Engaging Special Education Students in Higher Levels of Literacy

SUMMARY

Strategies developed at the University at Albany's Partnership for Literacy are proving effective in engaging special education students at the middle level, who are demonstrating to themselves, their parents, teachers, and others that they are capable of higher levels of thinking.

Picture this: A class of middle-level boys in a self-contained special education classroom. All are bright, but they share a common weakness — a lack of confidence in all things academic. Furthermore, this is a class for students with social-emotional problems, some with explosive behaviors. How can you draw them into the world of literacy? What could you do to help them engage in school in a positive and productive way?

This was the challenge for April in her first year as a teacher. She looked at the children before her and knew they demanded some exceptional experiences to light their curiosity about language. So she began with some "playful" activities (e.g., jokes, hyperbole). In late November, she introduced *The Red Book*, a wordless picture book by Barbara Lehman. After viewing all the illustrations, the students made up a story for each page; an aide recorded the story on chart paper for all to see, with students' initials next to the lines each contributed.

April was surprised at how they described — rather than told — the story. "They started to use their imaginations," she noted. "This was lots of work for them to do, and it was an activity of complete inference — and they all did it!" She followed up with the non-fiction *Volcanoes, Our Own Burning Questions*, using students' wonderings about volcanoes to drive instruction.

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From these initial activities, April began to build a community of writers and thinkers, and she saw not only huge growth in student literacy but noted that they were finding their voices and gaining confidence through their writing: Pedro was showing off his work to the secretaries in the main office, to the guidance counselor, and to the school psychologist and asking if he could write a story. BJ recognized onomatopoeia on a student's shirt in the cafeteria and with Marcus[i] searched for more words to contribute to the list the class was generating. By spring students were finding oxymorons and bringing them in for the rest of the class to enjoy. If students had free time, they were now returning to stories they had written previously and adding to them. All demonstrated a willingness to work — and the stamina needed to sustain writing.[ii]

April's voice became stronger too. She shared her students' successes with colleagues and recognized that she could do this work and that she had a cadre of students willing to join the initiatives she presented. Her reward was that each student grew in his own language proficiency and had contributed to the learning of every other student in that class. What more powerful accomplishment could there be for a teacher, especially a new teacher?

During that year, April was working with Johanna Shogan through the University at Albany's Partnership for Literacy (*see sidebar*). Johanna is a literacy facilitator, or coach, who works with teachers across grades, subject areas, and specialties on adopting and adapting instructional approaches that increase students' literacy learning and performance. Recently, she and her fellow coaches have been working specifically with special education teachers in several middle-level schools, including those of the authors of this article. Although the strategies described have been shown to be effective with all students, we draw our examples from special education, where students often face greater challenges than their peers and have further to go to demonstrate their literacy proficiency. Furthermore, since the strategies require and foster more abstract thinking, these special education students are demonstrating

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METHODOLOGY

Partnership for Literacy

The Partnership for Literacy is a research-based program that builds on and strengthens teacher and school efforts to improve student literacy. University-based literacy coaches work with and alongside teachers, introducing a variety of effective practices and ensuring that participants understand both why and how the strategies work to support student learning.

Based on a blend of state-of-the-art research and practice, the teaching strategies the partnership uses promote critical thinking, substantive discussion, and improved achievement in reading and writing. Another critical element of the partnership is support for groups of teachers to learn with and from each other. The partnership was developed by the Center on English Learning & Achievement at the University at Albany under the leadership of Judith A. Langer, distinguished SUNY professor and internationally recognized literacy expert. It works in every type of school, across all grades, and in all content and specialty areas.

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— to themselves, parents, teaching assistants, teachers, and administrators — that if given the opportunity they, too, are capable of higher levels of thinking and can use the concrete to support the abstract.

As in April's class, these students are eagerly *asking* to write more. Every student is actively taking part in the class discussion. Students are also gaining confidence and voice, enabling them to actively participate in their mainstream classrooms, according to their general education teachers. They are voicing thoughts and demonstrating higher-level thinking that teachers and administrators had not seen before. And they are demonstrating success in all areas of the state's English language arts standards, as evidenced by their improved performance on state ELA assessments.

Integrating Discussion, Reading, and Writing

Partnership facilitators start their work with all teachers, whether general or special educators, by encouraging them to open their classrooms to authentic discussion — and supporting them to physically set up the space to be conducive to discussion; to establish rules and guidelines that ensure meaningful and productive student interactions; to ask questions that students find worth discussing about issues that matter to them and to the subject being studied and to the material they are using; to use those questions to move students to higher levels of thinking (e.g., analysis, synthesis); and to tie all of this work to state standards.

This work with teachers is grounded in research about the connections between discussion and reading and writing performance[iii] and includes findings about:

> **How people learn best.**[iv] Humans are social beings who benefit from interaction, discussion, and the perspectives of others.
>
> **How our minds work when we process information.**[v] We process literary and informational texts differently — with the former opening up "horizons of possibility" and the latter closing in on points of information. We take various "stances" in relation to the text depending on our current levels of understanding, and a teacher's questions can guide students to more analytical stances.
>
> **The importance of instructional scaffolds to support student learning and skill development.**[vi] We need to teach students how to learn and then support them as they take on any complex task, gradually removing the supports as they are able to complete them independently.

How writing shapes thinking.[vii] Writing not only facilitates rational thought but provides a record upon which to reflect and review thinking.

How offering a connected and coherent curriculum helps students learn and remember.[viii]

These findings have been validated by many researchers over the past several decades.[ix] Included in those research studies is an experimental study conducted by Applebee, Langer and colleagues that tested not only particular instructional strategies, some of which are discussed in detail below, but also tested their approach to working with teachers to put the more effective strategies in place. This process/approach has come to be called the Partnership for Literacy. Results show a positive change in teacher practice and an improvement in student writing, particularly for urban students who are generally underperforming.[x]

In the sections that follow we offer a glimpse of how special education teachers use some of these strategies to motivate and support student thinking and use discussion to help their special education students develop stronger reading, writing, and oral language skills.

Instructional Scaffolds for Writing, Discussion, and Reading

Instructional supports — or scaffolds[vi] — are important in helping all students build strong skills that they internalize and can independently draw on to acquire additional skills and knowledge. This is especially true for students with special learning needs. Angela Spanakos uses a writing scaffold to help take the initial fear out of writing for her special education fifth-graders.

Scaffolding Writing of Paragraphs and Poetry

When first asked to jot down words they associated with writing, Angela's students offered: "boring!" ... "oh no!" ... "a drag!" ... "a hassle!" To help make writing less intimidating, Angela uses writing scaffolds. These supports provide students with guidance when writing so they feel confident enough to put words to paper. The scaffolds are frames that set the stage for what students want to put into their paragraphs. They are the "bones" of the paragraph; students add "meat" by adding their own ideas. Writing scaffolds build students' confidence and give them a feeling of "This isn't so bad; I can do this." When students see their final product, it opens the door for more opportunities in writing, which helps build stamina.[ii]

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Lifting students over the hump. To get started, Angela brainstorms ideas with students and writes their thoughts on chart paper. These ideas stay up throughout the writing activity so students have a visual to help with their thinking[vii] and spelling. Angela passes out the writing scaffold on paper. At first glance, it looks like a *cloze* activity, with hints written in the blanks. These hints are questions for students to answer as they complete the writing activity; they may be as simple as "What do alligators eat?" Then the class reviews the "bones" — or frame — of the paragraph by reading it aloud. Students next complete the frame by copying it over and putting their own ideas in the holes. The framed paragraph shows students how sentences come together; it helps them see the flow and organization of a paragraph. Like construction scaffolding, instructional scaffolding is meant to come down as students gain the skills to complete the task on their own.[vi]

For example, in her fifth-grade class, Angela used a framed paragraph to help students compare alligators and crocodiles after they had read *Snap! A Book about Crocodiles and Alligators*. Students were engaged in the book, which offers a wealth of information and photographs of alligators and crocodiles. Following the reading, the class developed a Venn diagram to organize the information. Students actively shared facts they had just read about as Angela recorded them on the chart. When Angela announced the writing task, one of her students who despised writing headed for the door. The words "type on the computer" caught his ear, though, and he stayed long enough to hear the activity. For this particular student, Angela had set up the writing scaffold on the computer, which he enjoyed using. Familiar with the framed paragraph from a previous activity, he felt confident enough to attempt the writing. The scaffold helped him organize his many thoughts and gave him a springboard from which to write. He was able to complete the writing task without hesitation and did so with a smile.

Poetry. Angela found that writing scaffolds also work with poetry. After reading the poem "Feelings Alive" by Carol Peck, she put the seven feelings described in the poem on separate sheets of paper and taped them around the room. Students were asked to list concrete objects associated with the feelings on each paper, for example, a fire for "anger" or a puppy playing for "happiness." As a class, students developed a variety of creative ideas and then added to the lists throughout the period as new ideas popped into their heads. Angela provided students a copy of the poem with Peck's concrete objects omitted. Students copied the poem into their notebooks, supplying their choice of concrete objects from the lists generated by the class. Angela was amazed to see students so eager to write their own poems. Again, students who had strongly resisted writing poetry found this task simple, and the final product made them feel successful. More importantly, the students became able to do the work on their own: As students grew more confident in their writing, Angela was able to pull the scaffolds away.

Scaffolding Discussion

Laura Carroll also uses chart paper to capture students' ideas for future reference. In addition to writing, she uses these and other visual cues to support discussion.

Visual and tactile cues to maintain focus. In Laura's special education class, visual cues set the stage for discussion and remind students to support their ideas and transfer their developing skills to other situations. Visuals include print as well as everyday objects that she has infused with symbolic meaning. For example, she posts student-generated rules and reminders for meaningful discussion. Some key concepts for a meaningful discussion are to agree and disagree respectfully, focus, clarify, think, tell why, respond, listen, question, connect, explain, predict, and give feedback. When students demonstrate an awareness of the key factors that create a firm foundation for an argument, they receive the "rock award." Her seventh-graders strive to receive the rock rather than remain quicksand, which has no solid foundation at all, for the remainder of the class period. Many students who receive a rock award also get published to the "Gem of the Day" bulletin board, a place where students' words of wisdom are displayed for all to see; both teacher and students use these gems for reference in discussions and writing. A backpack hangs in the classroom as a reminder to students to remember to bring the skills they learn to all of their classes. Another favorite visual is the pair of sneakers hanging from the ceiling. They remind students to step into someone else's shoes and see life from different perspectives.[iv]

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Questions to deepen thinking and learning. Laura also employs a tactile learning tool you may remember from childhood. Variously called a "scrunchie," "cootie catcher," or even "fortune teller," this origami toy is multipurpose, fun, innovative, and in Laura's class vital to helping students move from concrete to abstract thinking. Students can hold it, manipulate it, and use it as a guide to discuss ideas about text or to inform their writing. The questions support different reading stances[v] or levels of understanding as students process text — from initially stepping into a new text world (stance one) to being within it (stance two) to stepping

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back to relate what they are learning to something else they already know (stance three) to tapping higher levels of thinking like synthesis or analysis (stance four); Laura uses the stances as a framework to guide discussions with her students. They are open-ended questions about a literary text, prepared prior to a discussion, as a tool for teachers and students. The first stance includes the "wonder" question, "What are you wondering about?" Students respond to this question like no other. They tell her what is important to them, what ideas they have, and what they are thinking about the text; and they have a chance to clarify any misunderstandings about characters, events, vocabulary, and ideas.

Second-stance questions help students develop ideas, make connections to their own lives, and think deeper about the characters and important parts of the text. The third stance asks students to step out of the text and think differently about something in their lives or the world they live in — step into someone else's shoes, reflect on how the text has changed their views about their lives and the lives around them. The fourth stance asks students to analyze the text itself. For example, she might ask, "Why did the author write this book?" or "How does this book compare to others you have read?"

The framework allows students to move from one stance to another and back again as they attempt to make meaning from the text. Sometimes the class will lead the discussion by choosing questions from the "cootie catcher." They choose questions from each stance, question each other, and choose who asks the next question. Laura acts as the facilitator of these discussions, using uptake[xi] to build on student responses to ensure a full exploration of the text, as needed, but letting students lead the discussion in a way that is meaningful to them. And she helps them record their responses. The cootie catcher acts as a springboard for meaningful discussion and develops positive habits of mind when students interact with texts. It is also easily adapted for use at home with parents.

Scaffolding Reading by Teaching Inference

Nicole Hunt, too, uses scaffolds to support close reading, and through discussion helps students learn to identify what an author says without saying it explicitly — learning to recognize inference.

Finding inference through "wonder questions." Like April, Nicole was a first-year teacher who wanted to use classroom discussion to promote literacy engagement, but she found that her students were not fully capable of conducting a focused discussion.

Even more, she feared her students would not be able to meet the goal to master inference. To teach the students how to "read between the lines," she had to start with the perfect text. She chose a passage from the novel *First Part Last* by Angela Johnson, which offers many opportunities to practice identifying inference. This choice did not come without risk, though: The topic of teen pregnancy poses an issue of appropriateness for sixth-graders, but her choice was based on its potential for provoking conversation.

Nicole had already introduced her students to Reader's Marks (*see sidebar*) to track their thinking while reading. Students found these helpful; as one student said, they are a "map that shows the way to think." For this lesson she introduced a new mark for making an inference: a simple "i" with a circle around it. Discussing first why a reader might need to make an inference (because authors often leave information out on purpose), Nicole discussed how she might figure out what was not written by gathering written clues combined with her own background information to develop an understanding of the "unsaid." She modeled how a portion of the text made her wonder, then she and her students offered possible answers to her wondering. Next, pairs of students tried to come up with their own wonder questions as they read, with

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Reader's Marks

Good readers actively think while they read. With the right equipment, a pencil or pen, you can master all you read. By making your thoughts visible you can: learn the basic facts, think beyond the passage, spot essential vocabulary, ask important questions, remember information, connect ideas, and gain confidence. You will see your ideas at work!

———	**Underline** the parts that you think are important. Details, dates, names, facts and definitions.
★	Put a **star** in the margin of an unusual idea, a new thought, something you want to go back and take a second look at, or an interesting quote or piece of information.
?	Put a **question mark** down when you don't understand. Better yet, write your own question in the margin.
C	Put a **C** in the margin where you have a personal connection. It may relate to your own life, remind you of another idea, something else you know, etc. **WRITE THAT IDEA DOWN.** Or, it just might be a comment you would like to make.
!	**Surprise!**
P	Make a **prediction!**
i	Put an **i** where you think you have found an **inference** to something not being said directly.
Vocabulary	**Circle** a new new vocabulary word. Guess its meaning, or look it up in the dictionary.

Thanks to our teacher-partners for developing these marks.

It is often very difficult to motivate a reluctant learner, especially those who have had so many negative school experiences. It's so important to make learning fun for these children so they do not feel threatened.

possible reasons or answers. This activity helped students develop an understanding of both the skill of inferring and of the text itself. It pushed her students to dig deeper into the text — a new phenomenon for them. She followed this with a whole-group, student-led discussion; her occasional probing served as enough of a scaffold for the discussion about the inferences in the text. One of the most interesting things she noticed was that student-led discussion created enthusiasm for the literature.They were now begging to read the rest of the text.

Student-student discussion. Despite the accomplishments of this class period, Nicole was feeling "uncomfortable" about releasing control of the discussion so soon. She found it awkward to spend the majority of the class silently listening to a conversation her students were having. Yet with just a few interjections to guide the conversation in the right direction, she had helped her students develop a deeper understanding of the skill of inferring, the meaning of the text,[v] and the strategy of using Reader's Marks *(see previous page)*. That was a lot to accomplish in 40 minutes. Thus she concluded that "this community I had created in my classroom in which my students were fully engaged and learning was something I would stick with in the long run."

Tapping into student interests and **having fun with language**. When April decided that playfulness might engage her reluctant learners, she began by tapping into their love of jokes. They were always telling jokes, so she introduced *Lies and Other Tall Tales* by Zora Neale Hurston to teach hyperbole. She read the book aloud, and they discussed some of the tall tales from it. The students brainstormed their own hyperboles, with many students referring back to jokes they commonly tell, changing them to fit within the parameters of no insults, no names, and always school-appropriate. In the end, the students created an illustrated class book of their own hyperboles. Some examples: "I knew a girl who was so thin she used a Froot Loop as a hula hoop." "I knew a man who was so stupid, that while working in an M & M factory, he was throwing out all the Ws!"

Over the year, Fridays became "fun days" for those who had worked hard all week and earned it. One Friday the class did a project in which they hatched "test tube aliens." Those aliens sparked a class writing assignment for boys who were struggling writers and rarely wrote more than a couple of sentences. The aliens became quite the motivator! They became the subject of a story each boy eventually typed and illustrated.

They all worked hard writing rough drafts, revising and editing their stories. At the final copy stage, April brought in laptops and each typed out his story. She never thought she would get this group of students to take a story through the writing process.

In June, April said, “I learned so much from these students, but most of all I learned that it is so important to know who your students are, and what motivates them.” She learned it is possible to motivate a reluctant learner, especially those who have had so many negative school experiences. It’s so important to make learning fun for these children so they do not feel threatened. When my students were having fun with language they were learning and they were finally successful—and they knew it!”

Like their general education colleagues, in agreeing to try new instructional strategies that require students to attain higher levels of thinking through student-generated discussion, these special education teachers had to change their teaching practice to help their students master literacy. They learned to help their students simultaneously work with concrete and abstract thinking, using rich oral language experiences to stretch the concrete to the abstract. The strategies mentioned in this article are examples of scaffolds to support such thinking and learning. And, perhaps even more than mainstream teachers, they had to believe that their students could do it. All four were willing to work with a Partnership for Literacy coach and experiment with new strategies to help their students discover their voices, their own pursuits, and, in so doing, their own success in becoming more literate. The teachers, too, became stronger in their practice, more reflective, and more poised in their delivery. Students discovered they could write poetry, make inferences, take responsibility for their own learning, and actually enjoy reading and writing. What could be more important than building such a foundation for their students?

Endnotes

[i] Students' names are pseudonyms.

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