

FOCUS

Elevating the Essentials To Radically Improve Student Learning

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Content-Rich Curriculum and Literacy for All

As Phil Schlechty, author of *Schools for the 21st Century* (1990), notes, “Too many children leave school without having developed the skills, attitudes and habits of mind that will equip them for life in the 21st century” (1997, p. 2). The civic, intellectual, and workplace demands of the new century, writes Schlechty, will require that *all students* can “read, write and cipher . . . think and solve problems . . . draw upon a rich vocabulary based on a deep understanding of language and the human condition” (1990, p. 40).

This is hardly what students now get, even in our better schools (Pianta et al., 2007; Schmoker, 2006; Wagner, 2008). Note Schlechty’s emphasis on literacy, problem-solving, and deep knowledge of “language and the human condition.” These form the basis for authentic literary studies, the social sciences, history, and geography (or “global studies”). But as Schlechty avers, we can’t be satisfied with only providing such an education to the most privileged (1997, p. 12). We need to provide such an “elite education for *nearly everybody*” (1997, p. 40, my emphasis).

Our current system, alas, doesn’t even attempt to provide this kind of rich, rounded education for all. Reflecting on this, Schlechty observes, “There is a crisis and it is real” (1997, p. xv). Interestingly, he says this in response to David Berliner and Bruce Biddle’s widely read 1995 book, *The Manufactured Crisis*, which also contains an incisive call to 21st century education.

Skills for the 21st Century

Many have cited Berliner and Biddle’s book to defend the status quo. They misread the book. *The Manufactured Crisis* contains a bracing critique of typical schooling, of both *what* and *how* we teach. The authors emphatically call for a curriculum rich in content, advanced literacy, and thinking skills. And they lament their manifest absence.

In a section titled “Skills for the 21st Century,” the authors report that we have never provided an intellectually demanding, content-rich curriculum to most students. Their observations are as penetrating now as they were in 1995. Even then, they could see us lurching toward technology in the hope that it would save education, even before we attended to the much higher priorities of curriculum and instruction.

Despite years of lip service, schools have never made the “cultivation of thoughtfulness” a priority. Like John Goodlad (1984) before them, Berliner and Biddle found that students are seldom asked to read and resolve “conflicting views,” to exercise judgment, or to engage in “critical thinking” (pp. 298–299). In the 21st century, schools must ensure that all students become “citizens who are flexible, who embrace new ideas, who can reason well when faced with complex new ideas” (p. 300). All students need abundant opportunities to speak, write, and listen—“to make and evaluate . . . logical arguments[,] . . . solve problems, [and] offer potential solutions to problems” (pp. 300–301). And all benefit from opportunities to connect literature to their lives, to “create meaning from related readings,” and to do their own research (p. 319).

Berliner and Biddle’s understanding of 21st century curriculum includes a ringing endorsement of a shared body of subject-area content. “Let there be no mistake,” they write; students need to learn and acquire a common “knowledge base that constitutes our cultural heritage . . . our country badly needs a citizenry that shares such a heritage” (p. 302).

Content matters. And educators need to be very clear on the relationship between content and our ability to think and reason.

Content *and* Intellectual Skills: More of Both

Any credible curriculum has to embody the link between knowledge and critical thinking (usually done as we read, talk, or write).

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How We Teach

Improved classroom instruction is the prime factor to improve student achievement gains.

Allan Odden and Marc Wallace

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There is a lot of sitting and listening and not a lot of thinking.

Robert Pianta (on his observations of more than 1,000 classrooms)

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Good teaching is good teaching and teachers don't need to adjust their teaching to individual students' learning styles.

Daniel Willingham

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All available evidence suggests that classroom practice has changed little in the past 100 years.

James Stigler and James Hiebert

We've been looking at *what* we should teach—at content and skills, including authentic literacy skills. In this two-part chapter, I will clarify *how* we should teach, again including authentic literacy practices. We'll see how nothing, other than *what* we teach, is more deserving of priority.

The most respected educational researchers speak almost as one on this issue. Linda Darling Hammond argues that “the single most

important determinant of success for students is the knowledge and skills of that child's teacher" (Goldberg, 2001, p. 689). Allan Odden and Marc Wallace observe that "improved classroom instruction is the prime factor to improve student achievement gains" (2003, p. 64). Richard Colvin and Judy Johnson have come to believe that parents and the public deserve far more detailed knowledge of what actually goes on in classrooms. Why? Because of mounting evidence that the teacher's actions can no longer be seen as just one among many factors; teachers are "the most important school factor in how much children learn" (Colvin & Johnson, 2007, p. 36). It is now a well-established fact that even three years of fairly ordinary but effective teaching can completely change the academic trajectory of low-achieving students—vaulting them from the lowest to the highest quartile (Bracey, 2004; Sanders & Horn, 1994).

These facts have finally caught the attention of the popular press. In her recent article in *The Atlantic*, journalist Amanda Ripley describes her encounter with the influence of effective teaching. While reporting on the success of the most effective teachers in Teach for America, she discovered that even in the worst schools, the most simple, ordinary teaching strategies overcome all other factors by significant margins. This is, she writes, "the most stunning finding to come out of education research in the past decade" (Ripley, 2010, p. 2).

What makes these findings most interesting is that "effective teaching" is not some complex combination of talent, technique, or long experience. As Elmore (2000) observes, we are too quick to assume that good teaching is a "mysterious process that varies with each teacher" (p. 16).

As we'll see, anyone can immediately implement the most essential, common elements of good teaching with success—and then get better at them with *practice* (as I and so many other teachers have). Effective instruction consists primarily of just a few ordinary, largely whole-class teaching practices that we have known about for

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English Language Arts Made Simple

Adolescents entering the adult world of the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives.

Richard Vacca

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The explosion of media and technology . . . has made it all the more important that students master the core skills of gathering and evaluating evidence. Reading and writing with independence and confidence will remain master arts in the information age.

Vicki Phillips

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Literature makes significant life possible. . . . [We] construct ourselves from novels, poems, and plays as well as from works of history and philosophy.

Mark Edmundson

Language arts, more than any discipline, has lost its way. It is in desperate need of clarity. To that end, we need to simplify and reconceive English language arts standards. Without meaning to, state standards and assessments have had a uniquely destructive effect here. As currently conceived, they have corrupted language education and its essential mission: to ensure that students

can read, write, and speak effectively in and out of school. New, smarter standards would clarify literacy and ensure something current standards (including the national standards) don't adequately address: that every year, *every student needs to spend hundreds of hours actually reading, writing, and speaking for intellectual purposes.*

In this chapter, I'll advocate for a very simple model of both *what* and *how* we teach in English language arts, starting in the primary grades. I will make frequent references to the literacy template described in Chapter 3. At the end of this chapter, we'll see how three schools assured that their students were spending hundreds of hours reading, writing, and speaking every year.

All disciplines connect and contribute to success in other disciplines. But as we've seen, language competency is the foundation of learning in the other disciplines. As McConachie and colleagues aver, students "develop deep conceptual knowledge in a discipline only by using the habits of *reading, writing, talking and thinking*, which that discipline values and uses" (2006, pp. 8–14).

Many of us know E. D. Hirsch for his ardent advocacy of content knowledge in the disciplines. As we saw earlier, that hasn't prevented him from concluding that literacy is "the most important single goal of schooling"—a reliable indicator of general competence and life chances (2010, p. 1). Language arts matters greatly in every subject area—a fact that the national standards quite formally (and admirably) recognize. If we can get this discipline right, the benefits will be amplified throughout the curriculum.

It all starts with reading.

The Life-Changing Power of Broad, Abundant Reading

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If you're born poor, you'd better start reading.

Joe Queenan

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