

AV Reading

“Don’t tell me you believe ‘all kids can learn’ . . . tell me what you’re doing about the kids who aren’t learning.”

Richard DuFour

Reading News:

--Innovative Homework Practices: Do you have a policy or practice that seems to work really well? Send your ideas to me for one of our upcoming newsletters.

-- Reader’s Theatre: The 5th Hour Reading Enhancement Class has been preparing a 25 minute reader’s theatre around the theme of capital punishment. If you would like to bring your classes to see the performance on November 10th, please let me know.

--Project Fair: The Academic Literacy 9 classes have been working on researching different questions about the Holocaust. If you would like to bring your classes to the student work on November 9th for 2nd or 4th hours, please let me know.

--Join the Literacy Planning Committee: Wednesday, October 5th, 2:30-3:00 in Room 132.

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Stratifying Homework

For our building’s literacy goal this year, I am focusing on homework practices. In my first newsletter, I offered some questions to challenge you on the nature of homework in your classroom. And for this month, I am going to discuss the “structure” of homework. I will first present a portrait of the traditional structure of homework (which may or may not apply to you) and then offer an alternative model that might help you get closer to the completion rates you want.

In the traditional model, homework assignments—or just assignments as a whole—are all of equal weight, both in actual point value and in perceived value on the part of students. In some cases, many of the assignments are worth the same amount, and so when students get to the point where they have missed four or five of them, they struggle with where to begin since there seem to be so many little pieces missing. Students become preoccupied with these smaller assignments and then drop the ball on the big ones, thinking that before they do the big project they should probably do the smaller ones. And so the cycle begins: students fall behind, they become overwhelmed

with where to start, and consequently give up—or do something silly like complete two small ten point assignments, when they are missing the 100 point project. Sometimes teachers intentionally structure the grade book this way in order to establish priorities. After all, students should know that the 100 point assignment is more important than the 10 point assignment. However, this isn’t always the case.

Sometimes restructuring our assignments can help students to know up front what to prioritize. While it is necessary to tell them that you expect them to do all of the work and do the work on time, it is more realistic to stratify the assignments in such a way that students can discern the “must complete” from the “should complete” from the “can complete” (ie extra credit or enrichment activities). In all honesty, we have that system within the traditional classroom when we simply make an assignment for lots of point, some points, and no or few points. But in the traditional classroom, students are not always fully aware of that system. In the stratified approach teachers decide from the outset what the five or six “must complete” tasks

or assignments will be for the trimester. They become the essential learnings, the concepts that are absolutely critical to class. And no student is allowed to pass the class unless they complete all five or six of these tasks. By continually reminding students of this fact, students can easily discern what the base line for passing the class will be.

From there, teachers offer their regular assortment of weekly work. However, in this case, students are told that it is the expectation that they complete this work and hand it in, but that it isn't as critical to passing the class. Note, this is hard to do. After all, we like to think or believe that all of our assignments are profoundly good and necessary. But the truth is that not all assignments are really that important. They might be critical to getting a good grade (ie. something higher than a D or a C), but they are not absolutely necessary for surviving the course or leading a healthy and productive life.

Psychologically, this changes the game a little bit. On the part of the student, a stratified approach enables a greater sense of choice. And almost universally, students make the right choice on these smaller pieces. They choose to do both the critical assignments and smaller assignments because they know that one or two of those assignments will most likely be the difference between a C+ and a B-. This restructuring also empowers teachers and allows them to focus on what is of most importance. Instead of being annoyed and irritated that a student is missing a handful of small assignments, teachers can focus on helping the student accomplish the big things.

Doing this should allow teachers to get upwards of 95% completion rates on the big things, which means 95% of the students in the class will pass. As an interesting side effect, students complete the big things, and typically feel empowered and confident (in cases where late work is allowed) to go back and tackle some of the small things. In those cases, it is likely that you will hit 80%-90% completion rates on the small things as well.


Prioritizing and stratifying your assignments in such a way forces you to come back—once again—to reflect on what is absolutely critical in your classroom. It allows you to distill your curriculum down to its bare essentials to ensure that students experience those lessons critical to your class. And it enables you to really go after kids on those big assignments, to schedule kids before and after school, during enrichments and study halls. It changes the mindset from “I will give you the **opportunity** but you must take it” to “I won't **let** you fail. There is a path to success. We will get these things done.” Doing so establishes a mentality where all students can succeed.

Two Quick Vocabulary Ideas

1. **Vocabulary Opening Activity:** Working a new vocabulary word into a quick “whip around” activity is a good way to both build community, increase participation and learn new words. I got this idea from Bonnie Davis’ *How to Teach Students Who Don’t Look Like Me*. I put up a continuum on the board. At one end I wrote “Loquacious” (Talkative) and at the other I wrote “Reticent” (Quiet). As students entered they simply put their initials on the continuum where they could best describe themselves for the day. On another day, the word was “ailment”. I asked students to simply identify “what ails you?” Students came to the board, ala graffiti art, and submitted an ache, pain, or annoyance they were dealing with.
2. **Vocabulary Notetaking Scaffolding:**

Vocabulary Note-Taking Scaffold

Exonerated; v to clear of an accusation.

Synonym	Explanation / Examples	Image
<p style="text-align: center;">Vindicate release</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>He was _____ from his death sentence.</p> <p>The exonerated man felt like _____.</p> <p>The police were _____ from wrong doing.</p>	

What is a time when I felt like I had been exonerated?