

# Learning From What Doesn't Work

*Gay Ivey and Douglas Fisher*

**Older students can read with enthusiasm and understanding, especially when teachers avoid ineffective practices that promote disengagement.**

Educators are flooding the professional learning community with requests for strategies that work to improve reading comprehension in the upper-elementary and secondary grades. In these achievement-driven times, we want to know what works best to raise test scores, improve comprehension, and motivate students to read. The answers are not simple for most students, particularly for older students still learning about literacy. The needs of adolescent readers are complex and varied (Ivey, 1999), even within specific cultural groups (Alvermann, 2001) and linguistic groups (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003–2004). To make blanket assertions about what works for *all* students would be misguided and shortsighted.

Getting to the bottom of older readers' comprehension and motivation difficulties requires careful, ongoing assessment of instructional practices and students' literacy needs. We believe, like Guthrie and Wigfield (1997), that real engagement in reading is not the product of strategies alone but a fusion of self-efficacy, interest, and strategic knowledge.

What we can report with more certainty are common practices that create barriers to engaged reading and comprehension development. We invite you to consider five ineffective strategies for developing reading comprehension in older students. Before asking "What works?", it might help to ask "What *doesn't* work?"

## **Ineffective Strategy 1: Don't let students read.**

A new high school principal "put an end to reading" and gave back to teachers time formerly used for Sustained Silent Reading. He warned teachers that students should be "focused on the instruction at hand" rather than "sitting around reading" during class time. In a discussion about these policy changes, the principal explained, "Students have to be taught. We need more time focused on direct instruction."

During the next two years, book circulation rates at the high school library plummeted, and the school's overall achievement on the content standards tests declined. Teachers understood why taking away students' time to "just read" might have resulted in a decline in reading scores, but they were shocked that scores sagged in history and science as well.

Compare this with the approach of principal Doug Williams, a former math teacher. He announced to the faculty of Hoover High School, "If we are going to teach our students to read, we need to provide them with *opportunities* to read." He allocated 20 minutes each day for Sustained Silent Reading and provided his staff with the resources and professional development necessary to ensure that students had time to read books of their choice (Fisher, 2004).

The result? Hoover has met state accountability targets, and students' average reading level as measured by the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test has risen from 4.3 to 7.2. Although the independent reading initiative cannot take full credit for this, Hoover teachers credit the Sustained Silent Reading time with a significant portion of the increased achievement.

In addition to such schoolwide approaches as a formal Sustained Silent Reading period (Pilgreen, 2000), providing students with time for independent reading during content-area classes increases their motivation, background knowledge, and vocabulary. In fact, students

report that having time to read actually affords them the opportunity to think and comprehend (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Consequently, we cannot imagine initiatives designed to improve comprehension that do not prioritize time with text. Although some have suggested that providing students with practice does not improve their reading (Shanahan, 2004), we cannot think of a single case in which a poor reader became a better reader without having substantial opportunities to read. How many years of piano, tennis, or driving practice do we need to excel at those skills?

We often hear the argument that we should focus on the basic skills, even in high school, before using valuable instructional time to let students read. We know of programs for struggling readers that emphasize word-level reading skills for several years to the exclusion of real reading. This kind of instruction certainly helps students read words more accurately, but it doesn't necessarily equate to improved reading comprehension, nor does it increase student motivation to read. Students need instruction, but mostly they need opportunities to negotiate real texts for real purposes. For example, 7th grader Manuel struggled to read materials above the 2nd grade level, but he became more skilled and motivated to read when his teacher found easy books for him to read and Web sites for him to peruse on platypuses and leopards, two animals that had piqued his interest in science class.

## **Ineffective Strategy 2: Make students read what they don't know about and don't care about.**

Insisting that every student needs to read enduring works of literature, Ms. Prewitt distributes a copy of *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1958) to each of her students, along with a packet that requires the students to summarize each chapter, identify the characters, and respond to specific prompts.

With no background knowledge and little interest in the book, students read one chapter each night for homework. They complete the assigned section of the packet before discussing the chapter in class. The book takes several weeks to complete; students rush to catch up on the packet work on the final day. One student uses *CliffsNotes* to hurriedly complete his packet; another student copies from a peer. When asked about the book, Anthony admits, "I don't know what it was about, really. All we had to do was this" (he shows the packet). When asked, "Did you make any connections between this book and your own life?", Anthony confesses, "I barely read it. I just searched for the answers. Man, it's not like I need to know this."

Alternatively, Mr. Jackson, a history teacher, was discussing the Reformation with his students. Each student had selected a book from a wide range of texts on the topic and appeared interested in the subject at hand. When asked how he engaged his students, Mr. Jackson replied,

You build on what they know *and* on what they care about. You also give them books to choose from so they can extend what they know.

Observing this classroom at work revealed a number of practices ensuring that students comprehended the content. First, Mr. Jackson used a wide range of texts and media to inundate students with intriguing information about the topic, drawing also from contemporary issues that would help students see connections between history and events currently happening in their world and in their personal lives. As students worked on generating questions for a game simulation, they reviewed their individual readings from the textbook and several trade books as well as their notes from class lectures, discussions, and a video that they had watched.

One page of Daveen's notes focused on the role of the Pope. Daveen's conversation with us confirmed his interest in and comprehension of the subject. After Daveen explained to us the role of the Catholic Church during the Reformation and the process of selecting a Pope, we asked whether he realized that the Pope had just died. "Yeah," he said. "I watched it on TV. I'm not Catholic, but it was cool to see history being repeated." When asked whether he planned to watch the Pope's funeral on television the next day, Daveen grinned and said, "Oh yeah, I'll watch it. You know, Elvis holds that record [for the biggest funeral in history]. I hope the Pope doesn't beat out the King."

Students *can* find curriculum-based topics interesting, and they *can* comprehend what they read in school. Unfortunately, we do not always use texts and methods that highlight what is interesting about the subjects that we teach. Think about how much more compelling students would find a study of genetics, for example, if we used trade books to connect the topic to the fascinating details of solving crimes (*Silent Witness*, Ferllini, 2002) or of multiple births (*Twin Tales: The Magic and Mystery of Multiple Birth*, Jackson, 2001).

Teachers generally ask students to read about a topic before they actually know enough about it to become interested. As adults, we rarely choose to read about unfamiliar topics, and we find it difficult to pay attention when we need to do so. But think about how your inclination to read increases when new information piques your interest. Take the phenomenon of the tsunami, for instance. Before late 2004, would you have been inclined to read about this natural disaster on your own? After the devastating tsunami in Asia, however, perhaps your sympathy for the many victims or your concern about a recurrence caused you to seek out more information on the subject.

We are not saying that students shouldn't read the great, enduring works of literature, nor that they should read only adolescent fiction. We are simply wondering whether a whole class needs to read the same book at the same time and whether this practice tends to produce engaged, interested students who are extending their knowledge.

Teachers who understand their students' backgrounds, prior knowledge, interests, and motivations are much more likely to make the connections that adolescents crave. Although volumes have been written on the importance of and strategies for building background knowledge (Marzano, 2004), good teachers understand that making their content relevant also matters. Studies further suggest that we must provide students with opportunities to draw from what they already know—popular culture and media, for example—so they can more easily learn new information (Goodson & Norton-Meier, 2003).

### **Ineffective Strategy 3: Make students read difficult books.**

Four students of various reading levels sit in a cluster to read together Camus' *The Guest* from their 12th grade literature anthology. Three of these students take turns reading; one follows along. When they reach predetermined places in the story, they stop to take stock of their understanding using the guidelines set forth in a popular strategy known as *reciprocal teaching* (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), in which students (1) summarize the section, (2) clarify confusing parts, (3) ask questions, and (4) predict what will come next.

Each student takes responsibility for one part of the process. The three students who volunteered for the oral reading fulfill their roles productively in the intermittent discussions. This strategy appears to help these students make sense of what they read as they move through the text. The fourth student, who is designated as the person to ask a clarification question, seems timid and confused when it is her turn to talk.

When she is finally convinced to take a turn reading aloud, it is clear that the text is far beyond her comfort level. In a paragraph of roughly 150 words, she misreads *mused*, *circumstances*, *alliance*, *fraternized*, *fatigue*, *essential*, and *musings*, and she takes a substantial amount of time to figure out *fluttered*, *presence*, *imposing*, *ancient*, *community*, *armor*, and *heavier*. Even with such solid scaffolding as reciprocal teaching, the difficulty of this text makes comprehension too much of a challenge for this student.

Like this high school senior, 7th grader Renee is part of the 25 percent of students in her school who are reading below grade level and failing to achieve passing scores on the state achievement test. However, Renee's social studies teacher knows that she cannot learn from books that are too difficult for her (Allington, 2002). Instead of assigning one book for the whole class to read during a study of westward expansion in the United States during the mid-1800s, he provides reading choices. A week or so into the unit and after reading aloud from *The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party* (Calabro, 1999), *Hurry Freedom: African Americans in Gold Rush California* (Stanley, 2000), and several other complex but compelling books, he invites Renee and her classmates to select a text from more than 50 different books related to the topic, which vary in genre and level of difficulty. Renee, who has an identified learning disability, and two of her friends who are English language learners select *Kit Carson: A Life of Adventure* (Mercati, 2000), which they read nearly effortlessly on their own. Afterward, they create a fact poster to share with their classmates who have been learning from a host of other books on westward expansion. Renee, who sits in other classes seemingly confused during whole-class readings of difficult texts, has learned so much from this accessible book that she must use the flip side of the poster board to include everything she now has to say.

If we want students to comprehend what they read, we must begin by letting them experience texts that make sense to them. Unfortunately, we hear of school districts that have declared that to get students reading at grade level, all students must practice reading in grade-level texts exclusively: "The test is written at an 8th grade level, so students have to learn how to read 8th grade passages!" We know of no student who got better at reading by reading books that were too difficult for him, and we know of no student reading at a 4th grade level who learned to read at an 8th grade level by reading only 8th grade-level books.

## **Ineffective Strategy 4: Interrogate students about what they read.**

An 8th grade English teacher begins class with the proclamation. "Today, we are focusing on comprehension." Any observer can see that this is indeed the intention because one of the state curriculum standards dealing with comprehension is written prominently on the chalkboard. "You need to know how to comprehend what you read on the state test coming up in April," the teacher explains. With no further discussion, she asks for a volunteer to begin reading aloud from *I Had Seen Castles* (Rylant, 1993).

Some students follow along as their classmate reads, while others stare out the window, work on assignments for other classes, or whisper to a neighboring student. After several paragraphs, the teacher interrupts: "Can somebody explain what is happening so far?" After three students fail to adequately summarize the story, the teacher throws out a series of literal-level comprehension questions. Facing blank stares from the students, she ends up giving her own summary. This cycle of assigning the reading, questioning, coming up short, and summarizing continues for the rest of the class period.

Now consider a 6th grade small-group reading of *Welcome to Dead House* (Stine, 1995). As students read, the teacher interrupts with, "I wonder what those noises are in the house? When I have questions like this, it sometimes helps me to look back in the chapter." Before

she can finish her thought, several students yell out, “The voices are from dead people!” The teacher goes on to tell students that she has seen movies in which the ghost of a person who once lived in a house communicates with the current residents. A student muses, “I wonder whether this ghost will be like Casper.” Students and teacher negotiate the text together.

Despite the long-standing practice of literal-level questioning after reading, we have no reason to believe it actually creates better readers. People often confuse *teaching* comprehension skills with *testing* comprehension. This common practice persists in schools despite decades of research indicating that comprehension is a proactive, continual process of using prior knowledge, metacognitive awareness, and reflection to make sense of a text.

When adults think back to what reading comprehension meant when they were in elementary school, they may recall workbook pages that required them to “find the main idea” for a series of unrelated short passages. If you were asked to find the main idea enough times on your own, the thinking went, you would eventually figure out how to do it. We now realize that specific strategies can help students determine what is important in the texts they read and how they can be more strategic before, during, and after the reading so that understanding texts is not such a mystery (Duffy, 2002).

In our work across the United States, we consistently find that many teachers have not yet had the opportunity to study the nature of reading comprehension, even their own. Most new curriculum materials for teaching reading include a focus on strategies, but these materials may not always provide teachers with the theoretical underpinnings of reading processes and of effective comprehension instruction. A good start in the shift from interrogation to teaching would be a schoolwide professional development study of reading comprehension.

## **Ineffective Strategy 5: Buy a computer program and let it do all the work.**

Enter the skills lab. Students wearing headphones sit at their terminals. They look engaged in the task at hand, and they click away on the keyboard and mouse as their teacher wanders around the room. The school recently purchased a reading comprehension program that promises a “complete solution” to the reading needs of struggling adolescents. During the sales presentation, the administrator was told that the program was “teacher-proof” and that students would improve their test scores in a matter of weeks.

But let’s take a closer look. As we join Taheen at his monitor, we see that he has the reading program running in one window and a chat room running in another. He periodically glances up from the chat room to answer a computer-generated comprehension question. He gets all the answers right and doesn’t seem to be trying. At the computer across from Taheen, Fernando is getting frustrated. He doesn’t know the answer, and the computer is unable to offer him any help.

In another classroom, we join Ryan and Clay, two 8th grade students who are most comfortable reading 1st grade-level texts, such as *Spider Names* (Canizares, 1998) and *Tiny Terrors* (Kenah, 2004). Although these books are easy-to-read nonfiction, they nevertheless include information that even older readers would find fascinating.

The teacher capitalizes on the students’ background knowledge by having them talk as they work on their current project. They are dictating to her a story to accompany an intriguing illustration from the wordless picture book *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (Van Allsburg, 1984). They debate the most interesting word choices (for example, *hurt* as opposed to *devastated*) while their teacher acts as scribe. They are eager and able to reread this lengthy and complex story—written in their own words—and revise it to make it more interesting and

grammatically accurate. Their teacher explains certain conventions of language and draws their attention to literary devices that other authors use as they write. For example, when the boys decide that they need to let readers know early in the story that something bad is going to happen, the teacher locates several picture books that include examples of foreshadowing. This not only gives the students ideas for their own writing but also inspires them to recognize this tool in their strategic reading. This teacher is indispensable.

Although computers and Web sites may reinforce skills, they can't provide the specific feedback that students require. Intervention programs need to increase, not decrease, teacher involvement (Ivey & Fisher, in press). In addition, intervention programs—computerized or not—must be based on assessment information and provide students with reading comprehension instruction rather than focus on a single aspect of reading or writing, such as phonics, fluency, or spelling.

## What It Will Take

Improving reading comprehension and instruction in the upper-elementary and secondary grades will require a great deal of time and effort. There is no magical set of strategies you can get from an inservice workshop. Real changes in literacy learning and teaching will most likely result from a schoolwide literacy plan and strong leadership (Ivey & Fisher, in press).

Bringing about such a change means devoting resources to literacy-related personnel and to large volumes of high-quality, diverse, multileveled reading materials in all subject areas. It requires a commitment to providing literacy assessments of all students for the purpose of designing purposeful and appropriate instruction. It means creating a culture of collaboration and peer coaching. Finally, it requires that professional development focus on building teacher knowledge and expertise.

Is this a tall order for schools when the immediate need is to improve their current students' reading comprehension? Absolutely. But we are doing struggling students no favor when we perpetuate strategies that do not work.

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