

Literary Learning

The Newsletter for Vermont's English Language Arts Educators and Supporters

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Improving Adolescent Literacy

As an ELA teacher trained and licensed in secondary education, I was not prepared to teach my students how to read. In fact, I was naïve enough to assume they would enter my classroom with the ability to read and when I encountered students who did not have these skills, I was at a loss. There is a well-deserved push for early literacy in Vermont, but what about the students who have been moved through those early grades and still don't have the tools to decode and comprehend complex texts?

I recently completed the course "Improving Reading for Older Students," put on by David and Meredith Liben of [Student Achievement Partners](#). This course focused on the skills and knowledge students need in order to access complex texts: word recognition, which includes phonics; fluency; vocabulary and knowledge; comprehension; and efficacy. The first two, automatic word recognition and fluency, have a reciprocal relationship; improving one supports improvement in the other. Also, as students develop a greater volume of sight words and become more fluent readers, they in turn become more efficient readers and do not need to put forth as much effort.

Current educational practices support the so-called "Matthew Effect" – the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. Early readers who struggle are often exposed to less text, thereby giving them less practice. Consequently, they end up having to read texts that are too hard for them, causing them to spend too much mental energy decoding. "Slow, capacity-draining word recognition processes require cognitive resources that should be allocated to comprehension. Thus, reading for meaning is hindered; unrewarding reading experiences multiply; and practice is avoided or merely tolerated without real cognitive involvement" (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998).

Adolescent readers who struggle with word recognition or fluency can become easily frustrated by the imbalance between the amount of effort they must put into decoding a text and their level of subsequent comprehension; they continue to struggle, get no joy out of reading, and feel like failures. Therefore, strengthening older readers' fluency skills can lead to greater comprehension, more enjoyment of reading, and feelings of success. Simply put, strong readers read more and therefore get better at it. To support this, educators can incorporate fluency exercises into classes at any level and doing so can benefit readers of any age.

The Libens present some strategies for improving fluency, one of which is reading aloud to students. This models fluency and has the added benefit of taking the burden of decoding off students so they can spend their mental energy comprehending the

text. It is a good idea to have students follow along as you read, so they can make the connections between what they are hearing and the printed text. You can also use some of the strategies described in the following paragraphs, such as choral reading, echo reading, or paired reading.

As ELA educators, we are all aware of the importance of vocabulary and knowledge in being able to access a complex text. Research shows that having knowledge about a topic, whether through education or lived experience, aids in comprehension even more than the ability to read fluently (Recht, D. R., & Leslie, L., 1988). A volume of reading at the student's reading level is the best way to increase vocabulary and knowledge. [Text sets](#) about a particular topic are a proven way to build vocabulary and knowledge necessary for all students to enter a complex text from a similar starting point, thus setting them up for successful comprehension and a strong standard of coherence. In other words, students who are confident in their ability to read successfully are more likely to persevere when challenged and employ the habits of strong readers, thus making that predicted success a reality. Reading success, in a way, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Adolescents who struggle with reading experience the opposite; they do not see themselves as readers and therefore tend to give up more quickly than their peers who do not struggle, perpetuating the cycle.

An important point about older students is that, much like adults, they need to know why they are doing something, to see the value and be able to make connections for themselves, in order to fully invest their energy in the activity. Additionally, it is essential for adolescents who struggle with reading to know that their struggle is not about how smart they are. The Libens present an activity called "Did I Just Get Smarter?" to drive this point home. Start by having students read a short passage out loud together (they can whisper read to themselves if they are uncomfortable reading in front of others). After that first reading, ask how it went. Most will agree it did not go well. Next, read the passage out loud twice, modeling fluent reading, and have students follow along. Then, do two "echo reads" in which you read a sentence and the students echo as a group. After that, do two "choral reads," which are like echo reads but with the whole paragraph at once instead of sentence by sentence. Finally, ask students to read the passage again, this time to one another in pairs, and ask how it went. When they say it went better than the initial reading, ask them if they just got smarter in the last 20 minutes. Of course, they'll know they didn't, which can lead to a discussion about what did change: they improved their reading fluency, and they did this by practicing. This activity can help demonstrate to students that fluency has nothing to do with intelligence; in fact, it comes from a different part of the brain entirely. The ability to read fluently is like a muscle that can be strengthened with practice, and students will quickly see the results of their work if they stick with it.

Another important point about teaching reading to adolescents is that it needs to be done in such a way that they do not feel like they are being treated like little kids. Therefore, the content you are teaching (phonics, word recognition, fluency, etc.) needs to be the same as for young readers, but the delivery method and materials need to be quite different. One way to do this is to work with the texts students are reading in class whenever possible, instead of using separate worksheets from a

foundational reading program. This can be challenging, but it is absolutely essential to get buy-in from your most important stakeholders: your students.

Vermont PBS Kids and Education Resources for Back to School

The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) continues to partner with Vermont PBS to provide high quality educational resources for teachers and families. Access these resources by visiting the [AOE's PBS webpage](#) or [Vermont PBS Kids and Education](#). Check out [Vermont PBS Kids and Education: September 2021](#), which includes resources for back to school, organized by grade band and subject area. This month, join the Vermont Agency of Education, Vermont PBS, and GBH Boston for a free webinar, [Indigenous Cultural and Informational Text Resources from Molly of Denali](#). Gear up for the new school year with resources that support diverse cultural awareness and accessing informational text, available free on [PBS LearningMedia](#) and all drawn from the animated series, *Molly of Denali*. Stay tuned for more monthly resources as they are developed.

In the meantime, join the Vermont PBS Educational Resources group on [Edmodo](#) as a space to share resources related to PBS programming and strategies for incorporating PBS programming and resources into your classroom. This group will allow educators to post their own resources, ask questions, share ideas, and collaborate statewide. To join the group, activate your Edmodo account and join the VTED Learns community by filling out [this form](#). Then you can [join the group](#) with the link provided or the group code “zyqyd4”.

New Resources from Smarter Balanced

Smarter Balanced released three new videos in its series of informative videos that take a closer look at the tools available in their system of instructional supports. The new releases provide more detail about the **Interim Connections Playlists** and the **Individual Student Accessibility Profile (ISAAP)**. Each video has an accompanying professional learning resource in [Tools for Teachers](#) that provides a step-by-step plan for professional learning communities (PLCs) and supporting guides. The video [Using Interim Connections Playlists](#) (and [accompanying resource](#)) introduces the Connections Playlists and provides tips for how to use them to support teaching and learning. [Understanding the ISAAP](#) is the first in a series of videos about the Smarter Balanced ISAAP and describes a process and tool that can be employed by a team of educators, students, and families working together to select resources for individual students both in instruction and on assessments. [ISAAP: A Tool to Support Students](#), the second video about the ISAAP, features sample student profiles and shows how to use the tool to record those resources selected during the ISAAP process. [Accompanying resources for Understanding the ISAAP](#) and [ISAAP: A Tool to Support Students](#) can be found on Tools for Teachers. You can also view other videos in the series by visiting the [Smarter Balanced Instructional Supports Playlist on YouTube](#). This is a great way to learn more about the tools that are available to you as part of the Smarter Balanced system.

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2021 – 2022 Peer Learning Communities (PLCs)

The Proficiency-Based Learning Team is excited to offer educators opportunities to fine tune their skills designing performance assessments and Project-Based Learning units, as well as participate in content specific PLCs. To begin this process for English language arts educators, readers were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of last school year. Recognizing that needs change, you are once again invited to [submit feedback](#), this time to a few open-ended questions so that we can collect information to plan meaningful and pertinent professional learning opportunities.

Resources

- [Text Analysis Toolkit](#) – This toolkit from Student Achievement Partners “aims to support educators in the process of selecting and analyzing texts by reflecting on the identities of themselves and the students they serve, analyzing texts with multiple lenses, and considering implications for use in their specific context.”
- Kamil, M. L., Borman, G. D., Dole, J., Kral, C. C., Salinger, T., and Torgesen, J. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Effective classroom and intervention practices: A Practice Guide* (NCEE #2008-4027). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from [IES: WWC \(What Works Clearinghouse website\)](#).

Professional Offerings and Activities

Free Webinar: Indigenous Cultural and Informational Text Resources from *Molly of Denali* – Gear up for the new school year with resources that support diverse cultural awareness and accessing informational text. Join the Vermont Agency of Education, Vermont PBS, and GBH Boston for a deep dive into the *Molly of Denali* supplemental resources centered around teaching young children how to access and create informational text while exploring aspects of Alaska Native culture and values. Featured educator presenters will share their favorite resources on [PBS LearningMedia](#) and help you integrate them easily into your existing curriculum. You will leave this webinar with very specific strategies and resources you can use immediately. [Register now](#) to attend this live webinar on Wednesday, September 29, from 7-8 p.m.

Literacy Early Learning Networked Improvement Community (NIC) – In collaboration with Nell Duke and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), we are recruiting school teams to join us in a NIC to improve early literacy instruction and student learning in PreK-K. In the NIC, we apply an improvement science approach that focuses on equity by using systems thinking, disciplined inquiry, attention to variation, and practical measures for improvement. We involve those closest to the work (teachers) in the continuous improvement process, and in the co-design and development of positive classroom practices. For more information, please [contact the NIC hub](#) or [email Lori Dolezal](#).

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<https://education.vermont.gov/student-learning/content-areas/language-arts>