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Breaking through the literacy ceiling: reading is demystified for secondary students in reading apprenticeship classrooms, where students can "read to learn" in all their subject area courses

Leadership, Nov-Dec, 2003 by Marean Jordan, Ruth Schoenbach

In the last decade, concern about secondary students' literacy development and ability to comprehend content area academic texts has grown dramatically. The assumption that if students learn to read by the third grade they have the foundation and all the tools they need to "read to learn" thereafter in all their subject area classes is increasingly challenged by the sobering realities of middle and high school classrooms. Secondary teachers encounter large numbers of students who can decode and comprehend at the third grade level or above but are unprepared to make sense of academic texts in their subject area courses.

Many teachers, believing that students are unprepared, unwilling or unable to read academic materials, have stopped expecting students to do independent reading assignments. Instead, they resort to presenting information and concepts in pre-digested form--through lecture, summary, video, multimedia--anything but reading.

As the quote on the next page from a California high school teacher illustrates, it is possible to re-engage and empower adolescent readers, even those who have had little experience and even less success with academic reading.

For the last seven years, the Strategic Literacy Initiative at WestEd has collaborated with secondary teachers and school leaders to put reading materials back into students' hands and to help adolescent readers break through the "literacy ceiling," the invisible barrier that blocks many young people from doing the kind of independent reading and thinking they need to succeed in academic courses, higher education and the workplace (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999).

The result of this collaboration is an interactive approach to reading improvement that we call Reading Apprenticeship. Reading Apprenticeship engages subject area teachers, instructional leaders and students in a partnership of expertise that promotes students' self-awareness and engagement in reading, strengthens their reading performance and builds school, district and regional networks of educators committed to adolescent reading improvement.

Reading Apprenticeship: A partnership of expertise

Classrooms where teachers are embedding Reading Apprenticeship approaches in their subject area instruction, whether in English, social studies, science or mathematics, have several common features:

- * a focus on comprehension and the explicit modeling and teaching of strategies to help students access text-based materials;
- * an emphasis on demystifying reading and making the invisible process of reading visible through metacognitive conversation;
- * a climate of collaboration, in which teacher and students draw on each others' knowledge and serve as resources for one another's learning; and
- * an emphasis developing students' independence and responsibility for their own learning.

Focusing on comprehension

Growing public attention to phonics and decoding has obscured the reality that by the time students reach adolescence, the vast majority have developed basic decoding skills. To become more skilled, confident and practiced readers, and to meet challenging content area and grade level standards, they need many more opportunities to concentrate on the real work of reading--making meaning of academic texts.

In Reading Apprenticeship classrooms, teachers explicitly teach and give students regular opportunities to practice strategic reading of course-related materials. The work of comprehending reading materials takes place at least in part in the classroom, where the teacher can model, guide and scaffold the learning experience, and can observe and give students feedback on their reading performance.

Demystifying the reading process

Subject area teachers are reluctant to call themselves reading "experts," seeing this as the domain of reading specialists. Yet in the course of their academic preparation, teachers have learned to be highly skilled readers of texts in their disciplines: of poetry, fiction and exposition in English; of historical narratives and primary source documents in history; of research articles, lab reports and experiments in science; of word problems and analytical text in mathematics.

Students are expected to make sense of a bewildering range of textual materials across disciplines in

the course of their school day. To guide novice readers through the complexities of discipline-based reading, teachers need to surface the reading knowledge that is so internalized they are not aware they are using it, and learn to explicitly share that knowledge with their students.

This is where the metaphor of apprenticeship comes in. In Reading Apprenticeship classrooms, teachers apprentice students to read, write, talk and think in their discipline. They show students how texts are organized, highlight specialized language and concepts, and "think aloud" about the problem-solving strategies they use when they come to difficult passages. They make the invisible process of their reading visible, and in doing so let students in on what it means to be a skilled reader of text in that subject area.

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