

Reading for Understanding

A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms

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Preface: Into the Heart of Reading

In a back room off the school library, a boisterous group of ninth-grade students talk about a newly developed yearlong course called Academic Literacy. They started the course in September, and it is now early December. We have asked these students to discuss their impressions so far. They are eager to talk.

LaKeisha starts, describing the new way she thinks about reading. "When you read, there should be a little voice in your head like a storyteller is saying it. If it's not there, then you're just lookin' at the words." Other students jump in, competing to be heard. They agree they are reading more than they used to. They talk about knowing what kinds of books they like and how to choose a book.

Michael leans back in his chair, arms crossed, and tosses out a mock complaint about his teacher: "Man, she's tryin' to be sneaky! She wants you to pick a book that you are interested in so you will read it more. That's like, what hooks you into reading.... She makes you find a book that you like so you have to read it. Because you like it."

The talk shifts from choosing books to reading what they have to read for their classes. Jason speaks up about a history text he has been reading. "I understand the book more now," he says. "Before, it didn't make sense to me." When asked why he thinks he understands more of his book now, he answers, "Because I read differently now. Like when you're reading, if it doesn't make sense, you can try to restate it in your own words, or you can make questions so you can understand it better. Now I read in between the lines. I basically get into the story, into the heart of it--like reading deeper into what it is saying." Others rush to agree.

The meeting ends forty-five minutes later with cookies and sodas for the students and, for us, a growing sense of excitement. We wonder what will happen as these young men and women become increasingly effective in their reading and begin to add to their self-images the dimension of successful reader. We know that one school year cannot reverse lifelong habits and attitudes about reading, and we realize that we have to continue to nurture this fragile growth. But we also believe in the resiliency and resources that adolescents bring to any challenge they are really determined to meet. We leave the room feeling optimistic about the academic future of these blossoming adolescent readers.

Why We Wrote This Book

The authors of this book are two classroom teachers and two senior staff members of a research and professional development project called the Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI). We decided to write this book to explain how a number of urban adolescents have come to understand reading in new ways. We describe what is happening in dozens of middle and high school classrooms in which we and other teacher colleagues are working to implement a reading apprenticeship approach to literacy instruction. Our goal

is to help secondary students become engaged, fluent, and competent readers of both academic and recreational texts. We want to invite teachers, school administrators, teacher researchers, and others to join us in this effort.

In this book, we

- Provide a framework for thinking about teaching reading that is clear, powerful, and adaptable across the middle and high school curriculum.
- Provide middle and high school teachers with concrete descriptions of the key ideas and practices of a reading apprenticeship approach in a variety of real classrooms.
- Provide practical ideas regarding curriculum, staffing, professional development, materials, assessment, and school politics for educators interested in adapting the approaches described here to their own classrooms and school communities.
- Encourage others to adapt and extend the ideas presented here and to join us in an ongoing dialogue about successful practices for developing stronger readers in middle and high school.

Audience

This book will assist middle school and high school classroom teachers in improving their students' ability to read materials ranging from textbooks to Web pages to novels and will increase students' interest in reading on their own. It will offer guidance to middle- and senior-level administrators such as language arts coordinators and curriculum administrators with responsibility for students' academic performance who are working to improve students' reading at the school or district level. The book will help middle and high school principals support teachers' efforts to increase students' reading ability. And finally, the book will inform educational policymakers and academics who are interested in issues of literacy, equity, and achievement.

Overview of the Contents

Part One introduces the concepts underlying our reading apprenticeship approach. We discuss both the need for improved reading ability among middle and high school students and the reasons we are optimistic that these students can learn not only to read textbooks and related materials with increased understanding but also to make reading an important part of their lives beyond the classroom (Chapter One). We then examine the complexity of reading and the importance of cognitive apprenticeships in its development. We offer a framework for understanding reading apprenticeship, based in four dimensions of classroom learning, and an overview of instructional approaches that support reading development for adolescent learners (Chapter Two).

Part Two describes how we have put the reading apprenticeship approach into practice. First, we set the scene with an overview of the students and curriculum of Academic Literacy, the yearlong reading course that we all helped conceptualize and design and that two of us taught to ninth graders at Thurgood Marshall Academic High School (Chapter Three). Then we present the ways we have put our theories into action, with detailed descriptions of the specific activities we used in Academic Literacy that have greatly improved not only our students' reading abilities but also the way our students think about reading (Chapters Four, Five, and Six). We then examine the ways our colleagues in the Strategic Literacy Network are embedding a reading apprenticeship approach in their regular English, science, social studies, and math classes (Chapter Seven). Finally, we discuss some of the challenges we and our colleagues face in

implementing a reading apprenticeship approach in the light of diverse student needs, curriculum pressures, and increasing demands for testing and accountability (Chapter Eight).

In Part Three we discuss ideas for professional development and schoolwide work toward implementing a reading apprenticeship approach. We describe the methods we have used to help teachers become aware of their own reading skills, acquire a better understanding of the struggles students are experiencing with reading, and prepare to assume the role of master reader to their apprentice reader students (Chapter Nine). We conclude by suggesting ways teachers and administrators might create support for a schoolwide reading apprenticeship program (Chapter Ten).

Our aim in this book is to give readers a new way to think about teaching reading in all subject area classes. We encourage you to experiment with the key ideas, core practices, and sample lessons we weave throughout the book and to adapt and expand on ideas that you find promising. In the Epilogue we tell you how to get in touch with us; we ask you to share with us the impact of these ideas on your classrooms, your teaching, and your students; and we invite you to involve yourself in an ongoing, professional conversation.