Turning the Tables in Manitoba Schools: Taking a Long View of Professional Learning and Literacy Development

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Introduction

“Lots of people struggle with the idea of spending time or ‘wasting’ time teaching reading. I often hear teachers wonder, ‘How am I going to fit in everything that the curriculum demands when you’re asking me to teach kids how to read? They already know how to read...’ When teachers take the time with students to uncover the ways of reading and thinking in their subject areas, the acceleration and depth of learning is incredible. Once kids understand how to sort reading, they take ownership of their learning. So instead of it being about me up at the front rehashing what they should have already read and understood, they can figure that out together and on their own. Teachers end up not only saving time, but students develop deeper understandings.” (Middle Years teacher)

As students enter middle and senior years, they are presented with an increasingly wide range of literacy demands as they participate in a wider range of academic disciplines. Students are asked to engage with multiple and varied texts, ideas, and discourses, as well as to become proficient with the literacy practices associated with each of these disciplines. Reading too is a complex, interactive process requiring much more than a single set of basic skills. Though all academic reading involves comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, and critiquing texts (Norris & Phillips, 2003), each discipline or subject area has its own conventions that learners must master in order to navigate increasingly specialized texts (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Lee & Spratley, 2010; New London Group, 1996). Academic literacy can be challenging for all students: Even students who do reasonably well in class and perform well on tests can find comprehending and interpreting class texts to be a challenge.

In the past, reading support has been presented as a remediation pulling students away from disciplinary learning in the service of becoming better readers. What has become apparent, however, is that students benefit from authentic and purposeful literacy experiences: “abundant evidence shows that students tend to be ill-served by having to do
basic, skills-focused reading exercises at the expense of time spent engaged in reading, writing, and talking about academic content” (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007, p. 12). Because we know that students will not gain experience as readers unless they have ample opportunities to engage with complex texts and the discourse surrounding these texts, it is clear that a shift in focus in our classrooms must occur for students to gain these experiences. The Strategic Literacy Initiative has been engaged in research and inquiry for the past twenty years to consider how this status quo might be disrupted to enable students to fully engage with disciplinary discourses and practices.

**The Reading Apprenticeship Framework**

The Reading Apprenticeship framework fosters cognitive and non-cognitive learning factors that support students in building these bridges in four overlapping dimensions of classroom life (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012).

- **The social dimension** involves building community. The classroom becomes a safe environment where students feel comfortable sharing what they have understood and what they struggled to understand in complex texts. They see other students and their teacher as resources for learning. In such a community, students can engage in productive, academic behaviours.

- **The personal dimension** includes developing students’ identities as competent readers and learners, and building their awareness of their purposes and goals for reading and learning. Students who can connect current academic tasks to future career or educational goals are more likely to exhibit persistence and other behaviours that support academic performance.

- **The cognitive dimension** involves developing students’ mental processes, including their problem-solving strategies with academic texts. Effective learning is characterized by metacognition, self-regulation, and cognitive strategies that contribute to deeper understanding and learning, improved academic performance, and feelings of self-efficacy.

- **The knowledge-building dimension** includes identifying the knowledge readers bring to a discipline and its texts, and further developing that knowledge through interaction with the text, the learning, and other readers and learners. As they read, students build their knowledge of the content of the text and also of language and word construction, genre and text structure, the variety of representations, and discipline-specific discourse practices.

  [See &lt;http://readingapprenticeship.org/our-approach/our-framework/&gt;.]
A focus on extensive reading and discussions of texts surrounds the social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions of classroom instruction. At the centre of Reading Apprenticeship is an ongoing conversation in which the teacher and students think about and discuss their personal relationships to reading and learning, the social environment and resources of the classroom, their cognitive activity, and the knowledge required to make sense of content-heavy texts. This metacognitive conversation is carried on internally, as the teacher and students read individually and consider their own mental processes, and externally, as they talk about their processes, resources, and motivations for reading and discuss their interactions with texts.

Within this framework, and grounded in authentic, purposeful literacy experiences, students are able to become increasingly aware of their own reading processes and the practices they engage as they read.

“What Reading Apprenticeship has done is allowed me to expose how I think when I read scientific texts, how I read a diagram, how I understand what's going on, when I summarize, how I make meaning. When I expose those strategies to students and I model that to them and show them, they were able to say, ‘Oh, that’s something that I’ve never done before,’ or ‘Hmmm, that’s interesting. Maybe I’ll try that.’ For some kids, they started to be able to name the processes by which they understood reading.”

(Middle Years teacher)

Reading Apprenticeship works in combination with any curriculum to teach students to successfully engage academic texts and knowledge in specific disciplines. Teachers apprentice students by modeling, mentoring, and providing scaffolded support to explicitly teach the tacit reasoning processes, strategies, and discourse rules used to comprehend the particular texts of each discipline.

[See the video resources at the end of this article for classroom examples.]

**Turning Tables: Classroom Implementation**

These goals for apprenticing students into disciplinary ways of reading and thinking may require a distinct shift in teaching practices in many contexts. Practices such as teaching
around the text; doing the intellectual work for students; or asking them to be passive recipients of knowledge through lecture and power points, explanations and interpretations, or copying, reciting, or remembering key facts will not support students’ growth as readers. The tables must be turned so that students are the ones grappling, inquiring, and asking questions. Learning contexts can provide opportunities for students to make meaning, build knowledge, identify and solve problems, use evidence, and construct arguments.

Research has underscored the necessity of explicitly showing students how to carry out literacy tasks, building bridges from their personal and cultural knowledge and language experiences to the language and literacy practices valued in school and society (RAND Reading Study Group, 2000). The complexity and value of this process of supporting teachers and students in engaging in joint inquiry surrounding their reading and thinking processes cannot be underscored enough. This has become increasingly imperative as we move into an era in which all students need support to gain discipline-specific literacies, and this is the focus of the partnership that has been developed by the researchers at the Strategic Literacy Initiative and Manitoba schools.

Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, the Border Land School Division, École secondaire Kelvin High School, École River Heights School, and Centre scolaire Léo-Rémillard embarked on a three-year pilot project of Reading Apprenticeship in August 2011 with a focus on collaborative, professional inquiry and learning. Divisional and school leadership teams committed to ongoing and intensive leadership training in Reading Apprenticeship and a consistently growing number of teachers from each school participated in ongoing training. Throughout this process, Reading Apprenticeship leaders and teachers sustained the professional learning, conversation, and reflection through collaborative student work analysis, coaching and mentoring, book study, classroom
observations, demonstrations, and collaborative teaching. Together, educators in the pilot pondered and experimented with processes for foregrounding metacognitive conversation in their classrooms in order to empower students’ development and meaningful use of disciplinary literacy practices. This work has shifted what teaching and learning look and sound like in our schools and classrooms.

**Students**

In this approach, students learn to experiment, fail, modify the parameters, and try again—thus developing their personal identities as resilient learners, their belief in the value of academic effort and persistence, and their mastery of learning strategies that support academic achievement. As they take up more and more responsibility for and ownership of their own learning, students are able to reimagine academic learning and reading as much more than memorizing and regurgitating information. They expand their identities as
learners to become questioners, meaning makers, thinkers, and designers. Students begin to perceive the classroom as a space for collaborative inquiry and problem-solving, and their peers and teachers as resources for their learning. As students engage with this intellectual work, they become more aware of their personal learning and reading processes and tap into others’ ways of knowing. Over time, students are able to take control of their learning and more independently and effectively take up the practices they tried and developed together. Students’ awareness of their own learning process is made visible through metacognitive conversations.

The Role of Metacognitive Conversation

Students who are aware of their own thinking develop strategies to control their learning processes. They can articulate not only what they understand but how they understand it, becoming aware of how language is used both in academic texts generally and within specific disciplines. In Reading Apprenticeship classrooms, there are ongoing metacognitive conversations. Classroom routines support making thinking visible while reading and discussing text. Teachers and students use “Think Alouds” as a routine to explore and make visible the ways of thinking and using language characteristic of a specific discipline. In classrooms in Manitoba where this is indeed a routine, students are more readily able to talk metacognitively about learning, advocate for their learning needs, collaborate effectively with their peers, and, in the end, think more deeply. In other classrooms where the focus is placed on the activity, students feel uncertainty about purpose and even frustration about repetition. The benefits of such “routines” are thus not realized.

Teachers

Teachers help marshal the resources needed to interact with a range of texts and ideas, and to solve comprehension problems, simultaneously demonstrating their own problem-
solving strategies and linguistic and knowledge resources when they orchestrate collaborative meaning making in the classroom.

“I feel much more like an actual teacher even though I don’t teach knowledge in the same way.” (Middle Years teacher)

“I did my best to create a Reading Apprenticeship classroom which included a lot of getting to know each other with the students and really trying to build an atmosphere of reading right from the start. One thing that I really observed over time in my classroom was that students became very close as a class. They became much more at ease with speaking out in front of the class and much less fearful. There was a lot of risk taking that I hadn’t seen in classes before.” (Senior Years teacher)

Teachers focus on building academic identity and dispositions for complex, intellectual work, including stamina, persistence in the face of academic challenge, and self regulation—the academic mindsets that are critical to literacy (Torgeson, et al., 2007), and, more broadly, to academic success (Farrington et al., 2012; Snipes et al., 2012; Yeager & Walton, 2011). In Reading Apprenticeship professional development, teachers learn to develop students’ academic identity as resilient learners and their dispositions to engage in academic tasks by creating relevant and safe learning opportunities in which risk taking is rewarded. Through metacognitive conversations, Reading Apprenticeship teachers “normalize struggle” (Grundman, 2009; Walsh, 2002), demonstrating that all readers face comprehension problems when they confront complex texts on subjects in which they have limited background. Normalizing struggle shifts the definition of success from performance to the process of learning. Providing structures that enable students to collaborate in understanding difficult texts, Reading Apprenticeship teachers help students marshal the resources they need to solve comprehension problems. At the same time, teachers demonstrate their own problem-solving strategies and how they use their linguistic and content-knowledge resources.

As teachers in Manitoba enacted these recommended shifts in practice, there was significant increase in student engagement, confidence, understanding, and achievement.
Teachers who piloted for three years became more efficient with time and more effective in their planning. Most noticeable was the shift in practice over time. Teachers moved from a focus on more concrete activities or tools to a focus on embedding the Reading Apprenticeship framework as a foundation for their curricular decisions and planning. Teachers also became increasingly able to design responsive instruction through careful observations of students and student learning.

“I am 3 weeks behind in my course, but my students have never learned as much.” (Senior Years teacher—First year of pilot)

This idea of turning tables caused some teachers to worry about disciplinary focus and depth of learning; however, as teachers became more adept at modeling and scaffolding metacognitive conversation, they noticed students digging into learning more deeply and working collaboratively to solve problems. They also noticed students taking ownership of their own learning and, consequently, taking up increasingly disciplinary ways of thinking and of constructing knowledge. Teachers became more grounded in the inquiry into their practice and their students’ performance, using this to continually refine opportunities for learning and disciplinary discourse.

A great benefit of this work might be that teachers themselves have become more metacognitive and reflective about their own practice. They too have increased their engagement and confidence and see themselves as responsive, reflective practitioners and collaborative inquirers.

Leaders

“With careful planning and support for teachers, students in classrooms where teachers are practising Reading Apprenticeship are experiencing real growth in their capacity to think, inquire, solve problems and participate in meaningful disciplinary discourse. I think Reading Apprenticeship is a key to ‘quality classroom instruction’ across all curricula.” (Assistant Superintendent)
Practices foregrounded by teachers and students in classrooms are also taken up by all members of an effective school system. Metacognitive conversation, reflection, and collaborative inquiry ground and facilitate everybody’s learning, and build coherence across the system. Although individual educators may have profound effects on students in their classrooms, communities working together stretch and sustain these individual efforts. The most remarkable growth in student learning and teacher capacity was evidenced by school divisions that ensured

- coordinated leadership that actively involved divisional administration, school administration, and teachers in planning toward a shared vision and common goals
- deliberate, intentional, and ongoing collaboration across school teams and within schools
- shared expertise and collaborative decision making and problem solving
- expected and ongoing professional learning through examination of student work, collaborative problem-solving, coaching and mentoring, and classroom observations
- consistent framing of professional conversations around Reading Apprenticeship dimensions, metacognitive conversations, and observations about student learning
- consistent and regular collaborative analysis of meaningful data about student growth and progress to inform classroom planning

**Conclusion: Sustaining the Learning**

Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning continues to prioritize the important literacy work of educators and students. The professional learning and inquiry through Reading Apprenticeship has had profoundly positive impacts on student learning, engagement, and confidence. Educators too have shown significant growth in their confidence and practice.
The ability, however, to sustain and support the deepening of this approach to literacy learning necessitates a long-term view and consistent focus. Inherent in this work is the understanding that developing disciplinary literacies, in all of their forms, is a complex and wide-reaching goal. As teachers and leaders continue to engage in joint inquiry into practice, and as teachers continue to apprentice students in literacy learning experiences, this work continues to move forward and deepen.

**Resources for Educators**

See examples of Reading Apprenticeship classrooms at


See examples of publications that articulate the work of the Strategic Literacy Initiative at


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