

Cracking the Code for Academic Literacy

Like many high school teachers, Gayle Cribb had grown accustomed to “teaching around the text” in her history classes. What started as a way to accommodate students’ variable reading skills, including those of many students who were English language learners, spiraled into a pattern of “delivering the content without requiring much reading.” As a result, struggling students continued falling behind, and many fluent readers failed to grasp the specific strategies historians use to build and deconstruct their subject.

“There was a lack of rigor,” acknowledges Cribb, who has worked at Dixon High School in northern California since 1979. “I sensed there was something missing, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. It was text. You can’t nail things down as firmly without text to provide common reference points.”

Cribb credits Reading Apprenticeship (RA) for showing her how to crack the code. RA, a model of academic literacy developed by WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative, helps teachers use and explain the reading comprehension strategies distinctive to each content area. Whether historians interpret events through cause and effect, or scientists analyze experiments using controls and variables, all subject specialists read, write, and think using different lenses and academic vocabulary. RA instructs teachers how to make those processes understandable to students.

Building Literacy Skills to Meet Higher Academic Standards

“Many students, even those in honors classes and otherwise doing well in school, invest a lot of energy in hiding their lack of understanding of complex texts and of the reading processes that help make sense of them. They ask, ‘What am I supposed to be doing when I’m reading?’” explains Cynthia L. Greenleaf, Co-Director of the Strategic Literacy Initiative. “Students don’t really know, because these content-specific ways of thinking and writing are invisible.”

By demystifying the techniques of close reading in each content area, the RA approach not only helps students do better in school, it also makes it possible for them to succeed in college and careers. In higher education and the workplace, people need to know how to comprehend various kinds of text in order to engage in higher-order thinking—making inferences, synthesizing information, analyzing arguments, verifying credibility of sources, and understanding and following complex directions.

As more states adopt the new Common Core Standards, which require students to develop advanced literacy skills in all subjects, RA’s rigorously researched model of learning could be a catalyst for changing the way reading is taught in high school. Over the next four years, the RA

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model will be the focus of a major scale-up initiative called Reading Apprenticeship Improving Secondary Education (RAISE), which will involve more than 400,000 students and 2,800 teachers in five states (California, Indiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Utah). As part of the initiative, nine teachers at each participating school will each receive 10 days of targeted professional development and ongoing support from WestEd specialists during the first two years of implementation. Those teachers, in turn, will work with their colleagues and WestEd staff to spread the recommended practices across the schools.

The timing is crucial if schools hope to meet the higher learning goals established by the Common Core Standards. These new benchmarks require students to “read and make sense of a variety of texts in ways that more closely resemble the disciplinary ways,” Greenleaf says. “It’s a much higher, more advanced description of what literacy entails.”

RA starts by asking teachers to think about how they comprehend text within their subject specialties. For many teachers, the process of making meaning with disciplinary texts has become so automatic that they may not consider that others don’t know how to do it. And because teachers rarely collaborate across disciplines, they may not understand both the distinctive and overlapping skills necessary to read knowledgeably in different fields. Deconstructing and sharing those techniques with one another is the first step in learning how to make them clear to students. “There are text features and discourse features, things we need to pay attention to in every subject,” says Ruth S. Schoenbach, Co-Director of the Strategic Literacy Initiative.

Guiding Students to Engage With Text

Students need to grasp the purpose of reading various texts, Schoenbach says, as well as the specific skills involved. For example, reading a novel for pleasure is different from analyzing a poem to identify literary techniques. Reading a newspaper article about global warming is different from reading a scientific abstract. A good reader might ask, “Will I need a basic summary of information to confidently discuss the topic in class?” or “Will I need precise data to use in a research paper?” RA shows teachers how to make those metacognitive processes explicit for themselves and then for their students.

Through such techniques as thinking aloud about text, modeling the mental processes required to understand it, and providing explicit instruction about the ways print and images convey meaning, teachers can make close reading an integrated part of content instruction. Using a range of whole-class and small-group conversations, they plant the seeds of inquiry, asking probing questions and encouraging students to do the same.

Teachers can also share their own struggles with reading, particularly with texts outside their fields. Dixon High School English teacher Lisa Krebs says students are amazed and empowered “when a teacher is willing to stand up and say, ‘This is really difficult for me,’ or ‘When I was 20 I didn’t get it, but at 30 I really understood it, and at 50 I’ll understand it even more.’ When they see comprehending literature isn’t a piece of cake, you’re on the same team.”

Similarly, teachers discover how students’ background knowledge and misconceptions can enrich or impede their understanding of text. At the beginning of a unit, the RA model recommends that teachers find out what students know—or think they know—about various topics. By creating a



safe environment for sharing confusion as well as breakthroughs, teachers signal that reading is a way of reasoning with text that everyone can learn and practice.

One of the unique features of RA is the value it places on the social and personal dimensions of reading for understanding. Students spend a lot of time reading and discussing text together, learning to value one another's experiences and insights, look beyond superficial answers, and change their beliefs based on evidence. Such conversations often elevate the status of students previously considered marginal learners because, regardless of their formal academic skills, these students help classmates gain a deeper understanding of ideas in the text, based on their knowledge and experience.

Cribb says this shift became clear to her when her Mexican immigrant students shared sophisticated insights about Depression-era economics and politics. They had intimate connections to the personal and social dynamics of scarcity and migration, she says, making rich connections to text that their classmates couldn't.

A colleague told Cribb how these exchanges had created bonds between different groups of students. One day, the colleague said, a special education student was absent from class. During the ensuing reading discussion, one of the high-achieving students looked around to the vacant desk and said, "Where is Charlie today? We need him."

"That's such an important contradiction," Cribb says, to the way students typically experience reading in high school.

Integrating RA Into Schoolwide Improvement Efforts

Research indicates that RA has benefits for teachers as well as students. Three separate, multiyear studies showed that the RA model strengthened teacher practices and substantially improved students' literacy skills and content knowledge. Moreover, gains were most significant for students who were English language learners. Since inception in 1995, the RA model has spread to 34 states, with more than 77,000 teachers participating in related professional development.

Key lessons from those experiences include the importance of integrating the model with subject area texts and units of study in professional development, as well as providing ongoing support for teachers and encouraging cross-disciplinary ties. The RA model works best when it's part of a schoolwide community-building effort focused on literacy. That's why the focus of the multistate scale-up initiative will be spreading the RA model across all departments in the participating high schools. High school students in the RAISE initiative will have the opportunity to learn from multiple RA-trained subject area teachers across several grade levels, experiencing a web of support for academic literacy learning over their high school career.

In addition, WestEd plans to develop a web portal to provide interactive exchanges and share resources and tools among all schools in the RA network; build capacity for supportive leadership within the schools and at the district level, including support for literacy teams to share effective practices and provide professional development, in order to sustain the scale-up; and encourage new faculty members and administrators to come on board.



“Often, so many different reforms are taking place in schools that it’s hard for faculty to focus their efforts,” Greenleaf says. Teacher leaders and administrators “need an understanding of how RA fits into other reforms, such as adopting the Common Core Standards. It’s a means to an end.” Importantly, the end goal of RA is a higher set of expectations for teaching and learning and a new vision of student capability.

“I think going through the (RA) training taught me how to teach better than any teacher education class I had in college,” says Krebs, who has taught at Dixon for 14 years and used RA for the past 10. “I understand my goals as a teacher, my purpose. My purpose is to inspire a learner, not just have them memorize Shakespeare. It’s helping kids get a vision for themselves through reading and thinking and participating in the greater conversation.”

For more information about the Reading Apprenticeship approach and the research documenting its effectiveness, contact Cynthia Greenleaf at 510.302.4222 or cgreenl@WestEd.org, or Ruth Schoenbach at 510.302.4255 or rschoen@WestEd.org.