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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

Educators Strategize, Democratize Reading Instruction in New Book

ORONO, Maine – What is learned must be taught, and the need for active, sustained instruction in reading doesn't end when students grasp the basics in elementary school. That's the bottom line of a new book that illustrates how to do more than simply throw required reading books at adolescents in the nation's middle and high schools.

Reading instruction falls by the wayside when students need it most, according to the authors of *Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy 6-12* (Heinemann 2001). The result of collaboration between a University of Maine faculty member and two Maine public school educators, the book examines major theoretical implications and issues surrounding teaching and learning. It also presents a model for teaching reading through high school and dozens of instructional strategies to help students comprehend *what* they are reading, understand *how* they are learning and appreciate *why* it is important.

Strategic Reading is about the democratic process of sharing expert knowledge and working collaboratively to give students the power of language – by developing skills to build on what they already know and can do to make sense out of unfamiliar concepts and tackle challenging, new text. The teacher's role, say the authors, is not to teach the book, but to teach the processes students need to understand different textual conventions, genres and themes in ways that are socially significant to them, their current concerns and interests.

Students' reading skills don't automatically grow to meet the demand of more difficult reading matter as they work their way through middle and high school, notes lead author Jeffrey Wilhelm, associate professor of literacy at UMaine.

“Text is conventional,” he says. “We all keep bumping up against new and increasingly complex text. That's why we need to learn the skills to read throughout a lifetime.”

Co-authors are Tanya Baker, an English teacher at Brewer High School, and Julie Dube, principal at Medway Middle School and a former English teacher and dean of students at Old Town High School. Both are currently working on doctorate degrees at UMaine, Baker in literacy and Dube in educational leadership.

The book grew from collaboration and shared teaching among the authors. Brewer and Old Town are members of the Penobscot River Educational Partnership: A Professional Development Network. The network is comprised of six area school districts UMaine through the College of Education and Human Development. It works collaboratively to develop and share ideas and resources to promote the professional development of future and practicing teachers in areas such as technology, curriculum development, assessment practices and research. Baker and Dube are

also fellows of the Maine Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project. Wilhelm founded the state writing project in 1997 and serves as its director.

The authors write with an authoritative voice and experience because they tried all the strategies in their classrooms, individually and team teaching together.

“Collaboration in educational endeavors is important,” says Wilhelm. “People working together can know more, achieve more and become more than they could be if they worked alone. This is one of the points of our book and one we embody in our own work together.”

Students aren't interested in being readers simply for reading's sake, according to Baker. They want to read, she says, because they are making connections to what they consider important and how they react to the world.

“We shouldn't take reading for granted just because a student has reached middle school or high school,” says Dube. “We need to actively assist them to continue building skills, not just give them harder books.”

The most typical instruction for older students is listening to what a teacher tells them, repeating it on tests and being evaluated. It is expecting accountability without the requisite teaching, without providing students with the knowledge and skills to succeed with more complex tasks, according to the authors.

The authors outline a system that requires explicit modeling and teaching of a reading strategy, collaborative learning, and active and sustained support that enables students to independently apply and use a strategy when and how it is needed.

They call for classrooms where students are not just taught strategies necessary to comprehending and conversing with new kinds of tasks and texts. Students, the authors say, should also be encouraged to discuss the politics presented in a text, express different viewpoints, consider the implications of prejudice and influence in a democracy, and relate these factors to a variety of circumstances.

Politicized teaching is more respectful of students, the authors claim, because it recognizes that they are important and have the ability to understand, negotiate, embrace and resist. And, the educators emphasize, such interactive instruction grants students responsibility as it lends them expertise.

“We want our goals to be clear to our students and open to discussion,” say the authors. “We want to let students know where we are going and why, and we want them to build and apply their own politics and critical standards to everything we do.”

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