

Introduction

Using Power Tools to Improve Adolescent Literacy

In many of the schools where we work, one of three students in the typical year 6–8 classroom reads poorly. For these struggling students, textbooks become harder to read, and learning demands become greater across the years. Comprehension seems to regress after the primary year levels, and many students hit the reading wall. Our observations of classroom literacy instruction reveal significant gaps between research-based practices and prevalent instruction. Observations in 24 middle schools revealed that middle school teachers:

- ◆ engage in modelling as a teaching style only 11% of the time.
- ◆ use small group instruction only about 4% of the time, and rarely differentiate small group instruction.
- ◆ depend on whole class instruction more than 60% of the time.
- ◆ articulate a learning objective about 12% of the time.
- ◆ model fluent reading by reading aloud to students only 8% of the time.
- ◆ engage students in reading about 19% of the time.
- ◆ provide direct teaching of comprehension strategies only 6% of the time.
- ◆ depend on worksheets more than any other resource, using them about 55% of the time as compared to journals (6%), content textbooks (14%) and nonfiction text such as articles and trade books (7%).

Middle and high schools lack 1) a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy across the curriculum, 2) high-quality professional development and 3) classroom resources needed to address a reading motivation problem. Based on our observations, we believe teachers are teaching the only way they know,

Our Beliefs

We believe that teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement when they:

1. **Expect** all students to learn at unprecedented levels.
2. **Get to know and understand** the adolescent learner.
3. **Schedule time** for students to read every day in every class, and include time to write about and discuss what they read.
4. **Build** a high-performance environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal and academic growth.
5. **Plan, plan, plan**, using data for continuous improvement.
6. **Collaborate** in teams to design, deliver and assess effective lessons that integrate high-yield strategies.
7. **Model** comprehension strategies that good readers use every day.
8. **Provide guided practice** that is consistent, systematic and of high quality, and shift **responsibility** for learning to students.
9. **Read aloud** to students every day to model fluent reading.
10. **Launch** learning through compelling learning objectives.
11. **Organise** learning in a variety of configurations—as individuals, pairs, teams and whole class—that promote student connectedness to peers, teachers, classrooms and schools.
12. **Build background knowledge** and teach vocabulary using Marzano's (2004) six steps for instruction.

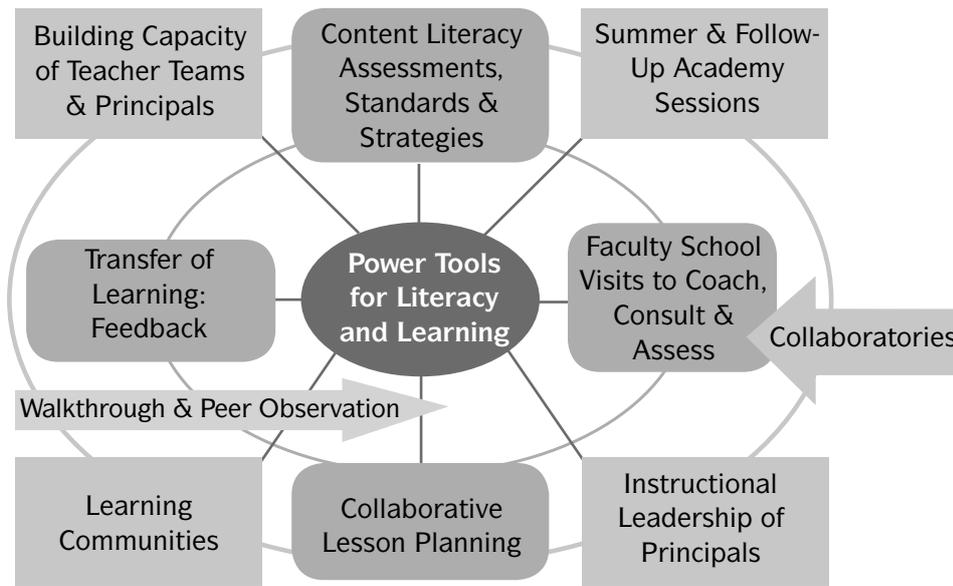


Figure I-1. SURN Adolescent Literacy Professional Development Model

Who Should Use This Book?

In 2005, we were invited to lead a summer academy for teams of teachers and principals from middle and high schools. To help increase the buy-in of the participants in the change effort, we adopted their motto: “To be good is not enough when you dream of being great.” We introduced Power Tools to help *good* teachers refine their lessons by integrating strategies that *great* teachers use to achieve high levels of learning. In this and dozens of other schools, this book serves as a resource for:

- ◆ new teachers beginning the profession who need tools to start their first day
- ◆ career switchers who lack background experience in pedagogy and methods
- ◆ experienced content teachers interested in ways to increase learning
- ◆ principals who want to know what to look for in all core content class-rooms
- ◆ staff developers who plan professional development for schools and areas
- ◆ school-based coaches supporting new teachers
- ◆ groups of teachers participating in professional book clubs or study groups

from the textbook and modelling how good readers use comprehension strategies. She routinely models how to make connections between prior knowledge and what the chapter is about, because she knows that if she does not engage students' prior knowledge and experience, they fail to learn the concepts—or learn them just for the test and then forget them. Elizabeth repeatedly models making connections and the other six comprehension strategies until they become so routine that her students speak the “comprehension” language by using the names of the strategies in class discussions.

Knowing that learning is social, especially for adolescents, Elizabeth organises collaborative groups in a routine called Reciprocal Teaching that emphasises a set of four strategies and provides guided practice of multiple strategies while reading text. Students are accountable for assuming one of the four roles of inferring/predicting, clarifying/monitoring, questioning and summarising. Because she knows some students struggle to sustain attention while reading, she holds them accountable for making their thinking visible by using sticky notes to write their questions, predictions and other notes. Reciprocal Teaching is a routine in Elizabeth's classroom that scaffolds students' comfort, confidence and competence. She feels the pressure all teachers feel to follow curriculum expectations and “cover” content, but she's confident that the strategies her students use every day will support them in understanding her textbook, performing well on the standardised assessments and reading independently, beyond her classroom and the school.

The previous chapter presented instructional strategies for increasing engagement and motivation. The purpose of this chapter is to answer a frequently asked question: *What can teachers do to promote comprehension of the challenging texts students encounter in middle and high schools?* Although this is a complex question without a single, quick solution, the first steps for all content teachers are to provide 1) time for reading and 2) high-interest materials that students are able to read. Then content teachers must help students to read difficult text by teaching strategies.

This chapter describes the “Magnificent Seven”, the seven comprehension strategies that all readers need to use, and explains why adolescents need to know and use these strategies. We also present explicit steps for teaching comprehension strategies and emphasise that all content teachers must model these strategies, not just English teachers. You'll also find directions on how to use the instructional strategy called Reciprocal Teaching and other instructional strategies and graphic organisers that increase student engagement and comprehension before, during and after reading.

Social Science Example

Connections:

I already know that Indigenous Australians were the first people to live in Australia.

Questions: Is Keating referring to his government, or all Australians?

The Redfern Address Prime Minister Paul Keating, 1993

I am very pleased to be here today at the launch of Australia's celebration of the 1993 International Year of the World's Indigenous People. It will be a year of great significance for Australia. It comes at a time when we have committed ourselves to succeeding in the test which so far we have always failed. Because, in truth, we can confidently say that we have succeeded as we would have succeeded if we have not managed to extend love, care, dignity and hope to the indigenous people of Australia – the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is a fundamental test of our social and political values: our national will: our ability to say to ourselves and the rest of the world that Australia is a first rate social democracy, that we are what we should be – truly the land of the fair go and the better chance.

Visualising: I can just see Keating's intense feeling as he reads these words.

Determining Importance:

The major idea here is that Australia is not a fair society as long as its Indigenous peoples suffer unjustly.

Inferring: I can infer that Keating chose Redfern as a place of significance to Indigenous Australia and wider Australia.

There is no more basic test of how seriously we take these things. It is a test of our self-knowledge. Of how well we know the land we live in. How well we know our history. How well we recognise the fact that, complex as our contemporary identity is, it cannot be separated from Aboriginal Australia. How well we know what Aboriginal Australians know about Australia.

Monitoring and Clarifying:

Do I understand what I am reading?

Synthesising: The arrival of Europeans brought pain and suffering to many Indigenous Australians.

Summary: Keating wanted 1993, as the Year of the World's Indigenous People, to mark a new beginning in the way Australians and Indigenous Australians lived together. He felt that the plight of Indigenous Australians was a failure of Australia as a nation, and something that undermined us as a fair and democratic nation. The speech calls on all of us to try and work towards a better and more equal future.