



STANDPOINTS & VOICES

ABCs of content area lesson planning: Attention, basics, and comprehension

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Traditionally, content area classes consisted of lectures and teachers telling students to read the textbook and then answer the questions at the end of the chapter. Teachers have since learned from research that students need to be actively involved in order to fully understand what they are learning, but sometimes knowing information and knowing how to implement it are two different things. In reality, teachers often revert to the traditional methods of lecturing, reading the chapter, and answering the questions because that's how they learned. In my university content area reading courses I try to show preservice middle school and high school teachers alternatives to traditional methods of teaching based on accepted reading practices. Making students active participants is one way to help students better understand material presented in content area classrooms.

Using a simple rule of thumb—what I call the ABCs of lesson planning—teachers can put the theory of active learning into practice and make learning more meaningful for their students. In the lesson planning ABCs, A stands for attention, B for basics, and C for comprehension. If teachers can keep these three things in mind as they plan their lessons, students are more likely to fully understand what is being taught.

A—Attention

Before teaching anything, it is imperative to first get the students' attention. It's hard to teach students if they are not listening. Beyond getting their attention, teachers also need to make connections to the

students' schemata—the background experiences they bring with them. Building on students' schemata helps them make meaning from the reading; or as Frank Smith taught us, we can help students connect the new to the known. He contended in *The Book of Learning and Forgetting* (Teachers College Press, 1998) that interest and past experience make learning possible.

Teachers have also learned from research that students learn better when information is presented in a way that draws their attention. Getting the students' attention could be something as simple as talking about O. Henry's time in prison before reading his short stories or doing a class Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the U.S. North and South in the mid-1800s before beginning a study of the Civil War. By using Donna Ogle's K-W-L strategy (from her 1986 article in *The Reading Teacher*), teachers can find out what the students already *know* about a certain topic to help draw students' attention to the topic. The strategy also provides a reason to read through the question "What do I *want* to know?" Finally, it aids in comprehension because after students read, they write about what they *learned*.

Anticipation guides are another method to direct students' thinking. An anticipation guide is a set of sentences that students respond to before reading a text. For example, before introducing the concept of photosynthesis, the teacher provides students with a list of statements about the process, and the students mark if they believe the statements are true or false. Then when the students read the text, they find out if they were correct. The anticipation guide provides students with a reason to read.

Providing attention grabbers serves to set a purpose for reading—and giving students a reason to read is one of our most important jobs before we assign a reading.

B-Basics

Teachers have all heard the clarion call "Back to basics!" One effective means of teaching basic skills is through the use of minilessons.

In *The Literacy Dictionary* (International Reading Association, 1995), Theodore L. Harris and Richard E. Hodges defined a minilesson as "a short, focused segment of a larger curriculum unit" (p. 154). Nancie Atwell used minilessons in the Reading Workshop that she developed and discussed in her book *In the Middle* (Boynton/Cook, 1987). She suggested beginning the workshop with a brief introduction of a concept, skill, or pertinent information that will be used during the class time and then providing some practice with that skill. As students spend their workshop time reading, they should be aware of when to apply the information they have been given during the minilesson. Brief times spent repeating skills will help students learn the basics.

Jo Anne L. Vacca, Richard T. Vacca, and Mary K. Gove explained in *Reading and Learning to Read* (Addison-Wesley, 2000) that minilessons should follow this pattern: "(1) creating an awareness of the strategy, (2) modeling the strategy, (3) providing practice in the use of the strategy, and (4) applying the strategy in authentic reading situations" (p. 569). The following would be an appropriate example of this pattern, if the basic skill being taught is the use of quotation marks for dialogue. (a) On an overhead projector or on the chalkboard, provide students with a text that contains dialogue with no quotation marks. Discuss the difficulty of understanding text without the quotation marks. (b) Together as a class, add the quotation marks. (c) Provide more samples of dialogue without quotation marks and have individual students add them. (d) Let students read the text as partners.

A minilesson could even be a short lecture such as an explanation

of the events that led to U.S. involvement in World War II or an explanation of how to work a certain type of algebraic equation. Lectures can be effective, but they are even more so if students are involved in some type of meaningful interaction with the skills that were taught.

C-Comprehension

The most in-depth and perhaps most important but often neglected part of the ABCs of lesson planning is an activity to enhance comprehension, our ultimate goal. John Dewey taught us that learning by doing is the most effective way to help students comprehend material and to cement it in their minds. Learning is more meaningful when students are active participants. We all remember best that in which we take an active part.

An example of a comprehension activity might be to have students do a web of the text either individually or in groups. Another idea might be to put a big sheet of paper on the wall and have students write graffiti that pertains to what they have read or write a poem about their favorite character in a book. Anthony Manzo's ReQuest strategy, as explained in his 1969 article in the *Journal of Reading*, is an effective way to get students involved in the reading and discussion. With ReQuest, both the teacher and the students read a passage silently. After reading, the teacher closes his or her book and the students ask questions. Then the teacher and students take turns asking questions of one another so the teacher can model different levels of questioning.

Higher level critical thinking skills are an important part of comprehension. Asking questions that cause students to use inductive thinking is important. Another means of using critical thinking skills is to provide activities that are open ended and allow students the opportunity to

come up with a variety of answers. Having to explain how they arrived at their choice and discerning whether or not they have used logical thinking is also important. The DR-TA (Directed Reading-Thinking Activity) is one such activity that promotes this type of thinking. With DR-TA, the teacher reads aloud the first part of a passage and then asks students to make predictions about what will happen next. Students are encouraged to explain the basis of their predictions. The class members are asked if they agree or disagree and are encouraged to explain why. The teacher then reads further into the text, stopping at predetermined intervals to ask the same type of prediction and discussion questions. The purpose is to guide the students' thinking and get them actively involved in the text.

Other strategies can be used after reading to help students comprehend what they have read. For example, provide students with a list of approximately 10 to 15 words or terms from the text along with three or four categories. After reading the text, students match the words to the appropriate categories. A variation on this activity is to group students and have them create their own word lists and categories based on material read, and then have the groups exchange papers and work on one another's categorization sheets.

In conclusion, by tying together the three themes of building student interest through attention grabbers, teaching the basics, and supporting comprehension through reading strategies, teachers can make reading and learning more meaningful for their students. The ABCs of lesson planning can move teachers beyond lectures and help students become active participants in their own learning.

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