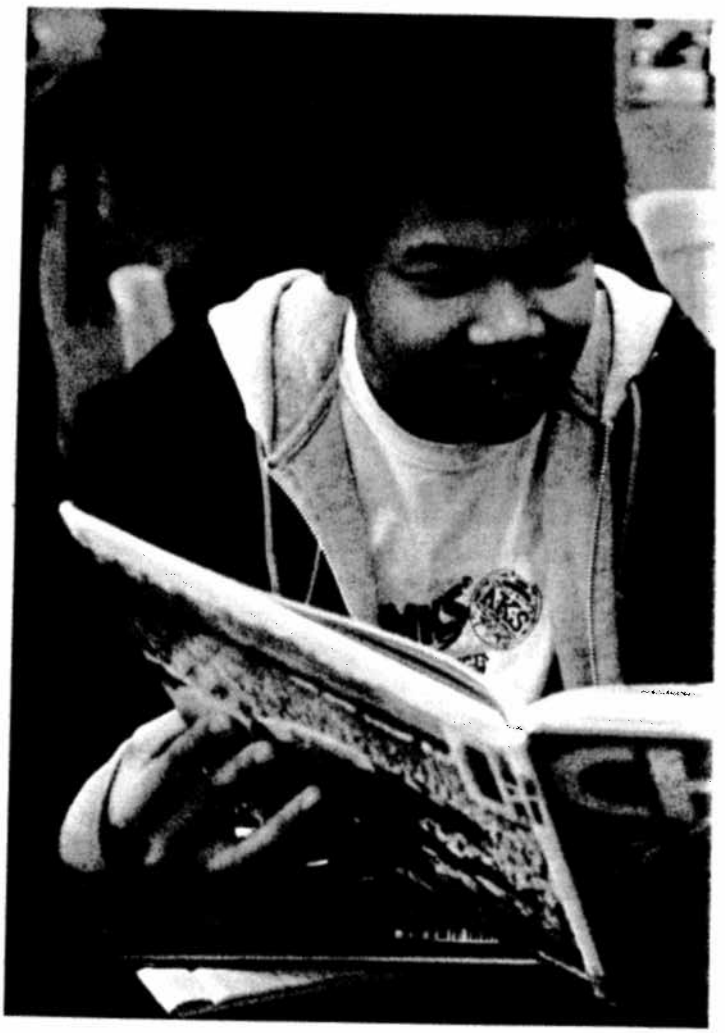
EL *online*

For another educator's take on schools' current focus on fluency, read the online-only article "Put the Brakes on NASCAR Reading" by Barclay Marcell at www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/mar10/vol67/num06/Put_the_Brakes_on_NASCAR_Reading.aspx.

Texts That

To create lifelong readers, we need to give students reading materials that leave them wanting to know more.

Gay Ivey



I hunkered down at Barnes and Noble one morning with my favorite Starbucks comfort drink, I savored a weekly ritual—an extended do-not-disturb period with the Sunday *New York Times*. As usual, I flipped to the op-ed pages to find columnist Maureen Dowd's latest contribution.

From the moment I read her opening line—"Women are getting unhappier, I told my friend Carl"—I knew this was going to be a good one. Dowd lamented that

> When women stepped into male-dominated realms, they put more demands—and stress—on themselves. If they once judged themselves on looks, kids, hubbies, gardens, and dinner parties, now they judge themselves on looks, kids, hubbies, gardens, dinner parties—and grad school, work, office deadlines, and meshing a two-career marriage. (2009, p. WK9)

I could relate, and I immediately thought of several female friends and colleagues who are even more compelling examples of this phenomenon. I sent several of them an electronic link to the column, knowing that a lively e-mail conversation would ensue over the next day or so. I also read some of the hundreds of reactions from other readers of the column that were posted on the *New York Times* Web site (www.NYTimes.com), some ardently agreeing with Dowd and others expressing their outrage.

Less than a month later, the release of *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything* by Maria Shriver (Simon and Schuster, 2009) generated a flurry of media attention centering on the plight of working women. I was drawn to morning news show interviews, blogs, and more editorials that extended my thinking about Dowd's ideas and prompted me to consider related issues, such as equal pay for equal work, the changing expectations placed on men, and the social and political implications of women serving in powerful governmental and executive roles. I will likely keep pondering these issues as I seek out or stumble across texts, both print and digital, that give me new ways to think and talk about them.

Of course, not everything I read for information has such an expansive societal reach. I've been known to conduct extensive research on different brands of shoes that are stylish and yet comfortable enough to help me stay on my feet throughout a six-hour professional development workshop.

Matter

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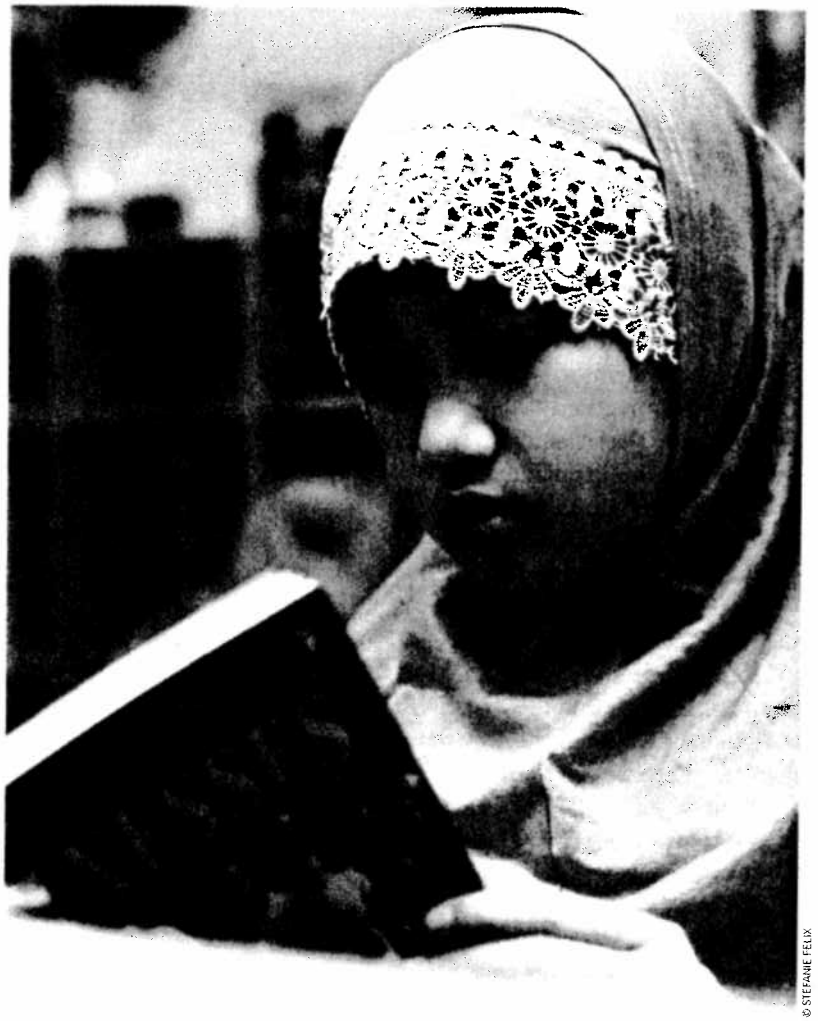

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Or even more personal and not so frivolous, I read and compared whatever I could find on endometrial cancer when my mother was diagnosed with it some years ago.

But as I reflect on the range of informational reading that informs the personal, professional, and civic dimensions of my life, I can't help thinking how much it differs from the way most elementary and secondary school classrooms practice reading and writing to learn. As a university professor, I also think about the contrast between the literacy experiences students have in kindergarten through grade 12 and those

Instead of focusing on how to get students to *remember* what they read, our best bet is simply to provide texts that are more *memorable*.

they encounter in college, where they are often expected to access, evaluate, and critically analyze both print and nonprint texts and to create innovative texts that incorporate evolving understandings (Yancey, 2009). Even students who enter the workplace right after high school need advanced literacy skills, including reading critically across various sources of information, using technology to communicate, addressing a variety of audiences, and reading and writing collaboratively (Beaufort, 2009).

In all of these situations, text matters—and it matters a lot. In this strategies-crazed era in literacy policy and practice, we may be missing a more fundamental challenge—identifying and making available the texts that inspire students to want to learn new information.

The matter of *what* students read is a make-or-break dimension of literacy-based learning. A few years ago, Richard Allington (2002) offered a forthright and compelling argument that "You can't learn much from books you can't read" (p. 16). I second that notion, but I would further argue that (a) you can't learn much from books that don't matter to you, and (b) you can't learn much from just one book.

You can't learn much from books that don't matter to you, and you can't learn much from just one book.

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From the Texts We Have . . .

For generations, students have struggled with, resisted, or faked textbook reading. If you asked most adults how they know some bit of common knowledge central to textbooks—for instance, the names and functions of the three branches of the U.S. government—I doubt that the most popular response would be, "Back in school, my government teacher assigned that chapter in the textbook, and I read it, and from that point on I knew." Most people acquire this kind of knowledge over time through multiple encounters and uses of it in a variety of modes and contexts, not from reading about it in one sitting.

Of course, we *can* learn factual information from reading about it. But that's likely to occur only when we have real reasons to read and authentic questions to answer (Guthrie, 1996). Learning is not likely to occur as a result of assigned reading that we do only to avoid the consequences of not reading, such as getting a bad grade.

Yet most schools have not relented in the purchase and use of traditional textbooks. And the practice of teaching students strategies for content-area reading, popular in professional development texts and inservice workshops, may have exacerbated the problem.

The thinking behind many content-area reading strategies is that if we provide teacher scaffolding, we can get students through difficult, unappealing texts. There are some fundamental problems with this thinking. First, it assumes that the right question, graphic organizer, or writing prompt will help a student become motivated and able to read an otherwise unreadable text. Second, it ignores differences among readers by assuming that every student in a class needs the same scaffolding strategy to access a particular text.

There is no doubt that guiding students through reading keeps them more on task, but I have heard few scenarios in which scaffolded reading experiences motivate students to continue learning about that topic on their own. Perhaps more important, student compliance can actually veil problems that might exist in our instruction and our curriculum materials.

. . . To Texts That Matter

Conventional textbooks across the content areas often mask what is most interesting and relevant about the topics we are required to teach. The right texts, though, can help students care about content.

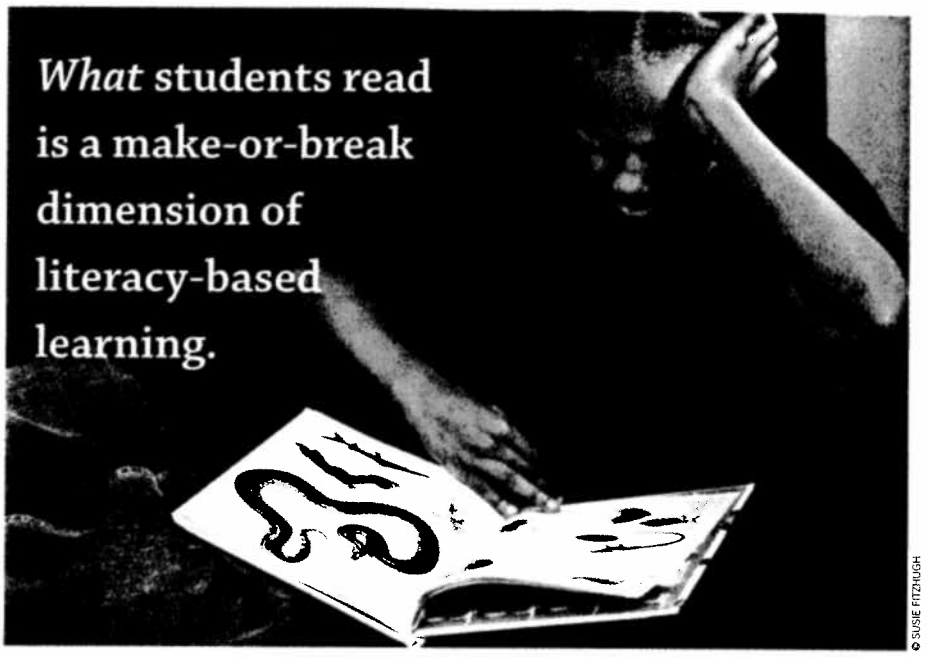
Some texts may hook students by presenting content that is unusual or

even bizarre. For instance, *Guinea Pig Scientists: Bold Self-Experimenters in Science and Medicine* (Henry Holt and Company, 2005) includes a memorable chronicle of what one scientist ate, excreted, and then studied to discover how the process of digestion works. *Secrets of a Civil War Submarine: Solving the Mysteries of the H. L. Hunley* (Carolrhoda Books, 2005) lures readers into a lesson about forensics, among other things, as they read about human remains that were found in a vessel more than a century after it sank.

Other texts relate content to students' own lives. For instance, *Sisters and Brothers: Sibling Relationships in the Animal World* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008) begins with "Playing together, working together, arguing, fighting—sometimes animal brothers and sisters act a lot like human siblings" (Jenkins & Page, 2008, p. 1). If you continue reading, you will learn that some animal family relationships seem almost human (such as older female elephants "babysitting" young siblings) whereas other interactions are different (such as the fact that, in both wild turkey families and cheetah families, sisters go off to start their own families whereas brothers band together for life).

Next, consider the opening lines of *Henry's Freedom Box* by Ellen Levine (Scholastic, 2007): "Henry Brown wasn't sure how old he was. Henry was a slave. And slaves weren't allowed to know their birthdays" (p. 1). The initial hook is provocative because most young readers would find this scenario outlandish and vastly different from their own life. If students continue reading this picture book, they learn the true story of a man who escaped slavery by shipping himself in a wooden crate. Good texts can bridge the gap between what students already know and the academic content they encounter in the classroom.

Contrast these texts with the more typical texts found in classrooms, such as a textbook chapter that gives a general historical summary of how the cotton gin and the steamboat changed early America. There is likely something fascinating about that point in U.S. history, but the texts students usually read on this topic do a good job of hiding it.



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Even in the absence of published texts that students can relate to, teachers can enable students to use literacy to make connections. Hansen (2009) described a U.S. history teacher's thoughtful decision to use writing combined with students' personal stories to help them understand Franklin Delano Roosevelt's declaration that December 7, 1941, would be "a day that will live in infamy." The teacher asked students to write about a day from their own lives that left an "indelible imprint" on them (p. 601). The students' personal essays became part of the classroom currency and helped them gain insight into the thoughts and feelings of people in the United States at the beginning of World War II.

The texts that matter to students—the texts that they read willingly and enthusiastically—can rarely be characterized as "just the facts." Sometimes, these texts get at big ideas, and sometimes they highlight the intriguing contexts in which curriculum standards are embedded. In any case, instead of focusing on how to get students to *remember* what they read, our best bet is to provide texts that are more *memorable*.

From Reading One Text . . .

A single-text curriculum bolstered by content-area literacy strategies not only distracts us from the need to engage students in their reading, but also may prevent students from engaging with big concepts. Reading about a subject or concept briefly and then moving on suggests there is not much to know about that topic and that thinking about it critically is unimportant. Even more troublesome, most conventional subject-area reading addresses generally agreed-upon information, leaving little for students to figure out for themselves or to contemplate with others.

Our testing practices perpetuate the problem. Instruction in informational reading is often influenced by what state

accountability tests measure—for instance, whether students can find the main idea in a particular text, or even more specific and inconsequential, whether they can make an inference using just a couple of lines of text. For the long term, what we really want students to be able to do is read across texts critically and analytically. We have become overly concerned with whether students can comprehend a particular text and not concerned enough about whether students can use multiple texts to grapple with big ideas.

Even the wording of standards and their supporting materials perpetuate a narrow perspective on reading and writing to learn. For instance, in the curriculum framework for U.S. history linked to the Virginia Standards of Learning (Virginia Department of Education, 2008), most of the essential questions to guide instruction are designed to elicit a common and finite response: "What were the reasons for the United States becoming involved in World War I?" (p. 15); "How did the African American struggle for equality become a mass movement?" (p. 28). Once students have learned the answers to these questions, they have little reason to continue reading unless we provide them with texts that make them want to know more.

. . . To Reading Endlessly

What leaves us wanting to read more are unanswered questions, issues that have a degree of ambiguity, and ideas that evoke multiple interpretations or possibilities. Reading solely to remember information in order to meet curriculum standards does not require problem solving, new understandings, or new ways of thinking. Reading and thinking end at the conclusion of the text.

Alternatively, students who read across texts and genres will read more and read more deeply. Maria Nichols (2009) describes a process to help elementary students build understandings through *text sets*—collections of sources of information in different genres that explore a shared topic or issue. In text sets preconstructed by the teacher or created by students themselves, the students engage in ongoing reading, writing, and conversation on curriculum topics—and they also gain insights into the value of multiple sources of information and the purposes and uses of various genres.

When it comes to subject-area reading materials, we are stuck in a rut.

Nichols describes one unit in which students read a collection of texts about George Washington as part of their study of American heroes. The text set included a simple biography (*George Washington*, Capstone Press, 1999); a more in-depth comic-book-style biography (*George Washington: First President*, Scholastic, 2004); the Mount Vernon Web site (www.mountvernon.org), which offered students a look at Washington's impressive home but also the revelation of slave quarters; a book examining Washington's service in the Revolutionary War that contained many primary sources (*When Washington Crossed the Delaware: A Wintertime Story for Young Patriots*, Simon and Schuster, 2004); and the fictionalized story *George Washington's Teeth* (Square Fish, 2007). Each of these texts added to the students' understanding of the question, What is a hero?

Likewise, older students can grapple with tough issues by reading critically to consider all angles of a topic. For instance, students may read *A Child Called It* (Health Communications, 1995); *Three Little Words* (Atheneum, 2008); and *Lesson from a Dead Girl* (Candlewick, 2007) to obtain three glimpses into physical child abuse. Through their varying perspectives, these books can help students understand the complex causes, responses, culpability, and implications associated with abuse.

To ensure that students will adopt the habit of reading to figure out the present and future, rather than just to revisit the past, we must give them opportunities to read timely texts. Digital texts of all sorts are useful because they often deliver the most recent information and contain unanswered questions.

For instance, students studying the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights might review recent online news articles about citizens' rights being decided in a court of law. A quick Google search yields a host of texts describing teens involved in First Amendment cases, such as the right to carry a purse with a Confederate flag patch attached to it in school (Hudson, 2009) and the right to post signs with religious messages on a high school football field (Brown, 2009).

But keeping up with the onslaught of information currently available is not the only reason to embrace new kinds of media in K–12 classrooms. Moje (2008) argues that because experts within the disciplines (for example, historians and scientists) already use sophisticated new literacy practices to develop understanding within their fields, schools need to mirror those efforts across the content areas. Reproducing old ideas from old texts can no longer be the focus of literacy-based learning.

Beginning the Shift

We hear a lot of lip service paid to equipping students with "21st century literacy skills." But when it comes to subject-area reading materials, we are stuck in a rut. In our efforts to improve literacy-based learning, our first order of business ought to be a serious examination of the reading materials from which we expect students to learn.

If our goal is to get students to read voluntarily and not just by coercion, then we must change how we select and prioritize materials. If we expect students to read beyond the curriculum, beyond the school day, and beyond 12th grade, then we need to show them the texts and purposes that make reading worthwhile and that they can actually find outside school. If we want students to learn how literacy can help them live well, think better, and participate more effectively in society, then we must give them access to texts that open their eyes to new possibilities. EL

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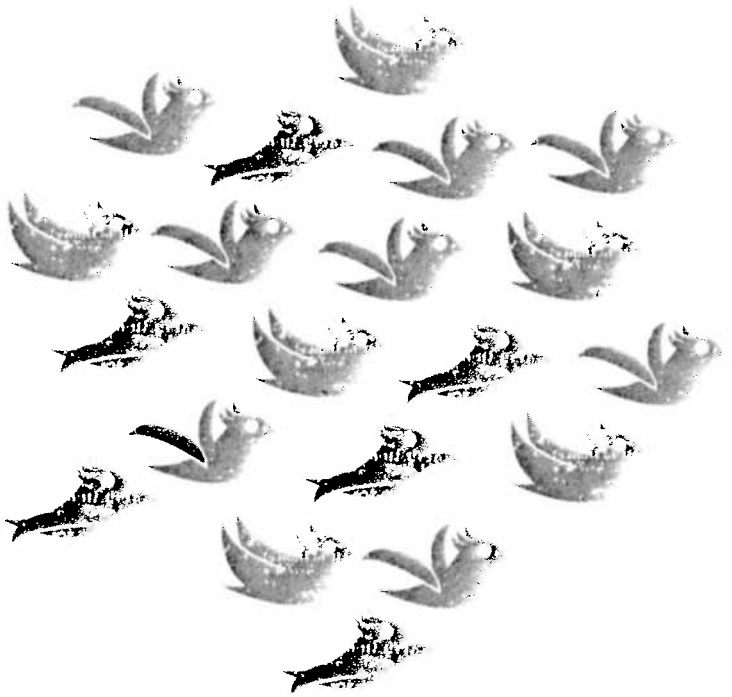


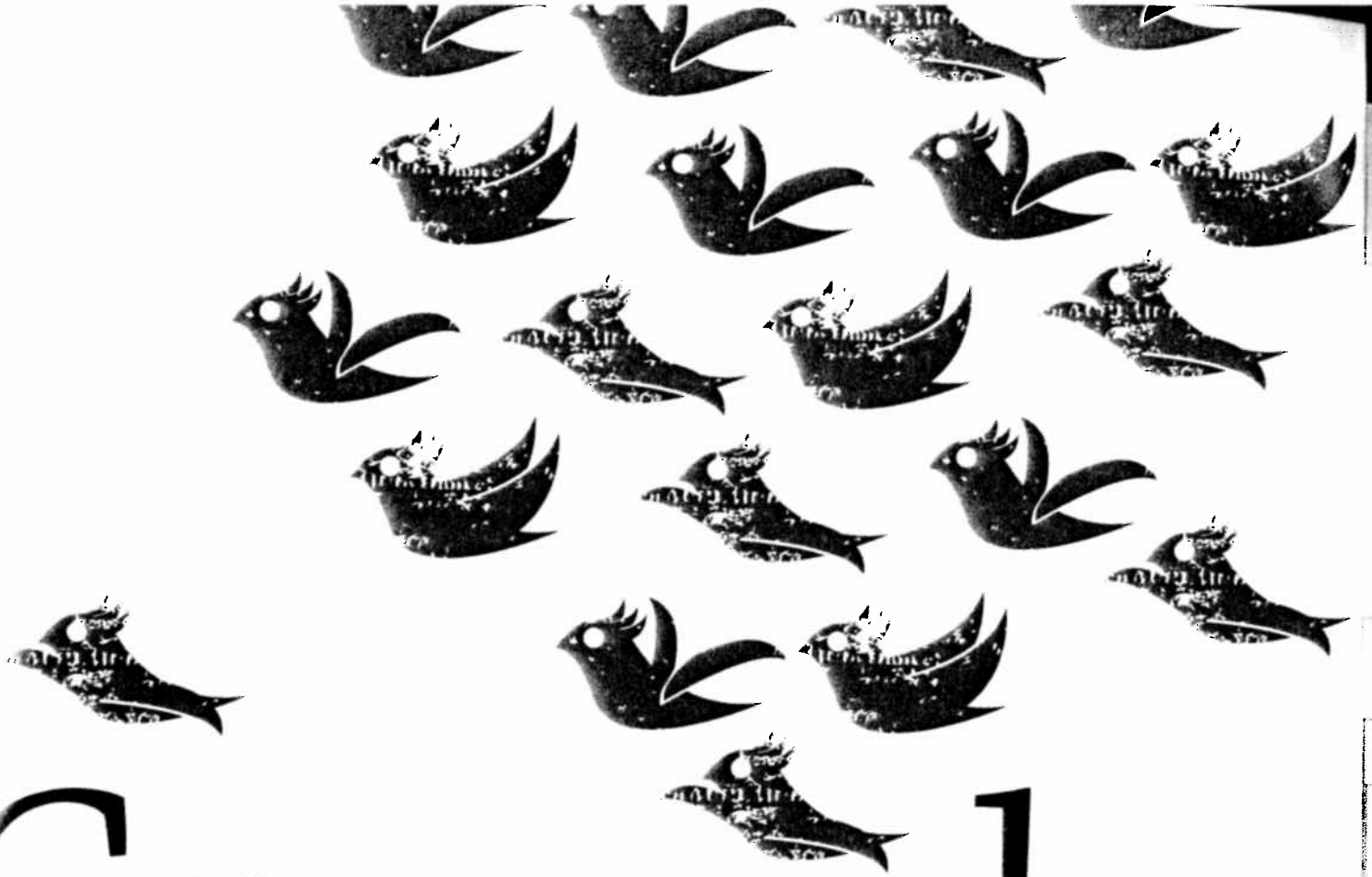
I Got

A teacher's experience with being grouped forces her to reexamine her beliefs about leveling learners.

Cris Tovani

During a reading workshop I gave several summers ago, a high school principal raised his hand and asked, "Why, after eight years of literacy interventions, are some 9th graders still entering my building as struggling readers?" Every day as I work to "catch up" those strugglers, I wonder the same thing. One experience last fall forced me to consider how educators' beliefs about these learners might be one of the problems.

It all started last June. Thanks to cell phones and satellite technology, I watched with the rest of the world as chaos erupted in the streets of Tehran as the Iranian people protested the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. A week later, when news surfaced about the death of Michael Jackson, I learned that people on Twitter were "tweeting" about it several hours before the major news networks got wind of it. At that moment, I realized that if I didn't start becoming more proficient with technology, I was going to be an ignorant, lonely person.



Grouped

Branded!

I decided that, by the end of the coming school year, I would be, if not technologically proficient, at least comfortable using basic applications. I went out and bought a new phone and the latest Macintosh computer. I signed up for Twitter and got on Facebook. I joined Jim Burke's English Companion Ning and started electronically following people to figure out how this new literacy worked.

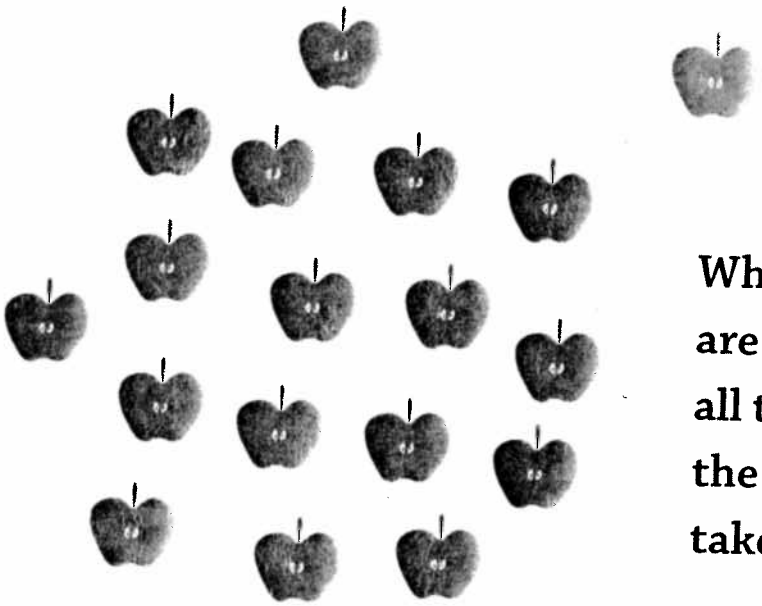
It was rough at first, and my learning curve was steep. I had my first major breakthrough when I figured out how to answer my phone without taking a picture of my ear. My 18-year-old daughter temporarily served as my patient teacher, but knowing she would soon be leaving for college forced me to look for other experts.

Being grouped gave me a taste of what struggling readers must continually face.

As the school year approached, I actually welcomed the annual technology training that I used to dread. Each fall, we had to learn new software and update our skills in such areas as taking attendance and using the new grading system. Those in the English department could choose one of two different times to attend training sessions. I cleared my calendar so that I could attend both.

I decided that during the first class, I would try to follow the furious clicks of the presenter, knowing full well that I would be somewhat lost. I'd stay for the second presentation, and after another go, perhaps I would know what I was doing.

My plans were quickly dashed when the groups were announced. We had been strategically placed into specific time slots and were asked to stay with our assigned group. As the names were read, it became embarrassingly clear that we had been grouped by our perceived levels of confidence around technology.



When strugglers are grouped together, all the experts except the teacher are taken from the mix.

The majority of teachers in the first session were younger than I, and they were fairly comfortable learning new software. When the names of my group were read, other people started to joke around. They laughed and made smart comments about being the techno-dinosaurs. Some in the group chuckled and in good humor joked back. I didn't say a word. I was embarrassed and indignant that no one had recognized the growth I had made over the summer in learning technology.

I was surprised by my reaction. I never used to care when people teased me about technology. But I was worried now. For the first time, I realized that I had to get on the ball. Suddenly I thought of 10th grader Geraun, a student of mine from last year who had complained that he'd lost hope of ever getting better in reading, despite the fact that he'd been in a remedial reading class since 6th grade. Like Geraun and countless other struggling readers, I began to doubt my abilities.

What I Learned from Being Grouped

Being grouped made me realize that I had a lot more in common with my struggling readers than I thought. It gave me a taste of what struggling readers must continually face. Before the sting of this experience wore off, I jotted down these insights.

Insight 1: Beliefs affect effort—and effort affects success.

I started to wonder whether our beliefs about struggling readers had inadvertently given students permission to give up. I know from experience that when people believe in my abilities, I work harder to prove them right. When colleagues ask me for help with reading instruction, I know they trust me to know what I'm doing. This belief encourages me to produce and perform.

Expressing belief in someone's ability is powerful—especially if the person dishing out the belief is in a position of authority. As a result of being grouped, I realized that people I respected didn't have a lot of confidence in my computer abilities. This public declaration almost forced me to give up my goal of becoming proficient with technology. My initial reaction was, why try? Because no one believed in my abilities, there was no pressure to perform. I was off the hook.

Just like this process made me—and everyone else—aware of my technology shortcomings, our focus on standardized testing during the past 10 years has made students aware of their reading shortcomings. Thanks to No Child Left Behind, we have identified struggling readers as early as 1st grade and have shared with them the cold, hard truth about our perception of their abilities. It's no wonder that by high school, they have often given up on themselves. Special reading classes just give some kids a better place to hide.

We have inadvertently given many struggling readers the message that no one believes they can or will read in school. Our low expectations give students an excuse to opt out of improving. Struggling readers, like all struggling learners, need confidence, or they won't take risks. And if they don't take risks, they won't improve. Of course, just saying to struggling readers, "I think you're the best reader in the world!" isn't going to magically make them so. But there is a valuable middle ground. Having reasonable expectations and providing scaffolding with strategy instruction may not be flashy, but it's effective.

Insight 2: Learners need both time and experts to improve.

Not only is it embarrassing for students to be relegated to the low-performing group, but it's also tough on the teacher.

When we group strugglers together, all the experts except the teacher are taken from the mix. So learners become even more dependent on the teacher. The teacher has total control of the group's learning because he or she is the one who holds the information. When there are lots of learners whose needs are great, taking away other possible "teachers" isn't an efficient way to meet needs.

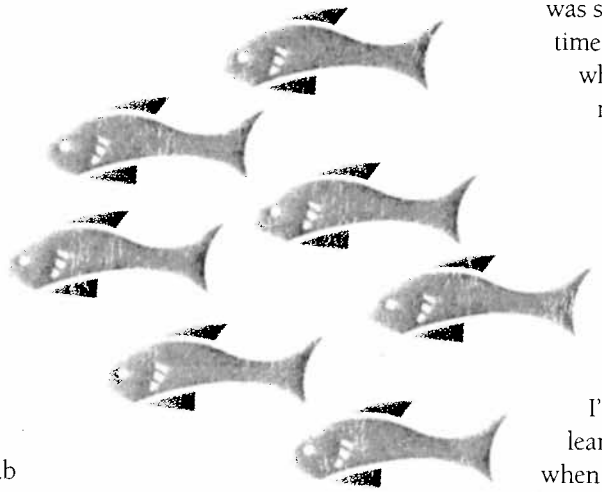
When it was time for me to attend my technology session, I begrudgingly dragged myself down to the computer lab. I knew that none of the people who usually helped me would be in my group. I had to learn the information quickly, and I was stressed because I didn't have the time or confidence to figure it out on my own. Because everyone in my group would need the teacher's help, I knew I couldn't count on much one-on-one help from him.

Luckily, when I arrived, the group before me was still finishing up. So I quickly looked around to see whether I could sit for a few moments by someone who knew more than I did. I rushed to grab the seat next to Scott. He wouldn't stick around long, so I had to work fast. Once Scott left, I was on my own. Ellen, another English teacher, sat on the other side of me. She didn't know much more than I did when it came to computers.

An effective way for me to learn is to find people who are more skilled than I am. These experts serve as models who enable me to "see" what to do. Jean-Claude Killy, the famous French skier who dominated the 1968 Winter Olympics, said, "The best and fastest way to learn a sport is to watch and imitate a champion." I was trying to learn how to set up my grade book—and time was of the essence. With the computer lab full of struggling learners and only one "champion" to help, I knew I was in trouble.

Cordoning struggling students off by themselves simply won't meet their needs. Struggling learners tend to shut down with frustration. They melt into the background until the challenge passes. Sometimes the teacher will take over and do the work for them, but this doesn't help anyone improve.

But what about advanced learners? Some argue that ability grouping is an effective way to meet their needs. Proponents of tracking claim that if such



students aren't together, they will spend all their time helping less able learners. This can pose a problem. However, advanced learners are more confident than strugglers. They tend to be more impatient when their needs aren't met, and this impatience can force them to take a more active role in their learning. Instead of saying, "I don't get it," they typically isolate their confusion by asking specific questions that lead to more targeted feedback.

Insight 3: Past performance is just that . . . past performance.

It's stunning how much stock we put into standardized tests scores. Noted researcher Gerald Bracey[1] wrote,

> In the last 50 years, the United States has descended from viewing tests first as a useful tool, then as a necessity, and finally as the sole instrument needed to evaluate teachers, schools, districts, states, and nations. (p. 32)

These test scores are so neatly packaged that we forget to consider the time in between the tests during which students have opportunities to grow and improve. We need to remember that students are continually learning.

I'm a lot better at technology than I was six months ago. However, at the time of the technology training, people who didn't work with me on a regular basis didn't know that. They had only my past performance to go by. They didn't know that over the summer, I had changed my attitude about technology and was practicing new ways to use it. They hadn't seen my successes or the confidence I had gained. I felt good about what I'd learned and was pumped to learn more. It was discouraging that when school started, others judged me by my previous performance.

Giving too much weight to old assessments is dangerous. Each year, I am forced to place incoming 9th graders into reading classes using scores that are 6–12 months old. I have to make judgments about students' abilities on the basis of old performances. To make matters worse, secondary students who struggle often don't try because they have a history of not doing well on those tests. Raul, a student of mine, complains that he is a lot smarter than his test scores show, but because he does badly on the tests, he's always in classes for low performers. He complains that he's bored and that he knows the material, but because his teachers think he's dumb, he doesn't even bother to try.

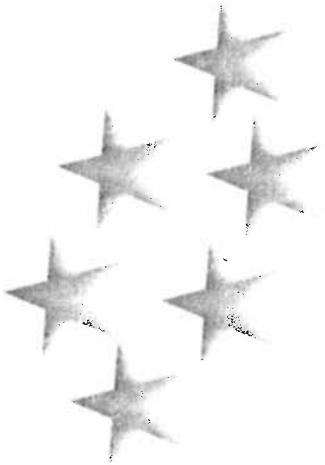
For these reasons, reading teachers in my building work hard to discover the growth students have made since taking the most recent test. At the beginning of the year, they assess students' abilities to find out whether the students are truly struggling readers or just poor test takers. We give our students the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test to get a baseline score on vocabulary and comprehension. We also confer with students and check for fluency, one on one, as they read aloud to us. We have them think aloud as they read so we get an idea of their repertoire of comprehension strategies. In addition, we teach students how to annotate text so we can "see" in the margins what they are thinking.

Each year, we have to see our students with fresh eyes and give them a chance to show new growth. If we are too quick to judge, we risk demoralizing them and putting out the spark that could ignite their learning.

Insight 4: Because reading levels change, we should change how we group.

A low test score doesn't mean that a student reads *everything* below grade level. No one has the same reading level for every kind of text. If I took a reading test using a chemistry textbook, my reading level would be about as good as a 4th grader's. On the other hand, if I were tested using a passage from an anthology of American literature, I would most likely be at the post-secondary school level.

Frequently, high school teachers ask me how to help students who can't read the textbook. When I tell them to "find something else that the students can read," they don't like the answer. The truth is that the best way to improve comprehension is to read. Ironically, the kids who need to be reading the most have the fewest opportunities to do so.



When students experience success each day, they will take the risks they need to take in order to learn.

Teachers worry that if they give students time to read, they will run out of time to teach their content.

Three factors affect readers' ability to understand texts. The first is background knowledge. The more background knowledge students have, the more easily they can understand difficult texts. The second factor has to do with motivation. If readers are highly motivated to comprehend a topic, they have the drive to push themselves through the complexity. Curiosity often motivates me to dig into a text that normally would be above my reading level. The third factor is purpose. If a text is relevant to my life, I am more willing to try to make sense of it. Having a purpose for my reading also helps me determine importance because I have a way to sift and sort information. When any of these three factors are missing, even easy text becomes difficult to read.

Making Grouping Work

Groups are fine—as long as the teacher frequently changes the configuration of the groups. However, reconfiguring groups is daunting for secondary teachers because they just have too many students to manage frequent group changes.

Grouping wouldn't need to play such a huge role in instruction if students could choose from two or three texts instead of having to all read the same one and if they had an opportunity to discuss what they read with others.

In addition, groups work well when the time the readers are in the group is short. The teacher might deliver a bit of explicit instruction and then let readers practice what they have just learned. One problem I often see in schools is that group time lasts way too long; the teacher becomes the gatekeeper, rarely letting students practice on their own. "Groups" can become whole-class instruction of students who score poorly on standardized tests. This type of grouping is really a classroom management strategy that works for teachers—but doesn't work so well for students.

What Matters Most

To this day, I think about the high school principal's question about struggling readers. It's a good question to ask because something isn't working. In the real world when people try to learn something, they are frequently heterogeneously grouped. Rarely do people improve when they are continually grouped with unsuccessful learners.

Luckily, for my technology training, I didn't have to stay in the same group all year. Once back in the real world, I could decide for myself who I chose to learn from. But for a split second, I

almost believed those people who didn't believe in me.

I came across a passage in Samantha Bennett's *That Workshop Book*[2] that eloquently speaks to this issue. Bennett writes,

> These questions [about instruction] can only be answered if teachers know their students deeply—as people and as learners—with layer upon layer of daily interactions combined with careful listening, close study, and heartfelt care. (p. 7)

Students need to know that their teachers believe they can succeed. For this to happen, we must, as Bennett writes, know our students well. More important, students need to have faith in their abilities as learners so they can face their learning challenges head on. When students experience success each day, they will take the risks they need to take in order to learn.

Being grouped refocused my attention on what matters most. I must make sure that my instructional practices match my beliefs about students' abilities. I must make available to students the tools, strategies, and experts that will enhance their learning. With scaffolded instruction, choice that drives engagement, and time to practice, our belief in our students' abilities can become their reality. EL

[1]Bracey, G. W. (2009). Big tests: What ends do they serve? *Educational Leadership*, 66(3), 32–37.

[2]Bennett, S. (2007). *That Workshop Book*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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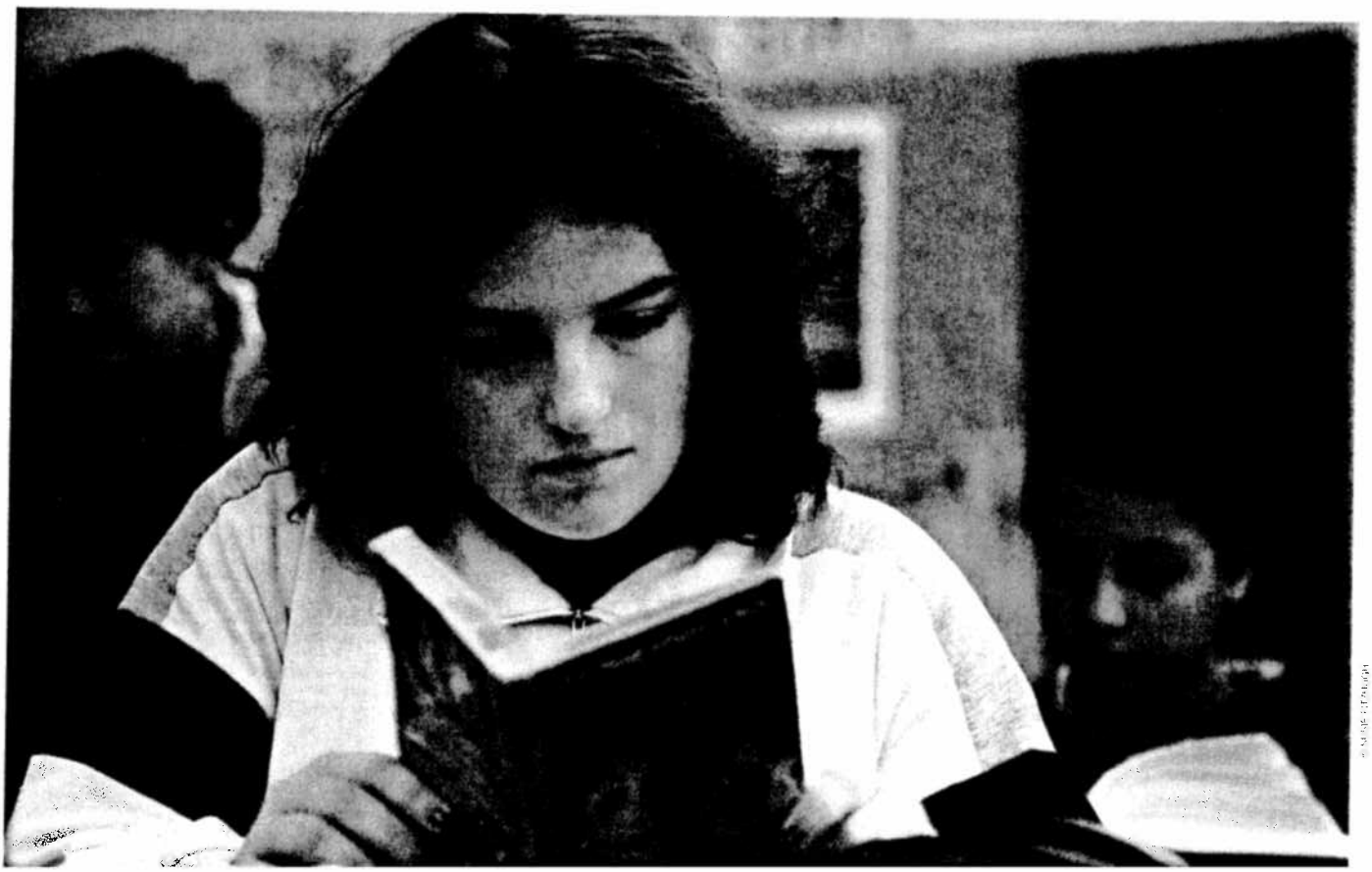
Becoming a Classroom of Readers

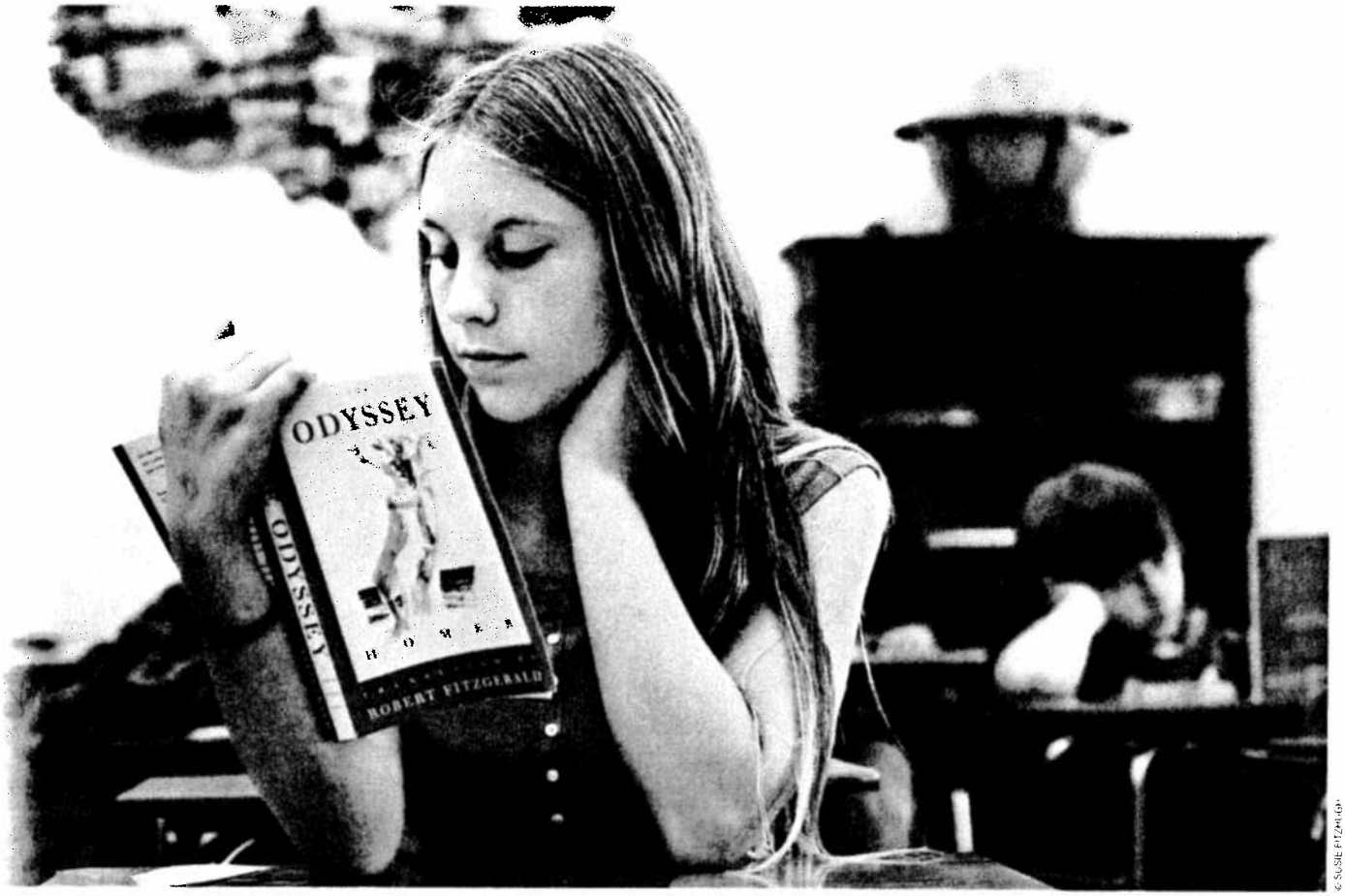
What makes students want to read?

Donalyn Miller

As I stand in the hallway, monitoring students at their lockers before school begins, Emily wanders over to chat. She has been reading *Fever 1793* by Laurie Halse Anderson (Simon and Schuster, 2000), a historical fiction novel about the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia. The events in the book have piqued Emily's interest in medicine and epidemics.

Emily is full of questions. "Mrs. Miller, why did people back then have such weird ideas about diseases? Why did they drain people's blood and feed them nasty herbs to cure them?





Didn't they know that mosquitoes caused yellow fever? Why do we know this now, but no one knew it then?"

"Well," I tell her, "scientists' study of infectious diseases like yellow fever has occurred over time, and years ago, we didn't know what caused many illnesses or how to treat them. There is a great nonfiction book called *An American Plague* by Jim Murphy (Clarion, 2003) that can give you more information about the 1793 yellow fever epidemic. Would you like to read it? We have a copy in the school library."

Emily agrees to read Murphy's book next and heads off to science class, where her newfound interest in infectious diseases will serve her well. During the 10 minutes between the first bell and the second, I discuss the Japanese invasion of Burma during World War II with Brian, who is reading Roland Smith's *Elephant Run* (Hyperion, 2007); debate the negative consequences of time travel explored in Rebecca Stead's *When You Reach Me* (Wendy Lamb, 2009) with Hanna; and define and pronounce *crenellated* for Grant, who declares that Christopher Paolini overuses the word in *Eragon* (Knopf, 2003). None of these students is in my first period language arts class, but their books provoke questions that cannot wait. As a reader, I enjoy these conversations, but as a teacher, I appreciate the intellectual power these students are gaining through reading.

Young readers learn what life readers know—keeping a book with you alleviates boredom!

The Need to Read

Numerous studies prove that wide reading improves children's comprehension, background knowledge, vocabulary, fluency, and writing (Krashen, 2004). Unfortunately, in many schools the poorest readers read the least, often as much as three times less than their peers (Allington, 2006). Many students identified as struggling readers early in their educations continue to receive reading intervention and tutoring throughout their school lives, never catching up with their peers. No matter what instructional methods we employ, students must spend substantial time applying the reading skills and strategies we teach before they develop reading proficiency. To become good readers,

students must read and read and read.

The challenge for many teachers lies in motivating and inspiring students to pick up a book in the first place. Developing or struggling readers often lack the experience and confidence to choose books for themselves, read for extended periods of time, or consistently apply reading strategies across texts. Dormant readers, who possess the reading skills needed for academic tasks, see reading as a school job—not as an activity in which they would willingly engage outside school. How do we instill lasting reading behaviors in all our students?

Lifelong readers possess certain habits that we can explicitly model and teach our students. By redesigning our classrooms to support young readers as they practice and internalize the behaviors of avid readers, we can increase our students' engagement in reading and reap the benefits that prolific reading engenders.

Making Time

When I announce, "Ladies and gentlemen, come to a stopping spot," my students groan. Their complaints are music to my ears. I learned long ago that the only way I could guarantee that my students read was to dedicate time for them to read in class every day. The Commission on Reading's report *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) recommends two hours of silent sustained reading a week, but increasing curriculum demands and the need to prepare students for standardized tests have made independent reading time a luxury in many classrooms. Knowing that voracious readers make time to read every day, how do we carve out more reading time for students?

Teach students to carry a book wherever they go and to enjoy a few minutes of reading time.

I set aside as much as 30 minutes a day for my 6th grade students to read in class. During this time, I confer with students about the books they are reading, ask students to read to me while I assess their comprehension and fluency, and work with students in small groups.

If dedicating chunks of your instructional day for independent reading seems difficult, you can still find time for students to read more. In my own school, I realized that there was a lot of wasted time spent waiting in lines for picture day, field trips, the bus, and assemblies—time when my students could read. After all, adult readers carry books with us for those times when we must unexpectedly wait. We read at the airport, at the doctor's office, and on the train.

Teach students to carry a book wherever they go and to enjoy a few minutes of reading time. Those stolen moments add up over a year. Young readers learn what committed readers know—keeping a book with you alleviates boredom! My students have even learned to pull out their books whenever visitors at the door, phone calls, and technology glitches interrupt classroom instruction.

Maximizing wasted moments in the school day may garner as much as an hour each week of reading time for students, but we can allocate more reading time by eliminating warm-ups and "when you are done" activities. At a recent conference, I asked the crowd to identify the true purpose of warm-ups and bell ringers, those activities that we have ready for students to complete when they enter our classrooms. Embar-

rassed, most teachers admitted that these activities were designed so that they could take attendance or make sure students are working as soon as class begins.

Common warm-up activities in language arts classrooms, such as editing sentences, vocabulary study, or journal prompts, may yield limited instructional benefits; but none produce the same level of academic power as 15 minutes of reading time. The same could be said for "when you are done" activities and enrichment folders. I tell my students that they are never done: When they finish class work, they read. Students can gain as much as 20 minutes of extra reading in class each day when teachers designate reading as the only activity for any class time not used for instruction and practice.

Having time to read in class motivates my students to read more at home, too. Captivated by the books they're reading, they cannot wait until the next school day to continue their books. Recently, I received an e-mail from a mother who discovered the night before that her son had fallen asleep while reading Scott Westerfeld's newest science fiction epic, *Leviathan* (Simon Pulse, 2009).

Every morning and after school breaks, students swarm me to share how their love of reading seeps over into their personal lives. As teachers and parents, we know that people who read when no one requires it are truly readers.

Giving Freedom

Although providing my students with more time to read dramatically increases the amount of reading they do, no single practice inspires my students to read as much as the opportunity to choose their own books. Learners who lack input into decision making feel powerless and unmotivated—this is true for adults, for teachers, and for our students (Cambourne, 1995).

We may spend weeks designing the perfect novel units, carefully selecting interesting texts and crafting meaningful activities, only to discover that our students merely plod through the book and our assignments. In addition, no one text or activity can possibly meet the needs of the diverse range of reading levels and interests found in the typical classroom.

So how can we accomplish our instructional goals and ensure that our students will be engaged? I have done away with whole-class novel units and allowed my students to choose their own books. A recent conversation I had with students about Suzanne Collins's futuristic novel *The Hunger Games* (Scholastic, 2008) confirmed my belief about whole-class novels. I never assigned *The Hunger Games* to my students, but after I mentioned it in book talks and offered it to my after-school book club, the book's popularity spread like wildfire. Of my 93 students, almost 60 of them have read or plan to read this book.

I tell my students that they are never done: When they finish class work, they read.

When I asked one student, Adam, why this book was so popular, he told me, "You made the book sound so exciting, and I decided to read it because I thought I would be missing out. The book was amazing! I loved the action and terror of the Games, and I thought that Katniss [the protagonist] was a great character. When she volunteered to take her sister's place in the games, I thought it was so brave."

Curious, I asked, "Adam, knowing that this book is worth reading, with lots of topics we could discuss in class, what would you think about my assigning this book to the entire class? Most of you are reading it, anyway. Obviously, many students would enjoy it."

My question sparked a wave of head shaking and protests from Adam and his classmates who were discussing the book with us. "No, no, please don't! When teachers tell us we have to read a book, we hate it. We like it that we get to choose what we read." Even though I could use heartfelt recommendations, thought-provoking discussions, probing questions, and many other techniques I was using in book talks and small-group discussions when teaching a novel to the entire class, my students' reactions revealed that the most important factor for them was having the choice to read the book. (See the list on p. 33 for some of my students' favorite books.)

Options and Requirements

Asking some students to read devolves into a struggle to get them to pick up a book in the first place, so I don't provide students with the option of not reading. Instead, I ask students what book they *will* be reading today. I move the opportunity for choice to book selection. Allowing students to choose what they will read gives them power and removes the opportunity to refuse to read at all. That will be enough to motivate some students.

I require my students to read 40 books each year, in a mix of genres from nonfiction to fiction to poetry. Requiring my students to read widely exposes them to more genres, authors, vocabulary, and background knowledge than I could ever accomplish by teaching a few texts each year; and it helps students discover and develop their own reading tastes.

My instruction is focused on the knowledge and skills students must learn to meet state and district requirements. All students learn how to infer a book's themes, predict resolutions, identify figu-

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rative language, and so on, but each student chooses his or her own books to practice and perfect these skills.

For students who lack reading experience and confidence in choosing books, I introduce a wide range of books and authors through readalouds and shared reading, where all students follow along as I read. Shared reading provides support for developing readers because the teacher scaffolds texts that students may not be able to read on their own. By following a more fluent reader, students can focus on comprehension instead of decoding. Students frequently seek out books and authors that we share in class. I often use the first chapter of a book as a teaching piece, then place the book on the chalkboard rail for students to enjoy. The book rarely lasts the day before a student checks it out to read.

When students select books on their own, I condone their choices. Books like the Diary of a Wimpy Kid series and the Bone graphic novels are popular with young readers, but teachers often denounce such books because they are short, are said to lack literary merit, or contain too many pictures. But consider that any girl who reads the entire Twilight series has read over a thousand pages of text. Surely, this is a powerful reading accomplishment! I celebrate any reading my students do.

When students see that I value their reading choices, they begin to trust themselves to select their own reading material and trust me to suggest more books. I tap into this relationship to move students toward more challenging, meatier books over time. For example, when I noticed that Shayla loved books about animals, particularly horses and dogs, I used her interest in Laurie Halse Anderson's Vet Volunteers series to suggest more challenging books like Anna Sewell's classic *Black Beauty*.

I work closely with students who struggle to select books or commit to a reading plan; I help them set short-term goals, such as reading so many pages per week or finishing one book. I encourage and praise these students for every step they take toward their reading goals. For students who resist trying anything, I have assigned a book as a last resort, choosing a title that I think the student might like and be able to read.

The Gift of Reading

The more students read, the better readers they become. By dedicating reading time, recommending books, exposing students to a variety of texts and authors, and validating their reading choices, I've seen students' interest and motivation to read increase. Students' background knowledge, understanding of text structure and features, vocabulary usage, appreciation for authors' craft, and performance on a wide array of assessments improve tremendously because of the reading they do. For it is only through volumes and volumes of reading that many students internalize the comprehension skills and gain the reading experience they must acquire for academic success.

Of course, hours and hours spent reading and the freedom to choose their own books also leads many children to discover a love of books and reading—a path to enjoyment and learning that lasts long after schooling ends. This is an immeasurable gift. EL

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REVERSING READICIDE

Schools have become unwitting coconspirators in the decline of reading.

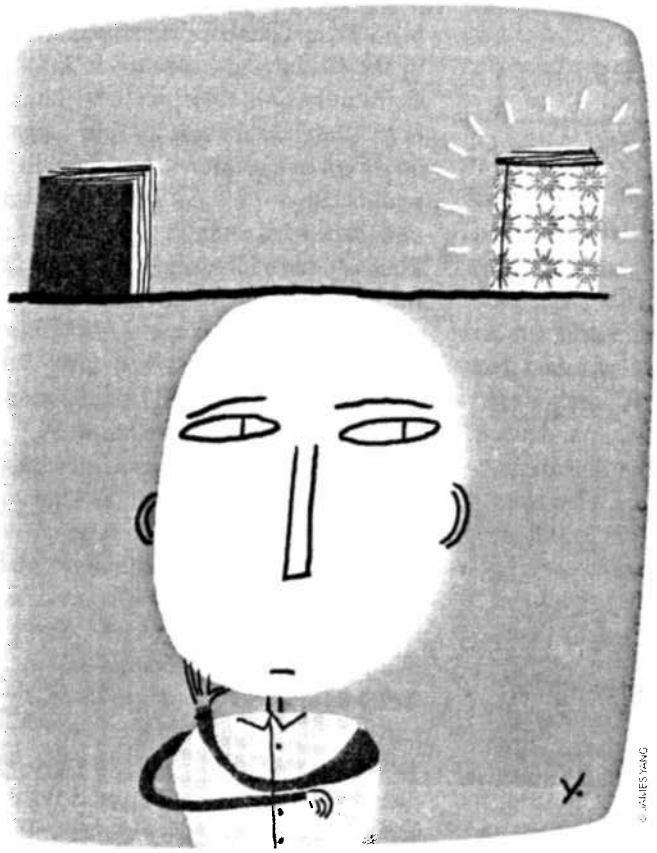
Kelly Gallagher

On a recent cross-country flight, I found myself sitting next to the president of a multimillion dollar computer software company. To keep his business competitive, he told me, his organization regularly recruits employees from top universities. When I asked him how his current recruitment efforts were going, he said that over the past few years it had become increasingly challenging to find qualified workers. It isn't difficult finding smart candidates; the problem is finding smart people who can think.

This conversation often comes to mind as I teach my students at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, California. My current freshmen entered 2nd grade as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law. Almost their entire school experience has been shaped by test preparation. These students have already spent years in schools where teachers and administrators have confused covering massive amounts of material with teaching students how to think and read critically.

One major drawback of having students spend their formative years memorizing facts is that facts change. Robert J. Sternberg, former president of the American Psychological Association, notes that the "facts" he learned years ago in his introductory psychology course matter little today. Instead of pounding facts into students' heads, Sternberg (2007/2008) suggests, schools should nurture attributes and skills that are foundational to becoming expert citizens, such as solving problems creatively, working well in teams, and knowing how to lose as well as win.

I fear that in the rush to prepare students for the next round of exams, schools are neglecting attributes like



these. And if we are to guide students to become thoughtful adults who possess such qualities, we must face the elephant in the room: U.S. students' lack of reading proficiency and their general disinclination to read.

The signs are not encouraging. Consider the following points taken from a 2006 report on adolescent literacy by the National Council of Teachers of English:

- The 2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that U.S. secondary school students are reading at a rate significantly below expected levels.
- The Alliance for Excellent Education points out that 8.7 million secondary students—one in four—are unable to read and comprehend the material in their textbooks.
- The 2005 ACT College Readiness Benchmark for Reading found that only one-half of the students tested were ready for college-level reading. Reading scores were the lowest in a decade.

Young people in the United States are not just substandard readers, they are increasingly reluctant readers—even in their free time. In the National Endowment for the Arts' comprehensive 2007 survey of American reading, *To Read or Not to Read*, researchers found that a "calamitous, universal falling off of reading" occurs for many students at around age 13 and often continues through the rest of these students' lives.

Educators know the commonly cited culprits behind the decline of reading: poverty, lack of parent education, print-poor environments at home, second-language issues, the over-scheduling of children, and competition from electronic media. To this list, I would like to add a factor I call *readicide*, meaning practices educators employ to raise reading scores that actually kill students' love of reading. Readicide is occurring, ironically, in the one place where a love of reading should be fostered—schools.

How have schools become coconspirators in the decline of reading? I suggest four contributing factors: (1) Schools act as though they value the development of test takers more than the development of readers, (2) Schools are limiting authentic reading experiences, (3) Teachers are overteaching books, and (4) Teachers are underteaching books. Let's look at how each of these practices leads to readicide, and examine steps teachers can take to counteract them.

FACTOR 1:

Schools develop test takers instead of readers.

A curriculum steeped in test preparation drives shallow teaching and learning. Consider, for example, the monumental task confronting social science teachers in California, who must teach the following standard from the 10th grade curriculum:

Compare and contrast the Glorious Revolution of England, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution and their enduring effects worldwide on the political expectations for self-government and individual liberty.

How long would it take to teach this standard so that students acquire in-depth understanding? A teacher could easily spend an entire year on this single standard—but this is only one of 49 similar standards 10th grade teachers must cover.

I purposefully use the word *cover* because that is what teachers must do to get students through the amount of material required to generate test scores that will appease administrators, school board members, and parents. Breadth is now winning out over depth in most subjects. Science curriculum frameworks in the United States, for example, are loaded with more topics than frameworks of other countries (Cavanagh, 2009).

It's good to have standards for what students should know, of course. But when there are too many standards, in-depth teaching gets thrown out the window, and schools start producing memorizers instead of thinkers. And when coverage trumps depth, close reading—the kind students need to develop their ability to read critically—gives way to surface-level, "one and done" reading.

Reversing the Trend

We must ask whether teaching in a coverage mode serves the long-term interests of our students as readers. If we look at students' critical reading scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) from 2002 to 2009, during the time NCLB has been in effect, we see a slight increase in points for several years, followed by a decline to below the average score for 2002 (Gewertz, 2009). Isn't it interesting that although many districts tout rising test scores at the local level, reading scores on a key national assessment are in decline?

> Teachers now chop great books into so many pieces that the books cease being great.

One recent study, in fact, found that nearly one-third of states have lowered their academic proficiency standards in reading and mathematics to make it easier for schools to make adequate yearly progress under NCLB (Dillon, 2009). Reading scores may be "rising" in districts across the country, but when one looks at a national assessment like the SAT, it seems our brightest students are actually regressing.

Clearly, the "coverage" approach is not working. It's time to bring depth back into the curriculum. Our students would be much better served if we taught them fewer concepts, slowed down, and taught them to think.

FACTOR 2:

Schools limit authentic reading experiences.

I currently teach five periods of 9th grade English at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, California. More than one-half of my students are socio-economically disadvantaged. The student body is 68 percent Hispanic; more than one-third are English language learners, and nearly 40 languages are spoken on campus.

Although my students have passed innumerable tests in their journey to high school, they are shockingly unaware of what is happening in the world. For example, only a small percentage can tell me the name of the vice president of the United States. Not a single student can name the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and only a handful can define the rights protected by the 4th amendment to the U.S. Constitution. On the other hand, almost every student can name the four judges on *American Idol*. More than half of my seniors last year did not understand that newspapers have editorial sections. These students have since passed all their tests and graduated; they are the next generation in charge.

I point this out not to bash my students, many of whom are exceptionally bright. My concern is simpler: Schools are not doing the job they once did of engaging students in the kinds of reading that enable them to become literate, well-informed adults. Instead, as students progress through our schools, they are forced to read more and more worksheets focused on isolated facts.

Reversing the Trend

Teachers should be guiding students in real-world reading, assigning critical reading of magazines, newspapers, Web sites, and blogs that provide background knowledge about U.S. society, key political players and issues, and students' own role as informed participants. At Magnolia High, for example, all students are given an article of the week to read every Monday. These articles are selected to shore up students' lack of prior knowledge about life outside high school.

FACTOR 3:

Teachers overteach books.

On my desk is a copy of the Los Angeles Unified School District's guide to teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This guide contains overarching questions, chapter study questions, essay questions, vocabulary lessons, activities for specific chapters, guided reading

lessons, directions for setting up a writer's notebook, literary analysis questions, collaborative activities, handouts, transparencies, 20 detailed lessons, quizzes, and projects. The guide is 122 pages long and includes numerous pages listing goals and "habits of thinking" that teachers should foster in students.

Why is this guide so exhaustive? Because it's aligned to the massive number of standards found on California's standardized exams each spring. As a result, teachers are driven into a "teach all things in all books" approach.

I am not suggesting that the goals in this unit of study are not worthy; they are. But using *all* these lessons to teach one novel, which teachers must do if they are to prepare their students for standardized exams, is a recipe for readicide. If I were to follow this curriculum guide step-by-step in my own classroom, there is little doubt my students would exit my class hating *To Kill a Mockingbird*—and possibly all reading—forever.

In the quest to prepare students for every standard that might be covered on this year's exams, teachers now chop great books into so many pieces that the books cease to be great. One teacher I observed, for example, required students to share their thinking on a sticky note on every page of *Romeo and Juliet*. As a result, this timeless work became an extended worksheet. Its beauty—its value—got lost in a sea of sticky notes. Imagine going to see a great movie, only to have the projectionist stop the film every four minutes to see if you are taking notes. Now imagine being forced to read a novel this way, and you'll see how overteaching destroys students' desire to read.

The antidote to this practice is not to simply assign great books and turn students loose—this practice leads to its own dangers—but to find what I call the *sweet spot* of instruction that gives students just the right amount of support for complex texts. Let's look at the flip side of how many schools introduce students to literature.

FACTOR 4:

Teachers underteach books.

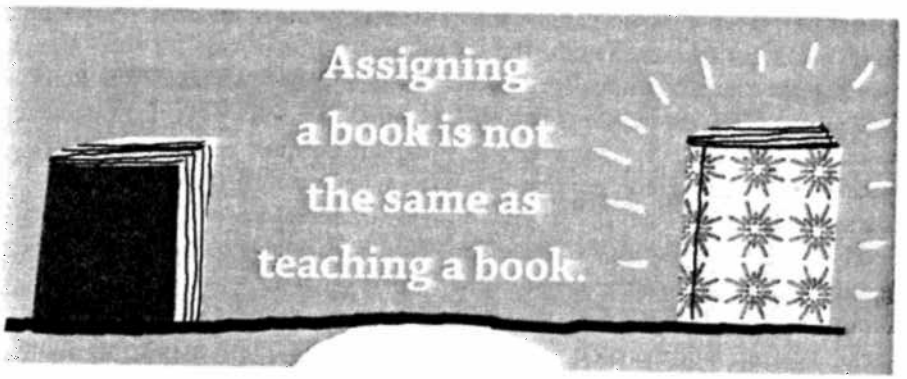
This may seem strange coming on the heels of my argument that too much teaching can kill a book, but underteaching a book can have equally devastating consequences.

At the end of her 10th grade year, my daughter was handed *The Grapes of Wrath* and told to read it over the summer. Her teacher did not "frame" the novel for her in any way; she provided little, if any, background information or support, and she communicated no purpose for reading the book other than to prepare for an exam on the first day of school. The assumption was that, as an honor student, my daughter could handle the task. You might guess what happened. My daughter started to read the novel, became frustrated, turned to a summary on Spark Notes, passed the test, and grew into an adult who still thinks *The Grapes of Wrath* is a lousy book.

If students could read academic texts or challenging literary works by themselves, they would not need teachers. But, of course, most cannot gain the full benefit from—and enjoy—difficult books when they read such books on their own. Assigning a book is not the same as teaching a book. When too much assigning and not enough teaching occurs, students are on the road to readicide.

Reversing the Trend

Realizing that neither chopping up books nor handing students a classic and wishing them good luck are the way to get students to read deeply, teachers must constantly search for the sweet spot of just enough reading instruction. To help find this balance, I ask myself as I assign texts, How much do my kids need me at this juncture of reading? How much support would be too much right now—or not enough?



One thing I have learned is that students need most of my help up-front, often before they even begin reading the text. To understand why, read the following passage:

> The pitcher's stuff was filthy. He was bringing cheese. He mixed in some chin music. Along with the heat, Uncle Charlie would occasionally show his face, producing a number of bowel-lockers. Only two batters got a knock. No one came close to dialing 8. (Gallagher, 2009, p. 95)

You probably understood every word in the above passage, but I am guessing that unless you know baseball well, you had a tough time comprehending it. Your inability to understand the passage

is not a phonemic awareness problem, a fluency problem, or a vocabulary problem. You can read the words; you just lack the proper prior knowledge to make meaning.

Many students have this problem when approaching a difficult text, be it a primary source document or a Shakespeare play. This is where teaching (as opposed to assigning) becomes crucial; students need a teacher to supply the context. Before reading Chapter 1 of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for instance, students should have an understanding of Herbert Hoover, the Great Depression, the Scottsboro Case (which inspired Harper Lee to write the novel), and the kind of racism that existed in the U.S. South at the time. On a more concrete level, many of my students do not know what a veranda is. They need vocabulary support before reading Lee's classic.

This kind of framing, however, is not in itself enough to generate the level of motivation required for my students to tackle a classic. Students today need more than history recaps and vocabulary lessons; they need to have some idea from the start of what they will gain from reading a text. I don't teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* because it's a great book. I teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* because it's a great book that puts my students in a place where they can examine racism today.

In a similar vein, when I teach *1984*, it doesn't overly concern me that some of my students are not going to like the novel. What concerns me is that all my students understand the value of the reading experience. As they read George Orwell's classic, I want my students to gain awareness of government surveillance today. I want them to understand that the torture site "Room 101" is not simply limited to Orwell's world—that many believe it has been recreated in Abu Ghraib and the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I want them to recognize the degree of language manipulation and propaganda they will confront for the rest of their lives. But I must make this value visible *before* my students commence reading. In introducing novels like these, I always address the central question my students bring to the book: Why should I care?

Bring reading for pleasure back into students' lives.

Before reading *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, I begin by having my students explore the question of whether long-term feuds can ever be buried. This question resonates with these learners, many of whom live in neighborhoods where gangs are a way of life. Although Shakespeare asked this question more than 400 years ago, it still holds value for the modern teenager. As the reading progresses and my students begin to connect with the play, I gradually release more of the meaning-making responsibility to them.

Promote Close Reading

A key element to finding this instructional sweet spot is teaching students to read closely. Teaching close reading is not the same as chopping up a book into so many pieces that it becomes unrecognizable. It is accomplished better by having students read large, uninterrupted chunks of text and then strategically having them return to key passages for second- or third-draft reading and thinking.

If the only reading our students do is "one-and-done" reading, they will never develop a critical reading lens. One cannot read James Madison's Federalist papers or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* once and reach a deep level of understanding. If we are to sharpen students' critical thinking, we need to require them to read longer chunks of text and commit to giving them more close reading practice.

Another important way to promote close reading is to bring reading for pleasure back into students' lives. Our intense focus on testing has brought an intense focus on academic reading, so that students have little exposure to reading for enjoyment in school. Many teachers have pushed aside recreational reading, which may be one reason that so few youth read for enjoyment on their own.

The lack of recreational reading has dire consequences. Brain researcher Maryanne Wolf (2007) has discussed "word poverty," noting that "by kindergarten a gap of 32 million words already separates some children in linguistically-impoverished homes from their more stimulated peers" (p. 20). If students are to have any chance to develop their vocabulary or build the background knowledge needed to become effective readers, they must develop recreational reading habits early in life. And reading habits are not built by handing students reading passages buried in test booklets.

Teachers and administrators who are squeezing recreational reading out of the day have forgotten an important finding: Students who read for fun have higher reading scores than students who rarely read for enjoyment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). I have never had a student receive a high SAT verbal score who was not a voracious reader. And I doubt that any student I run into on the street 20 years from now will thank me for helping him or her recognize symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*. In fact, I'd be happier if that student wanted to discuss the contemporary book he or she was carrying.

Pulling Out of the "Reading Recession"

Thomas Friedman (2009) claims that recessions have historically been great times for opportunities to arise. With apologies to Friedman, may I suggest that the United States is in a reading recession. I believe that the critical thinkers we so desperately need will emerge from classrooms where teachers have eschewed the coverage approach in favor of fostering deeper thinking—and where the development of lifelong reading habits has remained as important as next month's test. EL

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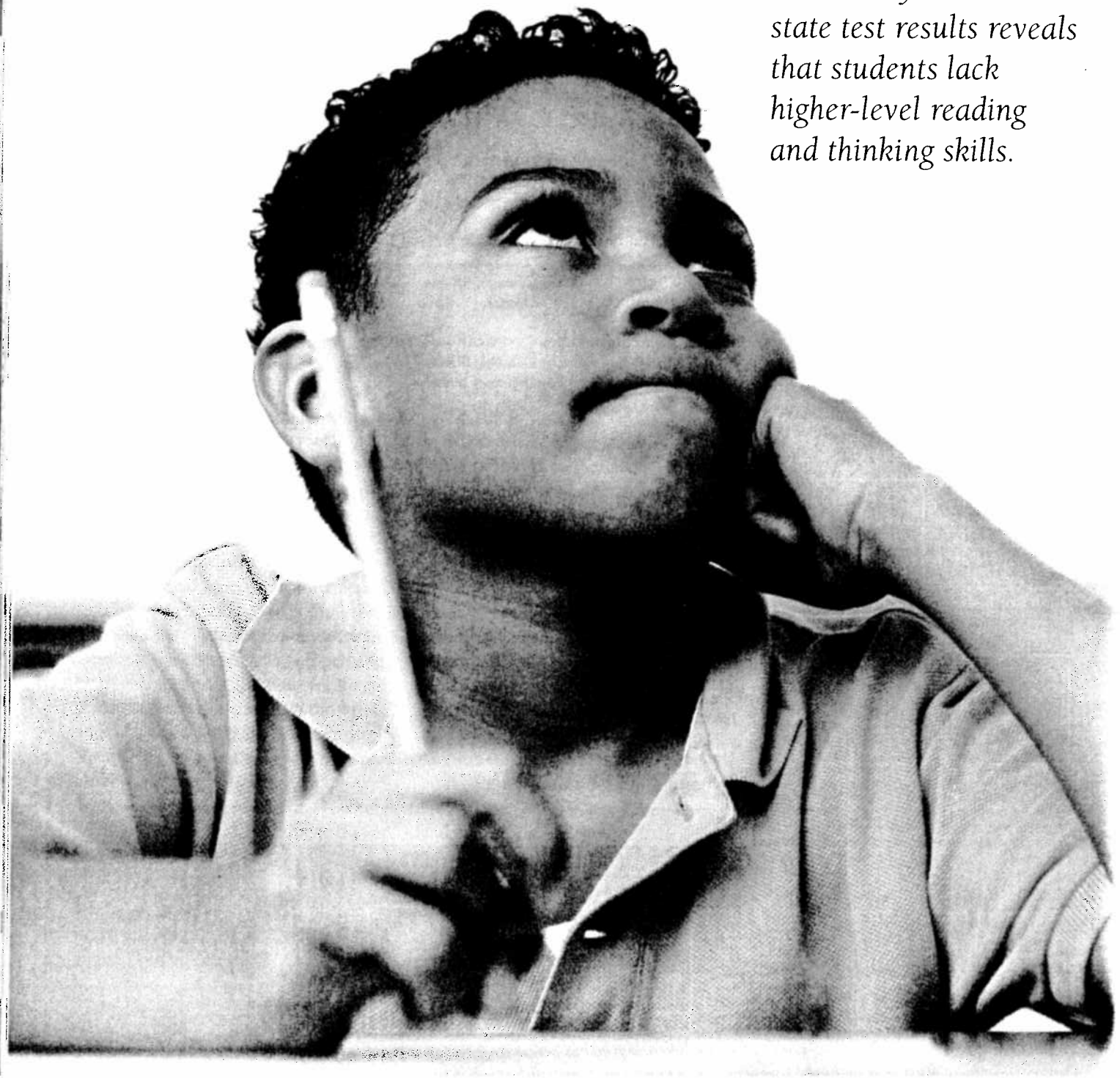
SPECIAL TOPIC

Why We Should Stop

An item-by-item look at state test results reveals that students lack higher-level reading and thinking skills.



Bashing State Tests

Grant Wiggins

It is, of course, a common lament: "Oh, those standardized tests! If it weren't for them . . ." But if you look closely at the released test items and student performance data for states that provide such information, your opinion may change. Mine did. Standardized tests can give us surprisingly valuable and counterintuitive insights into what our students are *not* learning.

The myth is that the tests demand and reward low-level "coverage." The results say otherwise. Consider this item from the 2008 Massachusetts 10th grade English test, which involves the lyrics of a Bob Dylan song dear to me as a child of the '60s and as a musician. The student sees all the lyrics of the song, and then responds to this question: *Based on "The Times They Are A-Changin'," why does the speaker most likely single out "senators, congressmen" and "mothers and fathers"?* Here are the four choices:

A. They understand the problems of society.

B. They represent an outdated set of values.

C. They are the most open to change.

D. They are role models for the speaker.

Well, we "better start swimmin' or [we'll] sink like a stone" in education—because only 58 percent of students chose the correct answer, B. Astonishingly, 19 percent chose A; 12 percent chose C; and 11 percent chose D. In other words, more than 40 percent of 10th graders think the lyrics mean the *opposite* of what they really do. It seems that a huge chunk of our students cannot even make the most basic sense of a biting song lyric.

A Critical Weakness in Student Understanding

This result is not an aberration, I am sorry to report. Over and over, in looking at fully disclosed tests and results where they are available—especially in Massachusetts, Florida, and Ohio, where the data are rich and revealing—I have found that far too many of our students at all grade levels do poorly on questions requiring inferences. Students are especially weak at drawing conclusions from nonfiction pieces of writing. On average, across all three states, only about 60 percent can identify the main idea or the author's purpose related to reading passages.

Teaching for greater understanding would improve results, not threaten them.

A clear example is the following test item from the 2007 6th grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). After reading a passage called "The Early Systems," students are asked, *What is the main idea of "The Early Systems"?*

A. The abacus is the earliest form of computer. (answer chosen by 21 percent of students)

B. The development of the computer spans many centuries. (correct answer; chosen by 64 percent)

C. Lady Ada Byron's role in the computer's origin is often overlooked. (chosen by 4 percent)

D. The world would be very different if Babbage's machine had been finished. (chosen by 11 percent)

The fact that the most frequently chosen wrong answer here is A reveals a serious problem that is evident across tests and grade levels: Many students incorrectly select an answer containing an important *fact* in the passage, instead of realizing the need to make an inference and then picking the correct inference.

Here is a similar example from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System's (MCAS) 3rd grade English Language Arts section:

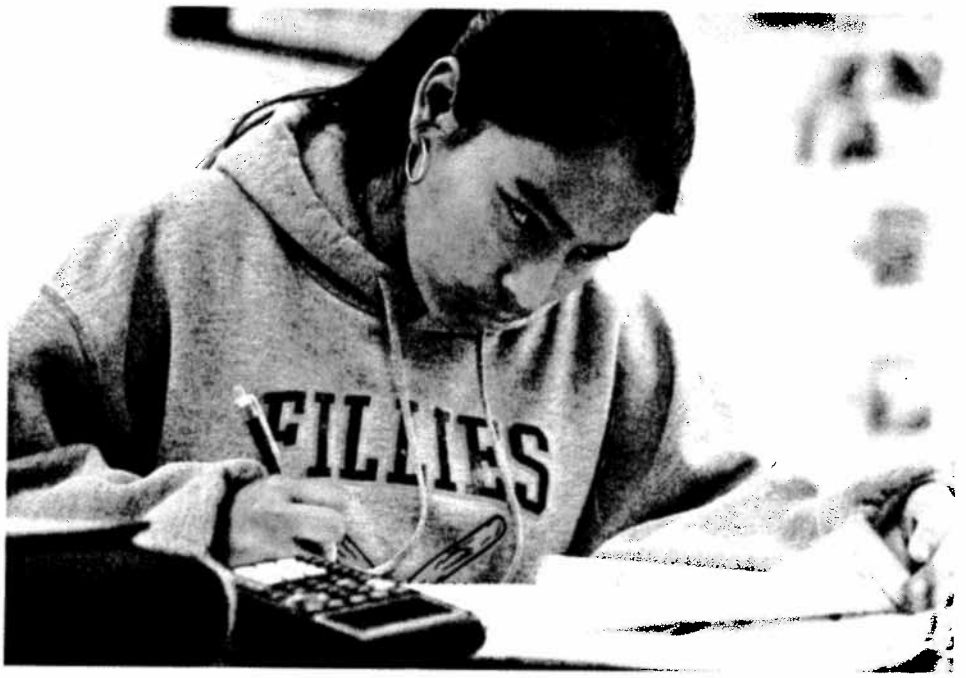
"I have a question that I ask myself as I write: Why does the reader want to turn the page?" Why does Joanna Cole most likely ask herself the question?

A. To keep readers from being confused. (chosen by 13 percent)

B. To make the book interesting to readers. (correct answer; chosen by 62 percent)

C. To remember all the information for the book. (chosen by 15 percent)

D. To make the writing long enough to become a book. (chosen by 10 percent)



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Overall, these are sobering results—and they are not easily explained away as artifacts of testing, as many testing critics would have us believe. As adults, all of these students will need to read nonfiction text and make inferences on their own for professional, political, commercial, and personal reasons. Yet the results across states and grade levels reveal that a large portion of them cannot do so.

The math results are arguably even more appalling. No news here, really: for decades, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have shown that math teachers in the United States are not getting the job done, especially at the high school level. But the tests from the three aforementioned states show the problem clearly, too.

On all three states' high school geometry tests, for instance, students do poorly on questions that require them to first recognize the need to use the Pythagorean theorem (*In any right triangle, $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$, where* c *represents the length of the hypotenuse and* a *and* b *represent the lengths of the other two sides*) and then apply the theorem—despite the fact that this is arguably one of the most important concepts covered in the course. Figure 1 shows the weak performance by 8th grade Ohio students on one such question. Only 48 percent could figure it out.

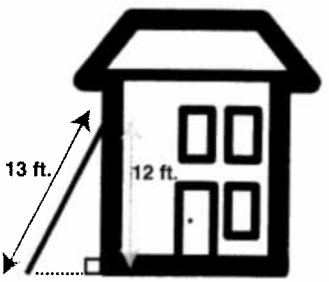
There simply cannot be genuine accountability unless state assessments provide transparent feedback.

The state tests contain dozens of Pythagorean items like this, in which students have to infer the need to use this core formula—and fail to. In some cases the tests even give strong hints, such as the little icon for right angles provided in a graphic. Even so, most students cannot go past rote learning to

FIGURE 1. Item from the Ohio 8th Grade Mathematics Test

A painter leans a 13-foot ladder against a building.

The top of the ladder rests against the side of the building at a point 12 feet above ground level. How far is the base of the ladder from the building?



A. 1 foot (chosen by 35 percent of students)
B. 2 feet (chosen by 10 percent)
C. 5 feet (correct answer; chosen by 48 percent)
D. 8 feet (chosen by 6 percent)

nfer the correct formula from the information given. This content was "covered"—but not understood.

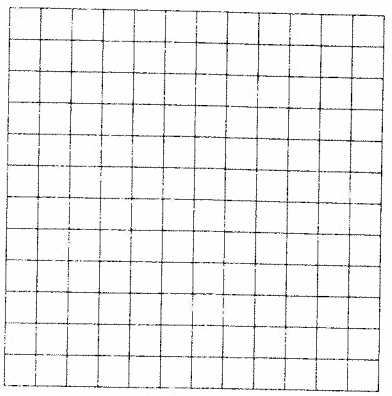
Figure 2 shows an item from the 2003 Massachusetts 10th grade algebra assessment. This result is doubly dismaying to me because even if you forgot the distance formula, you could plot the points and use the Pythagorean theorem to solve the item or derive the distance formula. Apparently, though, if our high school students can't "plug and chug" the answer, a majority of them are stymied. After a year or more studying algebra, students simply do not understand linear relationships—the key topic of the entire year! It makes me wonder what algebra teachers have been doing all year, frankly.

But my favorite example by far (one that always makes faculties we work with in Understanding by Design trainings moan in dismay, roll their eyes, and shake their heads) comes from the Massachusetts 10th grade English test. Students were asked to read a thought-provoking, enjoyable piece of nonfiction about color blindness. It was 17 paragraphs long.

> *1st paragraph:* A fellow 4th grader broke the news to me after she saw my effort on a class assignment involving scissors and construction paper. "You cut out a purple bluebird," she said. There was no reproach in her voice, just a certain puzzlement. Her observation opened my eyes—not that my eyes particularly help—to the fact that I am color-blind. In the 36 years since, I've been trying to understand what that means. I'm still not sure I do. . . .
>
> *16–17th paragraphs:* . . . there's no ready source of information about how many presidents, or military heroes, or rock singers have been color-blind.
>
> Based on the law of averages, though, there must have been some. We are everywhere, trying to dope, trying to blend in. Usually we succeed. Until someone spots our purple bluebirds. Then the jig is up.

FIGURE 2. Item from the Massachusetts 10th Grade Algebra Test

On the coordinate plane, what is the distance between the points (3, 4) and (11, 10)?



A. 10 (correct answer; chosen by 33 percent)
B. 7 (chosen by 35 percent)
C. 5 (chosen by 7 percent)
D. 14 (chosen by 14 percent)

After reading the selection, students were asked a few simple questions about factual details, which almost all students got right. However, the last item was one of the most frequently missed questions on all the MCAS 10th grade tests that year:

> This selection is best described as—
>
> A. a biography. (chosen by 38 percent)
>
> B. a scientific article. (chosen by 14 percent)
>
> C. an essay. (correct answer; chosen by 35 percent)
>
> D. an investigative report. (chosen by 12 percent)

When local papers did a follow-up article on the MCAS results, they interviewed students who had taken the test. When reporters asked about this question, many students said the piece could not be an essay because it was "funny" and "was not five paragraphs."

Here is our problem in a nutshell. Students are taught formulas that they learn and spit back unthinkingly—regardless of subject matter—all in the name of "meeting standards." Yet, as so many assessment results reveal, a large portion of U.S. students are so literal minded that they are incapable of solving fairly simple questions requiring interpretation and transfer—which is surely the point of the state standards.

Is that the fault of the testing system? Or have our teachers and school administrators badly misunderstood what kind of curriculum and instruction a standards-based education demands? No research supports the oft-heard claim that the tests "demand" superficial coverage. (On the contrary, we see the most slavish test prep in inadequate schools, not the best schools.) An education focused on student understanding—a prioritized curriculum, focused on transfer—would not yield such depressing results.

Lesson One: The Solution Is Local

Perhaps what should be a-changin' is our attitude toward test results. An examination of the released tests shows that most of the questions on the math and language arts tests are both appropriate and revealing—especially those that involve inferences about such key concepts as main idea, author purpose, linear relationships, equivalency of fractions and decimals, and so on. (It is true that some of the vocabulary questions seem picayune, and the history and science assessments are in general weaker.)

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In fact, despite the constant criticisms leveled at state tests, local assessment is arguably the far weaker link in the whole chain of would-be reform. Many of us have seen firsthand how invalid and low-level many local tests are. And studies have shown for years that in terms of Bloom's taxonomy, most teacher questions only hit the first two levels (knowledge and comprehension) instead of the higher levels (application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).[1] In one high-income suburban New Jersey district that some colleagues and I studied, we found *no* test question that required any higher-level thinking in all the marking-period tests. Even more surprising, there was no difference across honors and regular-track versions of the same courses.

A close look at state test results shows me that both test-prep "teaching" and test bashing get it wrong. The test items that our students do most poorly on demand interpretation and transfer, not rote learning and recall. Better teaching and (especially) better local testing would raise state test scores. Teaching for greater understanding would improve results, not threaten them—

Both test-prep "teaching" and test bashing get it wrong.

as both common sense and the research indicate.

Lesson Two: Greater Transparency Is Essential

If the goal is to better understand and prepare for standards-based assessments in math and literacy, I highly recommend that educators use the (free!) resources provided by the states discussed here to demystify testing and focus on what the feedback reveals, even if you don't teach in one of these three states. But the long-term solution should be less jerry-rigged. On the policy front, therefore, it is high time for all states to follow the lead of Massachusetts (www.doe.mass.edu/mcas), Florida (http://fcat.fldoe.org), and Ohio (http://ohio3-8.success-ode-state-oh-us.info): Release all or most of the tests with item-by-item and school-by-school analyses—and include the percentage of answers chosen for all questions, not just the correct answer.

There simply cannot be genuine accountability unless state assessments provide such transparent feedback. (I trust that the U.S. groups working on the Core Standards and assessments are attending to this point.) In far too many states, alas, educators can still actually be *reprimanded* for just looking at the test questions when the tests are given, never mind getting data about how their students and students in other schools and districts did on each question.

The sorry excuse for such policies? As they said in Watergate, follow the money. Many state education department personnel have told me either that it is too expensive to release the tests or that their contract with the vendor prohibits it. But if we are interested in genuine reform based on useful feedback from tests, it is unacceptable to settle for mere accountability audits that keep the goals and results of state assessments too opaque for actual use.

So maybe Dylan had it right here, too: In assessment, both local and state, the "old road is rapidly agin'." His next words seem all the more prescient today: "Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand." EL

[1]See, for example, Archibald, D. A., & Grant, T. J. (1999). What's on the test? An analytical framework and findings from an examination of teachers' math tests. *Educational Assessment*, 6(4), 250.

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New Horizons in Comprehension

By pushing students to go beyond superficial responses in conversations about books, we can teach them to deepen their understanding.

Ellin Oliver Keene

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I really want to be an astronaut when I grow up. I know a lot about the space station." Jacob looks up from his book, *Eyewitness: Space Exploration* (DK Children, 2004), during my visit to his 5th grade classroom at James Lewis Elementary School in Blue Springs, Missouri. I have just taught a lesson in which I explored with students the concept of *schema*—relevant prior knowledge and experience that readers use to comprehend text more deeply. Now I'm conferring with students individually as they apply this comprehension strategy in their independent reading.

I'm not surprised by the rather superficial nature of Jacob's response to my question about how the book he's reading relates to his own life. Several years ago, I might have said, "Great connection, Jacob. Mark it on a sticky note and keep going!" Not any more.

Instead, I ask him to give me a moment while I consider how to respond to him. I want to actually *teach* him something that will be valuable to him as a reader, and I'm going to take my time to consider the most effective approach.

A Bit of History

In the early 1990s, I studied research showing that students who are taught particular cognitive strategies (see "Key Reading Comprehension Strategies," p. 71) are likely to comprehend text more deeply. With colleagues at the Denver-based Public Education and Business Coalition, I began to teach these comprehension strategies explicitly, thinking aloud with students to show how a proficient reader uses the strategies and then gradually encouraging the students to use them independently (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). After experimenting with strategy instruction at a wide range of grade levels, I concluded, as did many researchers, that comprehension strategy instruction has a significant and lasting effect on students' understanding (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997/2007; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992; Pressley, 2002).

Since then, I have had the opportunity to work with and observe teachers implementing strategies instruction in classrooms throughout the United States. Today, in schools like James Lewis Elementary, I see teachers extending our original ideas about comprehension teaching in exciting new directions.

Walking down the hallway at James Lewis, you see evidence everywhere that students' work is valued, their interests and passions celebrated. Each grade level has created its own reading area in the hallways where students can read under the soft light of a lamp, meet with their book clubs, or practice reading with senior citizen volunteers. Individual classrooms also contain comfortable spaces in which to read and talk.

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We must *teach* comprehension, not just assess it.

The classrooms and public spaces at this school make me want to grab a book and join the students who are deeply engaged in reading, thinking, and discussing. Even more intriguing than the school's visible physical environment, however, are the invisible components of its success story. The beauty of this school is the level of engagement and intellectual challenge that are evident in its classroom interactions.

Three Scenarios for Reading Comprehension

As I consider how to proceed with Jacob, I reflect on three types of comprehension instruction that a teacher might use with students. In traditional comprehension instruction, Jacob might be part of a small group of students who read the same text. The teacher might ask Jacob and the others in the group questions to assess their recall of the main idea and some supporting details; chances are, the teacher would already have the "right" answers in mind. In this scenario, Jacob and his classmates aren't really being taught to comprehend better; they're being assessed to determine whether they have read the text and what they recall from it shortly thereafter. In a classic study, Durkin (1978/1979) showed that the vast majority of what passed for comprehension "instruction" was really assessment.

The second approach is a variation on comprehension strategy instruction. Jacob would be taught (at least it's not just assessment!) to use a strategy such as questioning or schema to make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. The teacher would confer with Jacob alone or in a small group to get the students to share their questions

or connections. Jacob would perhaps share that he "wants to be an astronaut" or has "read another book about space" or "knows a lot about the space station"—text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world (solar system?) connections, respectively. He might make connections, but he wouldn't necessarily learn anything about how to call on his relevant prior knowledge to understand a new text more completely and lastingly.

There is a third option—one that represents a new horizon in comprehension instruction. In this scenario, strategies aren't treated as ends in themselves, but as tools to enhance understanding. We want to push Jacob to do more than just articulate how his prior knowledge and experiences help him understand the text. We also want him to connect and store new information in association with what he already knows, creating a more complete picture of the topic in his long-term memory. Perhaps most important, we want him to transfer the kind of thinking he is using today to new texts and learning contexts in the future.

Key Reading Comprehension Strategies

Monitor for meaning. Know when, as a reader, you fully understand or don't understand.

Use schema. Relate the new to the known; activate prior knowledge to help you understand new information. Make connections between texts, portions of the same text, the text and broader knowledge, and the text and the reader. If you realize that you lack necessary schema to understand a text or concept, create schema using a variety of methods.

Infer. Predict; make independent decisions about inexplicit meanings; form opinions and defend them; draw conclusions and defend them.

Ask questions. Generate questions before, during, and after reading. Use questions to focus, delve more deeply, and extrapolate to insights within and beyond the text.

Create images. Use images that emanate from all five senses and from the emotions to understand more vividly.

Determine importance. Make decisions about which ideas and concepts are most important in a text; articulate why those ideas are most important.

Synthesize. Be aware of how one's thinking changes during reading. Create a cogent expression of key points after reading, which may contain information from a variety of sources outside the current text.

Putting Scenario Three into Practice

"Okay, Jacob," I say, resuming the conference after a few moments of silence, "you're saying that you have a connection to this text because you really want to be an astronaut when you grow up and you know a lot about the space station." I always try to restate the student's response so that he or she has a chance to hear it again and reflect on it more. "Now I have an important question to ask. Do you have additional schema that helps you understand this book?"

He looks up, clearly surprised, and appears to be thinking "I just told you my connection. Isn't it time for you to move along?"

"I just mean, Jacob, that I'm interested in other schema you may have and how it may help you understand this book better."

Jacob glances back at the book and says, "That's all." It's an almost automatic response, but I'm not going to accept it. I use one of my favorite responses to help him buy some time to think: "I know you don't have more schema, Jacob, but if you did, what would it be?"

He looks at me as if he wonders whether I'm hard of hearing, but I just smile. This time, he turns back to study a section in the book that describes astronauts' sleeping bags. He glances up at me and back at the page several times. I wait and resist the urge to bail him out with a leading question or idea. Sometimes I have to bite my tongue, but it's always worth the wait.

Finally, he says, "Well, I was thinking about my sleeping bag at home and how if I had it in space, it would just be floating around and I would bang into stuff because of no gravity. I couldn't get how come they aren't just floating around in their sleeping bags, so I had to reread this part, and then I looked at these pictures and I started to understand that their sleeping bags are totally different. They're made out of different material that's only for space; they're anchored to the beds. Then, I started thinking about how people figure this stuff out—how they make new stuff like a sleeping bag for space. . . ." Jacob goes on at some length, and he reveals an impressive understanding of some of the problems scientists have had to solve to make life in space possible.

Jacob is beginning to think beyond the book. He's exhibiting two of the common outcomes of applying compre-

hension strategies to informational text: (1) understanding the context and conditions that lead to important discoveries in the scientific, technological, or social scientific world; and (2) developing a sense of the elements of a problem and the necessary steps to solve it. Using comprehension strategies in reading fictional text commonly leads to a different set of outcomes—for example, experiencing empathy for the characters in the text or feeling a desire to reread portions of the text that the reader finds beautiful or moving (Keene, 2008).

Jacob takes a long moment to think and finally says, "You mean that at first I was just thinking about the sleeping bags and how they had to be different in space, but now I'm thinking about how people have to invent things to solve problems, not just in space."

"Exactly. And you could use this way of thinking in other books. I know you're still reading this book and you'll be reading other informational texts soon. I wonder if you could read *from the point of view of a scientist,* so that you could come to understand the kinds of problems and conditions that force scientists and inventors to create new solutions. In this book, you saw that weightlessness was the problem that made scientists come up with a new solution. There must be thousands of other problems that have forced people to create amazing new solutions. Would you be willing to make a list in your reader's notebook about the problems that led people to find solutions in science? I'm so interested to learn about situations that have caused scientists to create new solutions."

"Yep," Jacob replies. "I could watch for that. And it makes me think that I might want to be the kind of astronaut that invents stuff!"

A student's initial use of a comprehension strategy doesn't fully indicate the depth of his or her thinking.

I'm not finished with Jacob yet (poor kid!). Whether in a small group, a large group, or an individual conference, I want to teach students something new about themselves as readers—something they can use not just to read this text, but to comprehend whatever they read next. I want to teach them to be strategic in their thinking when I'm not around.

"Jacob, I have just learned something extraordinary from you!" I say. (His look says, "Who, me?") "I realized that you're thinking just like a scientist. You're using what you already know about conditions here on earth, like gravity, and you're imagining all the problems that scientists have to solve to make everyday life manageable in a weightless environment. You've uncovered a way of thinking that is crucial to science and invention. You've started to put yourself in the role of a scientist or inventor. What does that make you think?"

Exploring New Horizons

The transformation of Jacob's thinking from "I want to be an astronaut" to "I want to use my future reading to learn more about thinking like a scientist" is common in schools like James Lewis, where teachers understand that a student's initial use of a comprehension strategy doesn't fully indicate the depth of his or her thinking. If we want students to go beyond making superficial use of comprehension strategies, we need to consider some new principles for comprehension instruction.

First, we must *teach comprehension, not just assess it.* In many classrooms, we ask students questions to which we already know the answers. Although I believe that students should be able to answer questions about a text and summarize it in a cogent manner, it is important to understand that asking students to do this doesn't necessarily improve their comprehension skills. If we want to help students become better readers, we must think aloud about our own comprehension processes and give students tools they can use in new reading situations.

To enable students to go from superficial responses to deeper understanding about texts, we need to *give them time.* I modeled how a reader has to take time to think by asking Jacob to give me a moment to consider my response to his initial connections; later, I waited long moments for him to return to the book and consider new ideas that he wasn't aware he had when I first asked. Patiently restating students' first responses and resisting the temptation to answer for them nearly always lead to more thoughtful responses that are more revealing of what the student really understands.

We must *probe beyond students' initial responses.* If I had settled for Jacob's initial connections, I would have missed the interesting thinking he shared about how some people spend their lives seeking solutions to complex problems. We need to believe that students usually have far more thinking to share, but that we have to probe to find it. Given a teacher who wouldn't give up, Jacob

showed that he had much more to say than he had realized.

Finally, we must *consider the outcomes* of comprehension strategy use. If we ask ourselves where comprehension strategies lead a reader, what new insights result from strategy use, we open whole new worlds of insight. For example, Jacob's background knowledge about sleeping bags, of all things, led him to think more broadly about the context for scientific discovery and the people who work toward solutions to scientific problems. Any of the comprehension strategies can lead to such outcomes.

Teachers and students in schools like James Lewis Elementary have begun to explore new horizons in comprehension teaching and learning in a way I never could have imagined when I started working with strategy instruction. They have created physical spaces conducive to in-depth thought, provocative conversation, and lasting understanding—but they have also done something more significant. These teachers understand that they must create an environment in which they expect *and teach* students to comprehend at the highest levels. Ultimately, it matters less that Jacob made a text-to-self connection than that he left the conference with a new way of thinking about the books and the topics that intrigue him so much. EL

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Literacy Starts with

Effective professional development must be at the heart of efforts to nurture adolescents' content-area reading skills.

William G. Brozo and Douglas Fisher

Studies of effective secondary school reading programs demonstrate one thing clearly: We cannot significantly improve the literacy skills of adolescents without comprehensive staff development (Sturtevant et al., 2006). Many middle and high school teachers have not been trained in current theories of content literacy. Without additional support, these teachers often lack the skills to make disciplinary knowledge accessible to all students—especially struggling readers and learners (Brozo & Simpson, 2007).

Our experience working with school-based adolescent literacy projects confirms the need to put professional development at the heart of such efforts. Here, we present five principles to guide such professional development, drawing on our work with Hoover High School in southern California and Foothills High School in eastern Tennessee.

Hoover is an inner-city school that enrolls more than 2,000 students, 99 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and 70 percent of whom speak a home language other than English. In contrast, Foothills, located at the base of the Great Smoky Mountains, is the only high school in a small working-class community of about 7,000 residents; it enrolls about 500 students, 25 percent of whom are ethnic minorities.

Principle 1: Offer teachers a manageable number of new strategies.

Like students, teachers need scaffolding for change. If overwhelmed by having to teach too many new strategies to build adolescent literacy, teachers may find it easier to stick with the status quo.

At Foothills High, for example, the teachers agreed to embrace just three initiatives that would provide consistency for students and a common set of schoolwide teaching experiences for themselves: (1) sustained silent reading to increase time spent with print and to develop the reading habit, (2) use of multiple books and sources to give students experiences with a variety of engaging print genres, and (3) use of lesson impressions (Brozo & Simpson, 2007) to generate interest in class topics and create regular opportunities for content-focused writing. (The lesson impression involves presenting students with several words and phrases to enable them to form an impression of the topic to be studied. Using these words and phrases, students write brief essays or stories, which are then compared with the actual content.)

A commitment to a small but manageable set of strategies helped teachers feel that everyone was putting a common shoulder to the wheel in advancing the literacy reforms. Although we are not suggesting that

the Teachers

three is the magic number, focusing on developing expertise around a specific set of strategies benefits both teachers and students.

Principle 2: Move from workshop to classroom.

Inservice workshops are the most common form of professional development for secondary school teachers in schools implementing new reading initiatives. But to bring about deep learning and lasting change, such workshops must be coupled with support for teachers' sustained efforts to implement literacy and learning innovations (Cooter, 2004).

At Foothills, we provided two full-day workshops to introduce various instructional strategies just before the start of the new school year; then we went into classrooms throughout the year to conduct lessons using those strategies. We followed up with opportunities for teachers to team teach the strategies with us or try them on their own as we observed and provided feedback. Because of this in-class modeling and subsequent support, we observed many instructional improvements.

For example, we conducted a lesson impression in a 10th grade history class as a prelude to students studying an essay about the U.S. Civil War and the writer Stephen Crane. We gave students words and phrases from the essay—including *hero*, *fear*, and *ideal versus real*—and asked them to write short compositions in a genre of their choice

PHOTO BY KEVIN DAVIS

using the words. Some students wrote stories; others wrote newspaper accounts or letters; others created dialogues. The students shared their impression writing with the whole class, and we encouraged them to identify similarities and differences among the various compositions.

Students then read the assigned essay. Next, we gave them Venn diagrams and asked them to chart the main ideas of their lesson impression compositions, the main ideas presented in the essay, and the overlapping ideas. This process kept the class focused and attentive.

Afterward, we met with the history teacher during his planning period to reflect on the effectiveness of the strategy and discuss ways he might use it himself. During the following week, we worked with the teacher to develop his own lesson impression activity for another Civil War topic, General Sherman's march through the South.

After observing the teacher guiding the class through this activity, we met again with the teacher to offer feedback and respond to his questions concerning different ways to implement the strategy with other content and make it even more engaging for his students. After three or four attempts to employ the strategy, the teacher reached a level of comfort and confidence that enabled him to add it to his instructional repertoire.

Principle 3: Establish forums for teacher empowerment.

Many secondary teachers need to not only adjust their practices, but also change their beliefs, accepting greater responsibility for their students' literacy development. Transforming beliefs requires that teachers have a genuine voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating the improvement efforts.

At Hoover High, teachers gathered in focus groups to discuss and propose literacy priorities for their students. Emerging from these conversations were such proposals as daily independent reading, regular teacher-student conferences, and block scheduling. The school put these reforms into practice, and teachers highlighted them as contributing to Hoover's improved student reading scores.

In addition to holding teacher focus groups, the school established a staff development committee to identify strategies for reading across the curriculum that all teachers were expected to incorporate into lessons. After extensive teacher input and research, the committee set the literacy agenda for the school, which included such strategies as writing to learn, K-W-L charts, concept mapping, reciprocal teaching, vocabulary instruction, instruction in note-taking techniques, and readalouds (Fisher, Frey, & Williams, 2002). The committee was also responsible for finding appropriate workshop facilitators to present these strategies at the beginning of the year and for arranging additional monthly meetings during the school day, once a month, in which teachers could discuss their challenges and successes implementing the selected strategies.

Like students, teachers need scaffolding for change.

Principle 4: Vary the formats used in staff development.

Professional development for secondary literacy should not be one-size-fits-all. Instead, schools should make a variety of staff development formats available to teachers. At Hoover High, we use four formats:

One facilitator, 125 teachers. These sessions with the entire faculty are designed to introduce big ideas, motivate staff, and provide an overview of priorities for the year. For example, Hoover has brought in Harry Wong, Jaime Escalante, and Jonathan Kozol to present in this format. These presentations have focused on student engagement, classroom procedures, and improving student achievement in urban schools.

One facilitator, 31 teachers. In these smaller sessions, conducted monthly during teachers' prep periods and facilitated by members of the professional development committee, teachers practice and apply what they learn. They demonstrate content literacy strategies for their peers, discuss implementation challenges, ask questions of one another, discuss professional readings, and engage in collaborative learning.

One facilitator, 4 teachers. In these meetings, which we call *coaching clinics*, a teacher agrees to present his or her implementation of a specific strategy for a small group. Up to four teachers can sign up for each session, which occurs during a prep period. The format is fairly consistent: The presenter has 10–15 minutes to summarize his or her use of the strategy; then each attendee has 5–8 minutes to practice using the strategy in front of the small group. This rehearsal opportunity increases the likelihood that the teachers will use the strategy back in the classroom.

One-on-one coaching. Every eight weeks, 30 pairs of teachers are selected for collegial coaching on the basis of proposals they have submitted to the leadership team. The proposal must specify what instructional strategy the pair will work on and identify dates when each person will observe the other's teaching. To prepare for the coaching, the selected teachers attend sessions focused on peer coaching and

providing nonjudgmental feedback. Over time, teachers have become skilled at observing students at work and identifying instructional strategies that facilitate learning. For example, one pair, which included a history teacher and science teacher, studied vocabulary instruction. The history teacher observed the science teacher using vocabulary journals. The teachers' conversations focused on keeping students interested in word learning through a variety of instructional routines.

In addition to these four formats for in-person professional development, some schools employ technology, such as videos, discussion boards, e-mail lists, and podcasts. Varying the format ensures that all teachers have opportunities to engage, share what they know, and expand their instructional repertoires.

Principle 5: Start with those who are most eager, and then spread the learning.

We have found that it pays to concentrate staff development efforts on those teachers and staff members who show the greatest interest in the reform. Teachers who are eager to learn new strategies and attempt new practices in their classrooms deserve the full support of any professional developer. As individual teachers become increasingly expert in employing innovative literacy strategies, their enthusiasm grows and spreads to the colleagues with whom they interact. At the same time, professional developers need to retain an attitude of openness to all teachers, including those who act more resistant to change, by creating interesting and worthwhile opportunities for them to receive technical assistance and support.

For example, after initial exposure to the strategy in a workshop, a Foothills biology teacher became intrigued by the idea of using print sources other than the textbook to aid the lowest-ability

PHOTO BY BRUCE BENNETT

readers in her class. She sought us out for extra guidance, and within a couple of weeks she was reading aloud to her class from Farley Mowat's novel *Never Cry Wolf* (Back Bay Books, 2001) in conjunction with a unit on ecosystems, in addition to allowing her struggling students to use Internet sites with easy-to-read articles on related class topics.

Convinced that these practices were responsible for increasing engagement and achievement among her low-performing students, the teacher shared the new approaches with her science department colleagues, both formally and informally. Before long, she gained a couple of allies who had originally been less eager to move away from the textbook. All three of these educators sought out our support, asking us to observe in-class demonstrations and provide feedback.

Staff developers should watch for those teachers who are ready to adopt content literacy strategies and who can subsequently facilitate their peers' use of these practices. They should also promote a system of incentives and rewards for teachers who contribute positively to the reform effort. These incentives may include grants, additional resources, elevated professional status, or recognition at events such as trainings or staff meetings.

Responsive Staff Development

In our experience, almost all successful secondary literacy programs are distinguished by an investment in high-quality teacher professional development. In turn, this investment pays dividends in the form of greater student engagement and higher student achievement. Responsive staff development can transform secondary teachers into highly qualified professionals with expertise in both subject matter and content literacy. And students are the beneficiaries. EL

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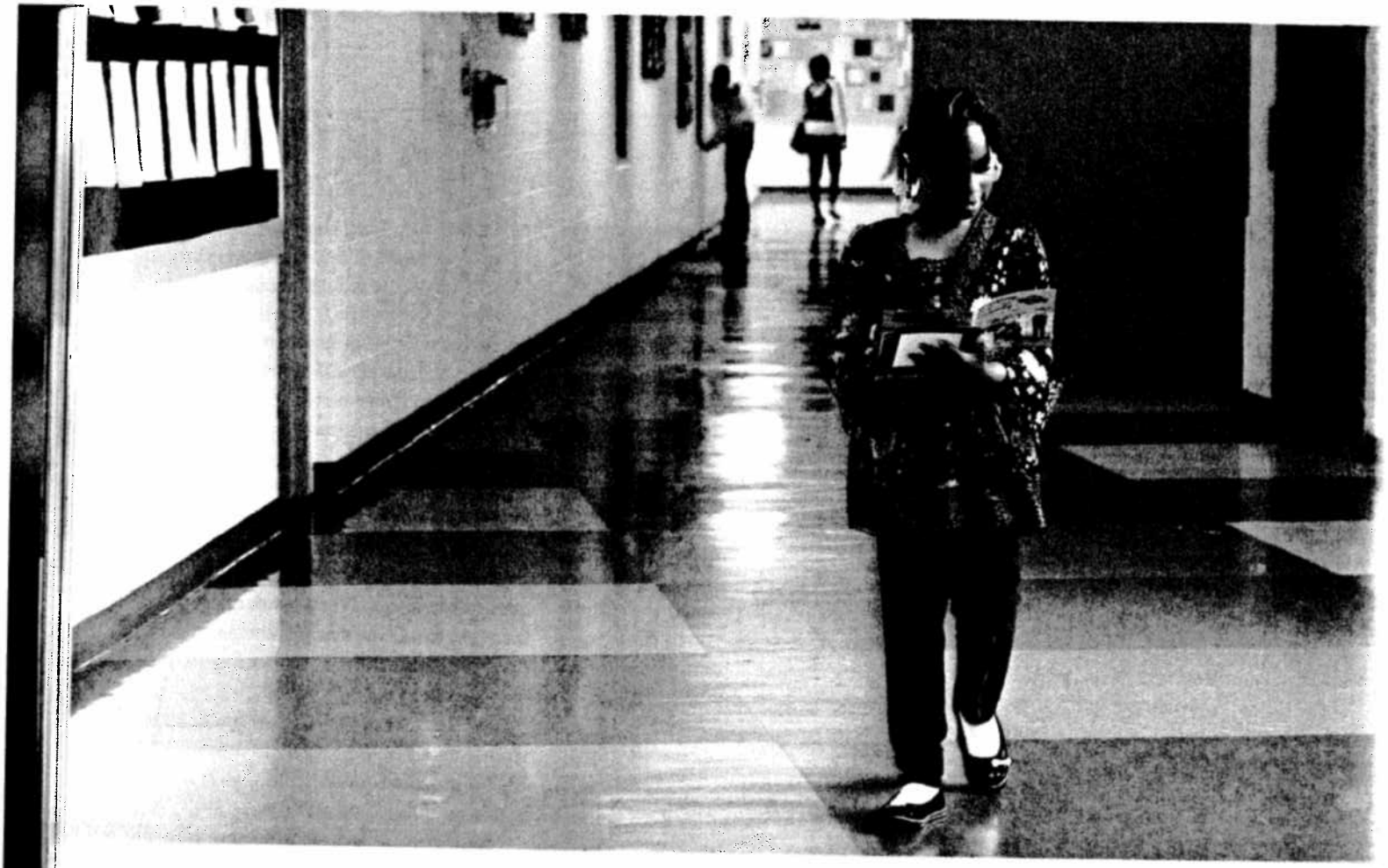

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The Day Reading

You can engage and instruct both advanced readers and nonreaders at the same time.

Bruce Hansen

Kendra and Gerard were opposites. Kendra entered my 4th grade class reading at a late 5th grade level; Gerard tested at the 1st grade level. As outliers, neither child fit into any of my reading groups. It was unthinkable to let Gerard languish or to let Kendra waste a year. How could I help Gerard read and still keep Kendra challenged?

Both students came from similar blue-collar family backgrounds, but Kendra did something that Gerard didn't do. She read for fun. For Kendra, reading was a form of play. She had her nose in a book nearly every free minute. For the sake of Gerard and the other struggling readers in that class, I made it my goal to lead my class to the place where Kendra dwelled: a land where reading was play—something to do during unstructured time.

Evaluating Strategies

I looked carefully at my reading program to see what strategies were most effective at opening the world of reading to my students. The students in my reading groups appeared to be on task and knew what was expected of them. But when reading instruction was limited to skill-based lessons given during our class period for reading groups, most students did not regularly choose reading as a free-time activity, and never once did any of them, including Kendra, pick up our reader during free time. Maybe the reader, its workbooks, and skill-based lessons were not what my students needed.

Story time, on the other hand, seemed to encourage students to read on their own. During story time, I gave students the background knowledge and vocabulary they needed to understand the book I was reading aloud. I also put out copies of the book I was

reading and other books by the same author or in the same genre or topic area. If students picked up these books for silent reading, I counted that as a step toward viewing reading as play.

Sustained silent reading was another successful strategy. I set a timer, and all class members read for 20 minutes. The class goal was that, between whole-class reading instruction time and the silent reading period, each student would read at least 3,000 words in class each day (about 10 pages of a typical 4th grade novel).

Kendra was in heaven. She and the other students already hooked on reading read the entire time and begged for more. Some students who teetered on the edge of seeing reading as play came around when there was nothing to do but read. Before long, many of them were choosing to read even when there were other options.

I made it my goal to lead my class to a land where reading was play—something to do during unstructured time.

Became Play

Reaching the Hard Core

With a robust story time and sustained silent reading, most of my students appeared to enjoy reading. Who was left? The unread hard core: Gerard, Mindy, and a few others. During silent reading, Gerard would idly flip through nonfiction books about airplanes or trucks. He didn't read. He just looked.

Because my nonreaders were flipping through nonfiction texts as a way to avoid actual reading, I decided to require students to read fiction during sustained silent reading. (I did allow students to read nonfiction at other times.) When I announced this new policy, Kendra didn't mind, but Gerard, Mindy, and some other weak readers were lost. They spent much of the silent reading time browsing the classroom library. This wasn't working.

Both Gerard and Mindy had tested at the upper end of the 1st grade reading level, but they resisted the books I offered at their reading level because they were embarrassed to read "baby" books. To address this, once a week I read a 1st grade picture book to the class. The students loved the simple stories and terrific pictures. I told the class that I expected everyone to read at least one of these books a week. (I had whispered to Kendra that the picture book was optional for her.)

Soon, Mindy, seeing that nearly everyone had a book at this level, read without self-consciousness. She started enjoying sustained silent reading and began taking books home to get additional reading points. The combination of forbidding nonfiction and making easier books more socially acceptable also helped Gerard: Within a few weeks, he went from reading just 200 words a day to reading 2,000.

But What About Skills?

I felt good about everything I was doing—except for the elephant in the room that I was trying to ignore. Our school's reading program stated that I should be teaching skills—the very thing that made reading a chore for both Kendra and Gerard.

No one taught Kendra reading skills. She acquired them simply by reading. Maybe I didn't need to teach skills. Maybe I just needed to make certain that my students were reading. I looked at the research and found support for this idea from writers like Stephen Krashen (2004), who wrote,

> When children read for pleasure, when they get "hooked on books," they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called "language skills" many people are so concerned about: they will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop the ability to understand and use complex grammatical constructions, develop a good writing style, and become good (but not necessarily perfect) spellers. (p. 149)

I worried that if I spent my reading block teaching skills instead of promoting reading for pleasure, I would again have to break my students into small groups based on skills. Research has revealed that ability grouping is ineffective—particularly for students in the lowest and highest groups (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). But without these groups, how could I meet the diverse needs of all my students? Would a lesson that engaged Kendra be appropriate for Gerard?

Reading to Learn Together

At about that time, my principal put in my cubby a much-photocopied sheet of paper with some research results. Some of the findings were about the effectiveness of whole-class literature instruc-

tion. (For some similar research, see Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, and Daniels, Zemelman, & Bizar, 1999.) This information gave me permission to abandon skill-based reading using the basal reader and move to engaging novels and other high-quality literature.

With truly beautiful literature, my highest-performing students could be touched and learn something new. If I prepared my struggling students well, they would be able to read and understand more than they could have in any remedial program. They would also gain confidence from being part of the "in" group.

I got my hands on a class set of *Henry and Beezus* by Beverly Cleary, a fabulous story set in the late 1950s. I brought in garage-sale artifacts from that era: everything from vintage roller skates to milk bottles, toys to pants-stretchers. I would start a typical lesson by discussing vocabulary and concepts that students would need to get the most out of the reading that day. Each day, I read part of the story aloud to the class while students followed in their copy of the book.

It became obvious that not all students could learn essential reading and writing skills simply through immersion in literature. Some students were making astounding improvements that often showed up in their own writing, but others, despite enjoying and understanding the book, weren't noticing the "tricks" Cleary used to make her writing so strong. They needed direct instruction, but teaching the skills and techniques in isolation didn't help them.

I noticed, however, that if I explicitly taught skills like using word attack strategies, determining an author's purpose, and making inferences within a literature lesson, students caught on more quickly than when I taught similar material using worksheets. They could see the value of the lesson and apply it right on the spot. It made sense to them. During the reading each day, we paused to discuss Cleary's writing. We used the six analytical writing traits to figure out how Cleary created suspense or humor or how she used punctuation to make her meaning clear (Culham, 2003; Hansen, 2006).

Following my oral reading, students were assigned to reread what I had just read to them. This gave students a chance to practice. Advanced students, like Kendra, did not have to reread; they could read a different Cleary book. Gerard and Mindy reread the book with me, a parent volunteer, or a peer tutor. Once a week, students would partner-read the section they had just read silently, so I could listen and assess fluency. This partner-reading also motivated Gerard and Mindy to learn the hard words. They ached to fit in, and I made sure they were able to read at least two or three pages to a buddy. They were so proud to carry around their Cleary book.

How could I help Gerard read and still keep Kendra challenged?

After the daily reading, students would have a writing assignment connected to what we observed about Cleary's story that day. They also were expected to write at least 90 words in a 20-minute journal period each day. By the end of 4th grade, Gerard was able to meet that goal, and Kendra developed a passion for writing—often taking her journal home to add hundreds of words.

Everybody Learns

The whole-class book enabled me to make certain that my lowest-performing students were reading their 3,000 words each day and to help my high achievers like Kendra to see and learn things far beyond what they could soak up on their own.

The *Henry and Beezus* unit proved to be so much fun that our class could hardly wait until the next whole-class book. At the end of that year, Gerard had gained more than two years in his reading level, according to our placement tests. He gave me a note thanking me for teaching him "to be good and to be a good reader." Kendra gave me an amazing 10-page story she'd written in the style of Beverly Cleary.

I learned more than any of my students. I learned that when students come to enjoy reading, fewer reading skills need to be taught. I learned the value of using excellent literature to give students skills they weren't picking up on their own. Gerard never developed a love of reading, but he did see himself as a reader. And I saw myself as a teacher who could reach students across the ability spectrum. EL

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Robert J. Marzano

Summarizing to Comprehend

As the most cherished skill in the world of language arts, comprehension is also crucial to understanding texts in every other subject area. Although the process of comprehension is complex, at its core, comprehension is based on summarizing—restating content in a succinct manner that highlights the most crucial information. During the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the work of cognitive psychologists (see Kintsch, 1974; van Dijk, 1980; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983) made this clear.

In a series of studies with teachers, we determined that summarizing strategies have a substantial average effect on student understanding of academic content. Across 17 experimental/control studies that teachers conducted, we found that using summarizing strategies, on average, increased students' understanding of content by 19 percentile points (see Haystead & Marzano, 2009).

Summarizing Strategies That Work

As with all instructional strategies, however, we found that some approaches to summarizing are more effective than others. Five strategies appear to influence students' ability to comprehend text.

Strategy #1: Clarify what's important.

Summarizing strategies that do not emphasize text structure have the least powerful effect. Some summarizing strategies simply ask students to sort content into information that is either important or extraneous. The problem with this approach is that it provides no guidance as to how students might differentiate important from unimportant information.

To be effective, a summarizing strategy should help students discern the inherent structures in a text. For example, a story has a structure: There are main characters; there is rising and falling action; there are events that take place in certain locations, and so on. If students are aware that these elements are important aspects of stories, they are more likely to identify them and, consequently, more likely to comprehend the stories they read.

Strategy #2: Familiarize students with multiple text structures.

The story structure is familiar to students because they experience stories early on in their lives and because teachers typically teach story structures as a regular part of language arts instruction. Throughout their schooling, however, students will encounter many other kinds of text structures that are more expository in nature. Unless students recognize these structures, they may be less successful at comprehending the expository content in their textbooks and related readings. Important expository text structures include

- *Description structures*, which describe characteristics of a particular person, place, or thing.
- *Generalization structures*, which begin with a general statement like, "There are a wide variety of consequences for breaking federal rules regarding carry-on baggage on commercial airplanes." Examples illustrating the generalization follow.
- *Argument structures*, which begin with a statement that must be proven or supported. Proof or evidence follows the statement. Sometimes qualifiers identify exceptions to the proof or evidence provided. For example, an argument supporting global warming might list pieces of evidence that make the argument valid.
- *Definition Structures*, which begin by identifying a specific term and then describing the general category to which the term belongs, along with specific characteristics of the term that distinguish it from other terms within the category. For example, a text structure might articulate the characteristics of the process of commensalism, first explaining that it is a type

of symbiosis and then showing how it is different from other types of symbiosis.

- *Comparison structures*, which identify two elements, such as commensalism and mutualism, and list how those elements are similar and dissimilar.
- *Problem/solution structures*, which begin by describing a problem such as "The problem of the divide in wealth between the upper 10 percent of people in the United States and everyone else can be addressed in a number of ways." Possible solutions follow.

Strategy #3: Help students recognize layers.

Such expository structures will help students comprehend relatively short passages. However, long expository texts have structures layered within structures, and each layer represents a unique comprehension task.

For example, a section of text might start with a general statement and then provide specific examples of that generalization. But the discussion might also include a description of a person, place, or thing or a definition of a specific term.

Knowing that texts have many layers of structures is crucial to unlocking the meaning of extended expository discourse. Without this awareness, students might assume that one structure should organize the content; the presence of multiple structures may confuse them.

Strategy #4: Encourage graphic representations.

Along with identifying text structures, it is helpful for students to represent those structures graphically. For example, a student might represent a description structure graphically by drawing a circle that contains the element described, with spokes emanating from the circle noting the various characteristics describing that element. A student might represent a generalization structure by stating the generalization at the top of a chart, with the examples indented underneath to the right. The more subordinate an example is to the generalization, the farther the student would indent it to the right.

Strategy #5: Review essential terminology.

Even if a student recognizes that a section of a science text is organized as a generalization pattern about relationships in nature, she will have little chance of comprehending that section if she does not understand important terms used in the text, such as *meiosis, mitosis, symbiosis* and the like. Teachers should carefully preview texts and ensure that students have at least a basic understanding of important terms.

Making Sense of the Text

Comprehension is crucial to learning—and effective comprehension depends on one's ability to recognize the structures inherent in a text. Spending more time and energy teaching text structures to students and then helping them recognize these structures in their reading can enhance students' ability to comprehend a wide variety of texts.

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Jane L. David

Closing the Vocabulary Gap

Vocabulary size predicts comprehension, but learning new words is especially hard for students who come to school with small vocabularies or limited knowledge of English.

What's the Idea?

Students who enter school with limited vocabularies, especially English language learners, often struggle to understand what they read because they are unfamiliar with many of the words they encounter. This barrier hampers their learning in all the subjects they study. The consensus of researchers and educators today is that such students need explicit vocabulary instruction.

What's the Reality?

Now, as in past decades, most teachers devote little time to explicit vocabulary instruction. Teachers are already under the gun to cover more material than time permits, and they are stymied by the need to devote extra time to vocabulary. Moreover, teachers face the challenge of identifying which words are most important for their students to learn, especially given the large gap in vocabulary size between students with poorly educated or non-English-speaking parents and their more advantaged peers.

What's the Research?

The research shows a strong relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension level; moreover, that relationship grows stronger as students progress through school (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). Because students who know many words can comprehend what they read, they continue to increase their vocabularies and content knowledge through reading. The opposite holds true for students with limited vocabularies, especially English language learners (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006).

Building vocabulary is more difficult than it might seem. Vocabulary signifies more than a list of words—it is a proxy for content knowledge. Learning new words often involves learning new ideas and information; memorizing definitions is not the same thing (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Researchers concur that to "own" a new word for the long term, the learner must see and use the word multiple times in several contexts. The question is, How can teachers accomplish this goal efficiently?

Most teachers devote little time to explicit vocabulary instruction.

Researchers have studied a variety of strategies to help students expand their vocabularies. In one such study, Beck and McKeown (2007) exposed kindergarten and 1st grade students to read-aloud trade books chosen because they included sophisticated words that struggling readers would be unlikely to learn on their own. The students had opportunities to discuss the books, hear the words explained in the context of the story, and hear the words used over the next few days. They learned more words than students in the comparison group, who participated in traditional read-alouds.

Carlo and colleagues (2004) tested the effects of a vocabulary enrichment intervention in which engaging texts and activities were used to teach 5th grade students strategies for analyzing new words using context clues and knowledge of root words and cognates. Students read newspaper articles, diaries, and histories about immigrants' experiences followed by daily work in small groups on such tasks as filling in missing words, making word associations, and playing charades. In classes randomly assigned to the intervention, both English language learners and

native English speakers outscored comparison students on several measures of vocabulary development, including depth of knowledge and understanding of multiple meanings.

No one strategy can do the job alone, however. Because different kinds of words require different approaches—and students' needs vary by age, background knowledge, native language, and motivation—teachers must know and be adept in selecting among multiple strategies (Blachowicz et al., 2006).

Students at the secondary level need to expand their vocabularies rapidly to comprehend the multiple subjects they are learning. This challenge is especially intense for English language learners. Even those labeled as fluent English speakers, whose gaps in English may not be readily apparent, often struggle to develop the academic vocabulary they need to be successful (Butler & Hakuta, 2006).

Across grade levels, teachers get conflicting advice about which words to focus on. Some researchers argue that struggling students should be introduced early on to interesting, sophisticated words, partly to engage their interest and partly to help them catch up to their more advantaged peers (Beck & McKeown, 2007). Some argue for subject-specific academic words, such as *circumference* and *pollination* (Marzano & Pickering, 2005), and others for words that cut across disciplines, such as *synthesize* or *infer* (Coxhead, 2000).

According to one synthesis of best practices for English language learners, the core reading program is a good place to begin choosing words for instruction in the elementary grades (Gersten et al., 2007). Others, however, point out that most basal reading books have little informational text and are therefore of limited help in building vocabulary or background knowledge (Walsh, 2003).

Whichever words teachers choose to teach, researchers agree that they need to provide a variety of structured opportunities for students to encounter and use new words in authentic and engaging contexts. The essential strategy is providing opportunities for students to practice using new words through reading, writing, speaking, and especially conversations led by teachers (Carlo et al., 2004).

To "own" a new word for the long term, the learner must see and use the word multiple times in several contexts.

What to Do?

Students grasp the full meaning of words gradually, with repeated use and varied contexts that illustrate how meanings can change. Whether the word is *of* or *revolution*, students cannot understand its meanings and usage without repeated practice and feedback. Conversations with teachers and peers that home in on vocabulary are one key element. Other elements include associating new words with pictures, creating semantic maps that show relationships among words, playing word games, and when appropriate, linking new words to students' native languages.

Devoting sufficient time to these activities can happen only if all teachers come on board and integrate vocabulary development into their instruction throughout the day. For example, elementary teachers might pick informational texts and stories with rich vocabulary as opportunities to learn new content and new vocabulary, along with careful attention to strategies that support learning the new words. Secondary teachers might use science experiments and movies, as well as written text, as sources for zeroing in on vocabulary development.

Without such concerted, schoolwide efforts, the achievement gap between students with limited vocabularies and their peers will continue to expand. EL

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William M. Ferriter

Can't Get Kids to Read? Make It Social

Recently, the language arts department at my school spent the better part of a meeting wrestling with a challenge: the apparent inability of today's teens to independently work their way through text. Although our students perform well on end-of-grade exams, they struggle with the higher-level questions we integrate into lessons and groan when it's time for sustained silent reading. "They can't seem to focus," said one of my peers. "How can we possibly teach reading when our kids just *won't* read?"

If you've spent any part of your career in text-driven classrooms, I'll bet our concerns resonate with you. Instead of getting lost in a book, students fiddle and squirm or ask to go to the bathroom. They switch titles every few days. They stare at the same page for half the instructional period and seek out books with as few words as possible—explaining the popularity of anime, graphic novels, and image-driven nonfiction titles. Students even skip text providing simple directions; they seem intimidated by any paragraph that continues for more than a few sentences.

These behaviors are discouraging but should come as no surprise. After all, classrooms are one of the only text-driven environments that our students experience. Beyond school, U.S. students spend most of their time with media consuming digital information from televisions, radios, and computers. Much of this electronic information is visual or is processed passively, in small bites.

Of the 11.2 hours each day that the average American spends interacting with information, slightly more than 30 minutes is spent with books, magazines, or newspapers (Bohn & Short, 2009). This shift is having a significant impact on readers, as Nicholas Carr described in his 2008 article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?":

> Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text.

Students seem intimidated by any paragraph that continues for more than a few sentences.

Dragging Back Their Brains

So how can you drag the wayward brains in your classroom back to deeper reading? Begin by recognizing that today's students are driven by opportunities to interact with one another. Conversations—whether they are started on Facebook, through text messages, or in the hallways—play a central role in adolescents' lives. Understanding that participation is a priority, the best teachers create social reading experiences and blur lines between fun and work.

One great tool for creating social reading experiences is Diigo (www.diigo.com), a free online application that allows users to add highlights and comments onscreen to any Web-based text. These comments can be seen by anyone using Diigo and are identified with the commenter's user name. Diigo also enables users to bookmark and "tag" with keywords any online articles that they find fascinating. Classes studying topics

together can share their reading. Articles tagged by one user become instantly available to another, providing a source for continued study and ongoing conversations.

The best news is that creating secure student accounts in Diigo is easy. Teachers can form a classroom group that enables students to see only the articles bookmarked and the annotations shared by their teachers and peers—instead of the comments of the entire Diigo community.

Avid Reading

Social bookmarking applications like Diigo help my classes explore interesting texts and get students reading actively. As students highlight parts of the text they find compelling and add comments in onscreen threaded discussions, they challenge the thinking of their peers and even of the author.

My students read and annotate at all hours of the day—before class, during lunch, or while surfing the Web after dinner—and return to our shared articles time and again to track developing conversations. Their reading has moved from a solitary act to the kind of community-driven practice that resonates with today's teen.

I started my work with Diigo by introducing students to the characteristics of good conversations. We practiced questioning and respectfully disagreeing with the opinions of others. We studied the differences between digital and face-to-face conversations and regularly rated practice annotations that we added to shared texts. (For guidance on setting criteria for annotations, see http://digitallyspeaking.pbworks.com/Social-Bookmarking-and-Annotating.) We reviewed particularly active strands in our Diigo conversations. (Scroll down on the site referenced above for a sample of thoughtful student interaction.)

To structure substantial conversations instead of reactive chatter, I defined five specific roles (listed in the Shared Annotation Roles section of the Digitally Speaking site referenced above) for students working in shared annotation groups. Roles include "Captain Cannonballs," who start conversations by posing thoughtful questions about key ideas in the text, and "Middle Men," who point out common ground between seemingly opposing views in each discussion.

Finding time in a packed curriculum to emphasize this kind of online commenting and responding has been a challenge, but it's been worth it. New opportunities to interact have drawn my students back to text-based studies. Tools such as Diigo are fundamentally changing the reading experience—and effective teachers must adapt to keep their students engaged.

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