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Teaching the Struggling Adolescent Reader: An Online Course

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Teaching the Struggling Adolescent Reader: An Online Course

I. Purpose of the Course

This is a course for middle school teachers, both inservice and preservice, who want to experience hands-on teaching and learning strategies known to be effective by the National Reading Panel for improving motivation and learning in the core subject areas. The course is designed around a two-level-mentoring model. This means that inservice teachers will be mentoring preservice teachers at the same time that both groups of teachers are being mentored by the course instructor and teaching assistant.

Specifically, in keeping with the call for collaboration between established teachers and those planning to enter the profession, the course was designed to enable inservice teachers enrolled in (graduate level section) to work in partnership with preservice teachers enrolled in (either an undergrad course or a master's certification course). As part of the collaborative work, preservice teachers will work with inservice teachers to develop tutoring plans and activities. The inservice teachers will use those materials in teaching struggling readers in their own classrooms.

II. Rationale for the Collaborative Framework

According to a recent report published by the Alliance for Excellent Education, "every school day, nearly a thousand teachers leave the field of teaching" (www.all4ed.org), a figure that does not include teachers who retire. Equally disturbing are the results of an earlier study (Ingersoll, 2003), which

showed that after five years half of all first-time teachers exit the profession. This alarming rate of new teacher attrition and a looming teacher shortage have been instrumental in focusing national attention on the need to attract and retain highly qualified teachers.

Teacher teams, a term typically used to describe interdisciplinary planning for instruction in the middle grades, is one of fifteen key elements of effective adolescent literacy programs (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). They are also part of the infrastructure that promotes teacher collegiality across disciplines in schools. Similar arrangements sometimes exist between colleges of education and colleges of arts and sciences, as was the case in the development of this online course.

There is no guarantee that simply turning out more beginning teachers using traditional “sit-and-get” lectures with minimal exposure to real-world classrooms will produce the high quality teachers required to meet the needs of struggling adolescent readers. For as Fallon (2004) noted in his foreword to *Tapping the Potential: Retaining and Developing High-Quality New Teachers*, historically it has been shown that “novice teachers needed education in clinical practice that went well beyond student teaching” (p. v) and into the induction years. Although this online course does not provide clinical practice, in the sense of a reading clinic such as the one offered by the Language and Literacy Education Department, it does provide preservice and inservice teachers a clinical framework in which to study their own practice.

III. Where Does the Struggling Reading Fit In?

Concurrent with our country’s concern about the attrition rate and looming shortage of teachers is a concern about the abysmal high school graduation rate and the fact that simply remaining in school is no guarantee that students in the middle grades will acquire the skills necessary for comprehending a wide range of texts necessary for competing successfully in today’s increasingly complex world (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

IV. Who Is a Struggling Reader?

Attempting to define the term *struggling reader* is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall (David Moore, 1991). The term takes on different characteristics depending on who is defining it and for what purpose. Currently, it appears to be the preferred term among reading professionals for adolescents who for whatever reason are unable to keep up with the reading demands placed upon them by the school curriculum. Some of the labels used to describe the so-called struggling reader, or youth who fall below “average” on some measure of reading competence, include the following: \slow reader, low reader, disabled reader, at-risk reader, and more recently, striving reader.

In the professional literature, as well, there is little agreement on what constitutes a struggling reader. A cursory analysis of the table of contents of an International Reading Association publication entitled *Struggling Adolescent Readers: A Collection of Teaching Strategies* (Moore, Alvermann, & Hinchman, 2000) reveals that the term *struggling* can refer to youth with clinically diagnosed reading disabilities as well as to those who are unmotivated, in remediation, disenchanted, or generally unsuccessful in school literacy tasks. A smorgasbord of descriptors, these labels tell little or nothing about the cultural construction of even a single struggling reader. They do, however, provide ways of thinking about culture and struggling that are seldom addressed in the literature on teaching adolescents who for whatever reason are thought to be achieving below their “full potential” as readers.

V. Effective Literacy Instruction for Struggling Adolescent Readers

Below is an executive summary of a position paper that was commissioned by the National Reading Conference, a major literacy research organization that draws its membership from around the world, though most members are from the United States. The full text of this paper is available at: <http://nrconline.org/>

Executive Summary

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The National Reading Conference (NRC) recognizes the importance of continuing literacy instruction beyond the elementary grades, especially for students at the middle and high school level. In commissioning this paper on *Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents*, the NRC acknowledges the complexities of reading in relation to writing and oral language in an array of 21st century media environments, of which print is a part. The term *adolescent literacy*, broader in scope than secondary reading, is also more inclusive of what young people count as texts (e.g., textbooks, digital texts, hypertexts). Many adolescents of the Net Generation find their own reasons for becoming literate—reasons that go beyond reading to acquire school knowledge of academic texts. This is not to say that academic literacy is unimportant; rather, it is to emphasize the need to address the implications of youth’s multiple literacies for classroom instruction. The following statements represent NRC’s position on keeping adolescents’ interests and needs in mind when designing effective literacy instruction at the middle and high school level.

- Adolescents’ perceptions of how competent they are as readers and writers, generally speaking, will affect how motivated they are to learn in their subject area classes (e.g., the sciences, social studies, mathematics, and literature). Thus, if academic literacy instruction is to be effective, it must address issues of self-efficacy and engagement.

- Adolescents respond to the literacy demands of their subject area classes when they have appropriate background knowledge and strategies for reading a variety of texts. Effective instruction develops students' abilities to comprehend, discuss, study, and write about multiple forms of text (print, visual, and oral) by taking into account what they are capable of doing as everyday users of language and literacy.
- Adolescents who struggle to read in subject area classrooms deserve instruction that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive to their needs. To be effective, such instruction must be embedded in the regular curriculum and address differences in their abilities to read, write, and communicate orally as strengths, not as deficits.
- Adolescents' interests in the Internet, hypermedia, and various interactive communication technologies (e.g., chat rooms where people can take on various identities unbeknown to others) suggest the need to teach youth to read with a critical eye toward how writers, illustrators, and the like represent people and their ideas—in short, how individuals who create texts make those texts work. At the same time, it suggests teaching adolescents that all texts, including their textbooks, routinely promote or silence particular views.
- Adolescents' evolving expertise in navigating routine school literacy tasks suggests the need to involve them in higher level thinking about what they read and write than is currently possible within a transmission model of teaching, with its emphasis on skill and drill, teacher-centered instruction, and passive learning. Effective alternatives to this model include participatory approaches that actively engage students in their own learning (individually and in small groups) and that treat texts as tools for learning rather than as repositories of information to be memorized (and then all too quickly forgotten).

VI. Required Readings, Postings, and Responses

The following articles, which can be found in the folder **Required Readings** on the homepage of this online course, address one or more facets of teaching adolescents who struggle to read their content area assignments:

(Week 1)

(Alvermann) Reading Adolescents' Reading Identities: Looking Behind to See Ahead

(Week 2)

(Zambo) Using the picture book *Thank You, Mr. Falker* to Understand Struggling Readers

(Week 6)

(Palmer et al.) Bridging Two Worlds: Reading Comprehension, Figurative Language Instruction, and English-Language Learner.

(Week 9)

(Snow & Biancarosa) Adolescent Literacy and the Achievement Gap: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here?

(Week 11)

(Cooper). It Begins with Belief: Social Demography is Not Destiny.

(Week 12)

(Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore) Reinventing Adolescent Literacy for New Times

(Week 13)

(Vasudevan) Looking for Angels: Knowing Adolescents by Engaging with Their Multimodal Literacy Practices

(Week 14)

(Weinstein) A Love for the Thing: The Pleasures of Rap as Literate Practice

These required readings are to be used as the basis for whole-group online discussion (see Required Readings folder). Each week that a particular reading is assigned (see above), you are to post an entry that is between 100-150 words in length and that addresses the required reading specifically. You are also to post one substantive response to someone else's entry (again, within the 100-150 word range). You will be provided feedback on your entries and assigned a grade based on the points shown in the rubric for online discussions (see Rubrics folder).

Hint: Sometimes it is easier and more productive to post your own entry before reading the entries that others have posted. That way your own ideas aren't influenced too early by others' ideas.

VII. Pretest and Posttest Construction

- Preservice teachers should model the pretest for Student X after the pretest and answer key examples included in the Example folder on the homepage. Be sure that the text you use for the basis of the pretest has enough information in it to allow you to construct a posttest on that same text toward the end of the course. The text on which the pretest and posttest are based should be topically and conceptually related to the curriculum that the struggling reader is expected to master. If you prefer to

use a test format that differs from the one in the Example folder under your particular content area, be sure that you have your partner teacher's approval to do so.

- Preservice teachers are responsible for constructing the pretest and posttest (with accompanying answer keys). You are also responsible for emailing them to your teacher partners and to the instructor (see syllabus for due dates).
- Inservice teachers are responsible for actually administering the pre/posttests to one struggling reader. You are also responsible for reporting the results to your partners and to the instructor (see syllabus for due dates)
- Results of the pretest and posttest will be used in writing up the final case report; thus, it is important to keep this information in a safe place. Remember, do NOT refer to the struggling reader by name or in any other way identify this individual. It is sufficient to write, simply, Student X.

VIII. Intervention Lessons

- Prepare or teach a set of 4 strategy intervention lessons that will be used with an actual reader who is struggling to comprehend her/his content area reading materials. (You will be working with a partner inservice teacher to complete this assignment. If you are not presently teaching, you will be responsible for preparing the lesson, and your partner, who is teaching, will be responsible for teaching the lesson and reporting back to you the following information: the degree to which the student was motivated; what the student learned; and what changes would need to be made if the strategy were to be taught again.

[Note: Although the preservice teacher is responsible for more work in the first half of the course when lesson plans are due, the inservice teacher will make up for the imbalance in the last half when the case report is due.]

- The 8 interventions from which to choose your 4 include the following:
 1. Predicting by using prior knowledge
 2. Vocabulary development
 3. Graphic organizing
 4. Comprehension monitoring
 5. Using text structure as an aid to comprehension
 6. Self-questioning
 7. Reflecting on reading
 8. Summarizing

IX. Written Case Reports

- The final project for the course will be a written case report of the struggling reader's response to 4 intervention lessons. You will either have prepared the 4 intervention lessons (based on the National Reading Panel's recommended strategies for improving comprehension), or you will have taught those 4 lessons and provided feedback to the person preparing the lessons.
- A rubric is provided (as to style, length, contents, etc.) for the case report (see Rubrics folder).
- Although both teaching partners are required to participate in planning the case report, the larger share of the writing will be done by the inservice teacher because he/she is the person who had responsibility for teaching the 4 intervention lessons, providing feedback on them, and actually observing Student X during the lessons. If you need help in understanding the rationale for distributing the workload, please be sure to ask the course instructor. You will turn in only one report for which you will receive the same grade as your partner.
- The case report examples reflect the work of students enrolled in the piloting of this online course.

X. Evaluation and Grading Practices

Evaluation in this online course takes into account written responses to weekly readings, intervention lessons planned by preservice teachers, teaching of the planned lessons to struggling readers by inservice teachers, and a written case report of a struggling reader's progress.

8 Required Readings	(possible 32 points distributed in this way: 2 points for a posting your own entry; 2 points for responding to one other person's posting)
Pretest for Struggling Reader	(possible 4 points – must include answer key)
Posttest for Struggling Reader	(possible 4 points – must include answer key)
4 Intervention Lessons	(possible 40 points – 10 per lesson)
Final write-up of case report	(possible 20 points)

NOTE: Late Assignments. Assignments turned in after the day on which they are due will be docked 1 point.

A = 90 - 100 points
B = 80 - 89 points
C = 70 - 79 points
D = 60 - 69 points
F = less than 60 points

XI. Weekly Assignments and Final

Orientation meeting in Room 227/228 Date Jan. 3, 2008

Introduction to the online course, including an overview of the mentoring and partner framework; a demonstration of what it means to use knowledge of your domain to select appropriate strategies (see also “Domain Knowledge” on the home page); an outline of procedures based on weekly assignments below; and time to meet and discuss with your partner teacher some of the logistics of the course.

[Note #1: The day on which each of the following assignments is due is posted under the numbered week. Assignments turned in after that date will be docked 1 point unless there is an extenuating circumstance, such as a school schedule that conflicts with the stated due date. If exceptions are to be made, they must be agreed upon in advance. Thus, you must submit to the instructor a written modified schedule that mirrors the orderly progression of assignments indicated below.]

[Note #2: Be sure to read EVERYTHING under each weekly assignment. Some information pertains to planning activities that should be going on during that particular week.]

Week 1

Jan. 8

Required Reading: Alvermann (1 entry and 1 response to another person’s entry are due on this date)

Preservice teachers AND inservice teachers - Email and/or call each other to determine content area topic and concepts to be taught in the 4 intervention lessons. The topic and concepts you choose should be developmentally appropriate for Student X (the student that the inservice teacher will identify as needing

instructional intervention). Do NOT identify the struggling reader by name; simply refer to this individual as Student X throughout the course.

Week 2

Jan. 15

Required Reading: Zambo (1 entry and 1 response to another person's entry are due on this date)

Preservice teachers (in consultation with your partner inservice teacher) prepare the pretest and answer key and send them to your partner teacher and both course instructors. *Be sure that the text you use for the basis of the pretest has enough information in it to allow you to construct a posttest on that same text toward the end of the course.* (See examples of pretests and answer keys in the Examples folder on the home page.) Remember, the text on which the pretest and posttest are based should be topically and conceptually related to the curriculum that the struggling reader is expected to master.

Week 3

Jan. 22

Inservice teachers – During Week 3, give the pretest, score it, and email the results to your partner and to both course instructors. Remember, please do NOT identify the struggling reader by name; simply refer to this individual as Student X throughout the course.

Preservice teachers begin to construct a lesson plan that uses one of the 8 intervention strategies in your content area (see Course Content on the home page). Please use one of the strategies shown in the Power Point for each of the 8 modules; do not substitute a strategy. Your lesson should be directed toward helping Student X with the concepts in the text that you and your partner teacher identified for the pretest/posttest. [Note: The text used in your lesson plan does not need to be the same text as the text used to design the pretest, but the concepts should be the same.] See rubric for constructing a lesson plan on the homepage for this course. Also, see examples of lesson plans on the homepage.

Week 4

Jan. 29

Preservice teachers - Lesson Plan for Intervention #1 due to your partner and to both course instructors.

Inservice teachers - teach Student X the strategy in your partner teacher's Lesson Plan for Intervention #1 sometime during Week 4.

Week 5

Feb. 5

Inservice teachers - Feedback on Intervention Lesson #1 due to your partner and to both course instructors.

Preservice teachers begin to construct a second lesson plan that uses one of the 8 intervention strategies in your content area (see Course Content folder on the home page). Please use one of the strategies shown in the Power Point for each of the 8 modules; do not substitute a strategy. Do not use the same strategy as the one you used previously. Your lesson should be directed toward helping Student X with the concepts in the text that you and your partner teacher identified for the pretest/posttest. [Note: The text used in your lesson plan does not need to be the same text as the text used to design the pretest, but the concepts should be the same.]

Week 6

Feb. 12

Required Reading: Palmer et al. (1 entry and 1 response to another person's entry are due on this date)

Preservice teachers - Lesson Plan for Intervention #2 due to your partner and to both course instructors.

Inservice teachers - teach Student X the strategy in your partner teacher's Lesson Plan for Intervention #2 sometime during Week 6.

Week 7

Feb. 19

Inservice teachers - Feedback on Intervention Lesson #2 due to your partner and to both course instructors.

Preservice teachers begin to construct a third lesson plan that uses one of the 8 intervention strategies in your content area (see Course Content on the home page). Please use one of the strategies shown in the Power Point for each of the 8 modules; do not substitute a strategy. Do not use the same strategy as the ones you used previously. Your lesson should be directed toward helping Student X with the concepts in the text that you and your partner teacher identified for the pretest/posttest. [Note: The text used in your lesson plan does not need to be the same text as the text used to design the pretest, but the concepts should be the same.]

Week 8

Feb. 26

Preservice teachers - Lesson Plan for Intervention #3 due to inservice teacher and to both course instructors.

Inservice teachers - teach Student X the strategy in your partner teacher's Lesson Plan for Intervention #3 sometime during Week 8.

Both preservice and inservice teachers will complete a brief online midterm evaluation of the course during this week. The midterm course evaluation will be your opportunity to give the instructors feedback on what is (and is not working) for you. Your instructors will work with you to resolve issues if at all possible.

Week 9

Mar. 4

Required Reading: Snow & Biancarosa (1 entry and 1 response to another person's entry are due on this date)

Inservice teachers - Feedback on Intervention Lesson #3 due to your partner and to both course instructors.

Preservice teachers begin to construct a fourth lesson plan that that uses one of the 8 intervention strategies in your content area (see Course Content on the home page). Please use one of the strategies shown in the Power Point for each of the 8 modules; do not substitute a strategy. Do not use the same strategy as the ones you used previously. Your lesson should be directed toward helping Student X with the concepts in the text that you and your partner teacher identified for the pretest/posttest. [Note: The text used in your lesson plan does not need to be the same text as the text used to design the pretest, but the concepts should be the same.]

March 11 - No assignments due: Spring Break

Week 10

Mar. 18

Preservice teachers - Lesson Plan for Intervention #4 due to inservice teacher and to both course instructors.

Inservice teachers - teach Student X the strategy in your partner teacher's Lesson Plan for Intervention #4 sometime during Week 10.

Week 11

Mar. 25

Required Reading: Read Cooper (1 entry and 1 response to another person's entry are due on this date)

[Note: This is a "light" week in terms of assignments due. It's a week to catch your breath. Feedback from the pilot group suggested that this was a good idea.]

Week 12

Apr. 1

Required Reading: Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore (1 entry and 1 response to another person's entry are due on this date)

Inservice teachers - Feedback on Intervention Lesson #4 due to your partner and to both course instructors.

Preservice teachers (in consultation with your partner inservice teacher) prepare the posttest and answer key. (See examples of posttests and answer keys on the homepage.) Email your posttest and answer key to your partner teacher and to both course instructors.

Week 13

Apr. 8

Required Reading: Vasudevan (1 entry and 1 response to another person's entry are due on this date)

Preservice AND inservice teachers – Begin to organize materials for the final case report (including the student artifacts that you will include with your case report). Consult the examples provided on the home page. Decide with your partner the sections for which you will take primary responsibility. Refer frequently to the rubric for preparing the case report. Be sure to make linkages between the way knowledge in your content area is structured (domain knowledge/structure) and the strategies you chose/taught. Ask your course instructor if you need further help on this.

Week 14

Apr. 15

Required Reading: Weinstein (1 entry and 1 response to another person's entry are due on this date)

Preservice AND inservice teachers – Write the sections of the case report for which you took primary responsibility. Be sure to make linkages between the way knowledge in your content area is structured (domain knowledge/structure) and the strategies you chose/taught. Ask your course instructor if you need further help on this.

Week 15

Apr. 22

Preservice AND inservice teachers – Share drafts (with your partners) of the sections of the case report for which you took primary responsibility. Read carefully, edit, and do one last comparison check with the sample case report on the home page that you consulted earlier. Then send your edited sections to your partner. In most cases, it will be the inservice teacher who pulls all

the pieces of the case report together and sends a copy of the final version to the preservice teacher and to both course instructors. (The reason for putting this responsibility on the inservice teacher is to balance the assignment load (e.g., earlier in the course, the preservice teacher had most of the responsibility for writing up the 4 intervention lesson plans)

FINAL

Polished final version of the case report is due on **May 1** to both course instructors. Also due on or before **May 1** is your final evaluation of this online course. The instructor will provide a website where you can complete the evaluation online.