

Literacy Matters

***Strategies Every
Teacher Can Use***

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Introduction

Two teachers are standing at their classroom doors across the hall from each other. They have just been to an early morning meeting about test scores . . .

Mr Lou McGuire: If you can't read, you can't do much else in school. The fact that 30 per cent of the children in our nation's schools can't read is astonishing to me.

Ms Juanita Ramirez: Thirty per cent? This is one of the most literate nations in the world. You must be confusing the data.

Mr Lou McGuire: Somebody's confusing something, but it's not the data on literacy in our schools. According to an article I just read, researcher Bruce Joyce says, 'About one-third of our students do not learn to read in the primary years, and very few of those students learn to read effectively later. The two-thirds who learn to read adequately in the early grades rarely reach their potential then or later' (Joyce 1999, 129). I think we're confused about our priorities.

Ms Juanita Ramirez: I agree. A nation as wealthy as ours has no business neglecting the education of our children. If literacy truly was a national priority, all children would read and they would want to read, because they'd know they owned the key to lifelong literacy and learning.

Does this conversation sound familiar? What *can* teachers do? With *Literacy Matters*, teachers working with students across content areas as well as year levels can promote literacy skills by using fifteen practical strategies. Each letter of *Literacy Matters* represents a strategy, as shown on page 8.

- L**earning to learn involves metacognition.
- I**nquiring readers comprehend more.
- T**apping into prior knowledge supports schema theory.
- E**xtensive reading encourages flexible reading.
- R**esearch on the brain informs educational practice.
- A**nalysis of words promotes reading proficiency.
- C**ooperative learning groups engage learners.
- Y**ou-are-a-reader attitude matters.

- M**ediate with early intervention strategies.
- A**ppealing to parents/guardians gets them involved.
- T**each vocabulary with key words.
- T**echnology impacts literacy.
- E**ntry points honour multiple intelligences.
- R**ead-aloud, read-along, read-appropriately practices foster flexible reading.
- S**trategic reading is guided reading.

Literacy Matters defines each of these strategies and offers best practices teachers can use to help improve student literacy. The strategies not only cover the basic skills of literacy, but they also help students become aware of their literacy skill levels. *Literacy Matters* is a practical guide to enhancing literacy skills at any year level and in any content area.

Learning to learn involves metacognition

Learning how to learn is just as important as what one is learning – going beyond the cognitive and into the realm of the metacognitive. Metacognition is about planning, monitoring and evaluating one’s own thinking and learning. To illustrate the concept of metacognition, think about a student working on a typical mathematics problem. The cognitive part of the lesson is the answer to the problem. The metacognitive part (Flavell 1979) is the student’s awareness of the strategy they used to solve the problem and to arrive at the answer. When the teacher focuses the lesson on the strategy as well as the answer, the student thinks about how they solve problems and those strategies become part of the student’s repertoire for future problems in mathematics as well as in other disciplines. By reflecting on the lesson, the student generalises the learning and can apply it in diverse and novel situations.



*Metacognition is about planning,
monitoring and evaluating . . .*

Learning to learn, or metacognition, is about becoming aware of one’s strengths and weaknesses as a learner. It is about acting on that awareness to change the way one does things. Once the learner is aware, that learner gains control over future learning situations. Teachers must explicitly weave metacognitive strategies into the fabric of the teaching-learning process. It is easily integrated into the thinking processes before, during and after the lesson.

**Best
Practice****Use mediated journals
before the lesson**

It is often appropriate to define terms prior to the lesson; therefore, an examination of the term ‘literacy’ serves as a way to illustrate using metacognition before the lesson. Literacy is a robust concept that can be somewhat ambiguous. What is the definition of literacy as it applies to reading? To help develop a personal definition of literacy, try the following reflective strategy with students.

A mediated journal entry is an entry with prompts by the teacher that cue the student to respond. The prompts get the student thinking by ‘priming the pump’. Using the concept of the mediated journal entry, have students respond to the following prompts to describe a literate person:

1. Name someone you believe is literate (personal acquaintance, celebrity, historical figure or fictional character).
2. List two traits of the literate person you selected.
3. Describe someone who is not a literate person.
4. Tell how the two are different.
5. Write a summary sentence.
6. Title your piece: A Literate Person.

After completing the journal entry, think about the benefits of being a literate person and the repercussions of being non-literate. Some issues might include self-esteem, school and marks, open doors or the gatekeeper concept of ‘closed gateways’ to higher education and other opportunities.

Use literacy ranking during the lesson

A black rectangular box with the words "Best Practice" in white, bold, sans-serif font.

During the lesson, teachers can further examine the elements of literacy by having students rank the four elements of literacy according to strengths: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Students can then justify their rankings of literacy elements with further reflection (see Figure 1).

Return to mediated journals after the lesson

A black rectangular box with the words "Best Practice" in white, bold, sans-serif font.

Again, a proven tool for explicit attention to reflective learning following the learning is the mediated journal, which guides the student entry with lead-ins (Fogarty 1994). Lead-ins do just that. They lead the student to write a reflection. A lead-in leads students to think in critical and creative ways. Notice how the various lead-ins dictate a certain kind of thinking on the part of the student:

I wonder . . .
A conclusion I have drawn is . . .
Comparing the two . . .
What if . . . ?
A problem I'm having is . . .
The easiest part was . . .
My worry is . . .
How might I . . . ?

As students respond to the lead-ins, they begin to solidify their thinking about the learning and they begin to develop a keen awareness about how they learn. This kind of self-feedback is critical to the concepts of lifelong literacy and learning.

Literacy ranking

Rank the elements of literacy according to your strengths:

___ Reading

___ Writing

___ Speaking

___ Listening

Think about how you might pursue your weaker areas or why you might not want to pursue them.

Figure 1

Reading, writing, speaking and listening are inextricably linked in the journey toward becoming a literate person. Use the mediated journal as a literacy tool to prompt thinking prior to the lesson and again following the lesson as a review tool to deepen comprehension. Have students label various sections of the journal. Use labels such as the following:

- Vocabulary
- Summaries
- Characters to remember
- Great beginnings
- Literary illuminations
- Write your own endings
- Kinds of stories I like

Discuss with students how these labels are not only helpful signals about the important information to capture when reading, but also they are helpful following the reading to capture the key points. Compare the mediated journal to typical text organisers such as headings, boldface type and italics. Talk about how the text organisers and mediated entries act as signals to the reader or learner to pay closer attention.



Inquiring readers comprehend more

An active reader is an inquiring reader. Inquiring readers carry on inner dialogues as they read:

- What is this all about?
- What is going on here?
- What is going to happen next?
- What does this really mean?

