

Reading and Writing
Strategies *for the* Secondary

ENGLISH

Classroom *in a* PLC at Work[®]

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PREFACE

To begin this book, and to immediately demonstrate the value of professional learning communities (PLCs) to support positive, thoughtful collaboration, we want to share a real-life experience we had with a group of fellow English language arts (ELA) teachers in our school. We believe this serves as an example of the familiar struggle occurring in many schools when even ELA teachers struggle to approach literacy instruction. It's important to emphasize at this point that, when we refer to *literacy*, we mean the act of engaging, knowing, and ultimately being able to navigate new understandings of known and unknown nuances associated with defined content. So, during one of our early conversations about working through prereading strategies, it stood out when one teacher said, "I don't have enough time to work through the reading process if I am going to get through the novel by the end of the term. Students already know how to read."

The conversation that ensued was difficult. Many of the teachers on our collaborative team understood the concept and importance of prereading, and we realized the value of connecting information to students' existing knowledge and the value of building prior knowledge bridges for students to learn new information. But at the same time, even for this group of ELA teachers, teaching the reading process (prereading, during-reading, and postreading skills) had seemingly fallen out of practice for many. For whatever reason, many of us were bypassing these important steps in the reading process. This discussion led us to an epiphany: Could it be that many grades 6–12 ELA teachers assume students know how to read? Have ELA teachers stopped teaching reading skills in favor of an in-depth exploration of the literature we love and admire?

It seems that we were not alone in our questioning. In a report, the Carnegie Corporation of New York (2010) notes "the downward spiral of adolescent reading achievement levels," also pointing out that "U.S. students in grade four score among the best in the world, yet by tenth grade students score among the lowest in the world." These findings indicate that we need to do a better job of teaching literacy.

We could see this effect at work in our own classrooms. In our various discussions with colleagues about teaching and learning, declining literacy skills were a clear concern that arose as a top priority. Many of us saw it daily in student writing that showed a clear inability of some students to clearly convey inferential and applied thinking. Others heard it every day in students' slow and painful reading, despite these students being adolescents. As teachers, we knew we had to navigate each of these realities carefully—we simply could not send our students out into the post-high school world with such drastic deficits.

So, our team had to make a decision: either return to incorporating reading skills into the curriculum or continue to forgo vital educational needs to instead focus on what we love and want students to take away from our beloved novels and texts. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive, but the reality is that by taking the time to develop students' reading processes, teachers might have to let go of some other favorite elements of their ELA studies.

Facing this decision, our team acknowledged that, as ELA teachers, we needed to recommit to being reading teachers, and we hope this example and this book drive home for you the need to make this same commitment in your school and classroom. The increasing gaps in students' abilities to read effectively demonstrate the need to make literacy instruction a priority in all classrooms, and the English classroom is no exception.

As students move through their middle school and high school experiences, many fall behind their peers, not learning how to *read to learn*. As literacy experts at our school, we (the authors of this book) realized this early on in our experiences when we discovered that many of the ELA teachers we work with don't make use of reading strategies to support students throughout the reading process. We didn't expect to discover that many ELA teachers don't have much background in teaching reading. As they shared with us, many grades 6–12 ELA teachers' expertise is more focused on teaching literature, and by the sixth grade, they assume that students have already *learned to read*. However, just learning to decode and read text is not enough. Students need to be able to engage with a text and be accountable for pulling out important information (read to learn) and not just pronounce the little typed characters on the page. Likewise, they worried about covering the lists of Common Core State Standards for English language arts (CCSS ELA) they were expected to get through by the end of the school year.

Consequently, our ELA teams—small collaborative groups in our PLC that were focused on various courses in the department—returned to concepts and

pedagogy that we knew but did not always think about or implement: prereading strategies, during-reading strategies, and postreading strategies. Why did we return to these strategies? Because in the end, we realized from our own experiences as readers that these are the steps that successfully literate people engage in when reading. Together, we began to explore how best to set our students up for successful reading experiences—based on thinking through our own habits as literacy experts.

During our collaborative work with ELA teachers, we also brainstormed a list of reasons our team felt students struggled in our classes.

- ▶ Students might have weak historical knowledge, cultural knowledge, or both.
- ▶ Students might have poor knowledge of reading strategies, poor usage of reading strategies, or both.
- ▶ Students might have difficulty remembering and focusing on important details.
- ▶ Students might have difficulty making logical inferences.
- ▶ Students might function as *pseudoreaders* (Buehl, 2017) who fake their way through reading or avoid it altogether.
- ▶ Students might struggle with their core writing skills with a need to improve focus, increase their use of evidence, and provide clearer justification.

For our team, the goals became clear. We needed to equip our students with improved reading skills to address the CCSS ELA. We needed to better prepare them for the reading skills they would encounter at the collegiate level, and we needed to teach them how to become lifelong readers for purpose and enjoyment. Furthermore, we knew that schools that invest in PLC at Work[®] culture work in ways that are more unified and cohesive, prioritizing shared concerns and working together to innovate (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016). Our team vowed to return to the core commitments of PLCs to help it commit to the collaborative process, focus on student learning, and better understand how results can help us reflect on and plan for student growth. Together, we began the process to bring teaching reading back into our classrooms—with the disciplinary reading lens of literacy experts.

Why a disciplinary lens? Because we know that it is important for students to adjust their thinking and reading strategies in each discipline to think more like

an expert on that subject (Buehl, 2017). In mathematics, students should read and think like a mathematician; in science, students should read and think like a scientist; and in ELA, students should read and think like literary experts.

In this book, we are excited to share ways a PLC culture can effect change when thoughtful educators dedicate themselves to supporting the literacy development of all students. ELA teachers have a special opportunity to lead in this work due to the clear relationship between ELA content standards and literacy processes—an opportunity that we will explore from collaboration and classroom perspectives.

We hope that these ideas can help develop your collaborative partnerships at your school, or that this book can serve as a strong resource for your teaching if you don't have other literacy experts to collaborate with to enhance your teaching and learning.

In working within our collaborative teams, the ELA teachers in our school soon realized that the extra time it takes to teach reading skills has great benefits for student learning and student performance. Our teachers saw increased basic comprehension, increased engagement, and better thinking throughout the reading. Taking the time to teach students to read to learn helped teachers develop the more difficult skills demanded by the standards they had listed in their curricula.