
Professional Resources

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English Companion Ning

Burke, J. (2009). English companion: Where English teachers meet to help each other. Retrieved March 3, 2009, from englishcompanion.ning.com

Teachers are concerned with developing 21st century literacy methods that help students achieve their Adequate Yearly Progress in light of No Child Left Behind. Some school districts are providing the type of professional development that will afford teachers first-hand opportunities for inquiry and collaboration for integrating theory with classroom pedagogy. Research has shown that collaborative learning groups are the most efficient way to provide social constructivist professional development that leads to school reform (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). With readily accessible technological advances in communication, it is reasonable for teachers seeking to improve their practice to collaborate in a public forum that meets their needs.

We credit contributors to listservs like NCTE-talk and Media-L with being the best cooperating teachers we've had in our combined 20 years of teaching.

We've had literacy mentors—Nancy Patterson, Tracy Gardner, Gloria Pipkin, and others—sharing, discussing any topic we found worthy. Listservs and other online communities are the most democratic communities of practice because credibility and respect is not based on one's education or job title, but in the intelligence of one's responses and commitment to the community. In December of 2008, Jim Burke, author of *The English Companion*, took the listserv-type community of practice to a 21st century level by creating a Ning (an online social network) of teachers sharing, discussing, and arguing topics central to their teaching—an online community of practice. Technological tools, such as the English Companion Ning, easily enable teachers to implement this practice with teachers within their local districts as well as teachers across state, regional, and national borders (Laferrière, Lamon, & Chan, 2006).

Laferrière et al. (2006) reported, "Internet-based technologies support teacher learners, distributing cognition across persons, tools, and resources to expand the system's expertise—members create and improve knowledge of the community collectively" (p. 78). Listservs have been fulfilling this role since the advent of e-mail. Online discussions position teachers in their classrooms but connected to the world. The development of professional learning communities reflects an emphasis on learning as a social practice.

Social networking sites such as Facebook have been recently growing in popularity among adults as they have discovered the advantages of maintaining connections with "friends" in other places. Ellison, Lampe, and Steinfield (2009) discuss how the two levels of personal networking sites—interpersonal and community—work. On the Ning, members have a personal page where they can post personal data such as photos, books they are reading, videos, and blog entries. This personal information allows participants to find connections with people they might not have reached otherwise. At the community level, participants can join focused groups where they can unite to share insights, discuss ideas, debate issues, or take action on a specific topic. The English Companion Ning has a similar format. Being able to connect with people at both the personal and community level has "the potential to have positive effects on society at

large because they encourage disparate individuals to connect, communicate, and take action" (Ellison et al., 2009, p. 6). Once teachers enter the site, they are on the main page that lists upcoming events, recent blogs, groups, and discussion forums. From there they may enter their personal page, discussions and forums that they are following, or groups to which they belong. The navigation tabs at the top of the pages allow for easy movement within the site.

Groups and Discussion Forums Pages

In an era where "teachers need collaboration tools that they can own and tailor to meet their own needs and the needs of the community" (Laferrière et al., 2006), Ning members create a plethora of groups based on their needs and interests. One of the largest groups is called Teaching Texts. This group formed to share ideas and resources for particular novels that teachers use in their classrooms. Another group, Teaching With Technology, focuses on questions and concerns surrounding the myriad tools available for teachers: Moodle, Twitter, YouTube, laptops, and videos, to name a few. Teachers should be able to find many groups to join, and if not, they can create one.

When Ning members have a specific question that does not warrant forming a group, they can post a single question on a discussion forum. It is practically impossible to look at the list of discussion questions without finding a question that answers one of your concerns or a question to which you can contribute an insightful answer. As teachers share their experiences, discuss research, and pass on wisdom and insights, their collective knowledge and teaching abilities can grow exponentially.

Blogs Page

Since there is value in shared experience, teachers benefit from the availability of blogs on the Ning. They

provide teachers with opportunities to view, reflect, and discuss exemplary instances of teaching practice; allow teachers to participate in communities of practice, to share ideas, reflections and resources with their peers and other experts in their countries or beyond; and in some cases, challenge teachers to become

knowledge designers and creators. (Laferrière et al., 2006, pp. 84–85)

Blogs give teachers opportunities to make the Ning personal with an area for reflection on their own practice, essential in active learning and fostering meaningful change.

Multimedia Page

To share electronic media, teachers can access the multimedia portion of the Ning (englishcompanion.ning.com/video). By viewing videos and photos, teachers can expand their literacy and gather ideas for using digital literacies in their classrooms. Several video types are available. Videos for classroom use include ones that showcase or model student work like “Macbeth Mindmaps” and “Not Quite What I Was Planning,” and others that motivate or introduce students to assignments such as “Don’t Fear the Essay.” Videos for teacher information or entertainment include “Simone Elkeles: *Perfect Chemistry Rap*” and “Paradox of Choice.” One problem emerged when our district’s filter blocked several of the videos, but the only weakness we found in the site is the Photos page, which was bogged down by irrelevant personal photos.

Events Page

A final beneficial aspect of the Ning is the transfer of online professional development to offline collaboration. On the Ning, there is an events tab where members can post events throughout the country, which can lead to face-to-face conversations through conventions and seminars, and opportunities for publication.

Conclusion

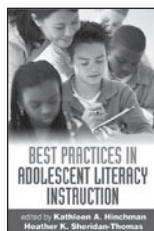
While Jim Burke created The English Companion Ning, he does not control the discussions. The Ning assists teachers in applying the moral dimensions of teaching to their professional development practice because it involves a truly democratic process. No one is in charge, all have equal say, and the quality of the discussion forums rests solely upon individual commitment to the community. If people do not find

what they are looking for, they can create a space, either in a forum, community, or blog, but they are not limited to participating on the English Companion Ning. By visiting Ning.com, teachers can find a Ning that better suits their needs, such as “LITeracy and Technology,” “Maths Literacy Teacher’s Network,” “NCTE Ning,” or “Literacy Coaches.” If interested persons do not find what they want, they can create a relevant Ning within five minutes. In the democratic process allowed through online communities, the possibilities of literacy development and collaboration are endless. We felt the Ning was so useful and addicting that we added at least 20 friends, created 3 discussion forums, responded to 11 discussions, and commented on a video in the process of writing this review. Jim Burke implemented the English Companion Ning, which has allowed over 5,000 teachers to revolutionize their professional development by connecting with each other through a new literacy tool.

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Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy Instruction

Kathleen A. Hinchman and Heather K. Sheridan-Thomas (Eds.). 2008. New York: Guilford. 379 pp. US\$33.00.

Public education, especially at the secondary level, is currently experiencing a powerful increase in focus upon literacy and literacy instruction. Many models of professional development are being employed to ensure that, regardless of discipline,

faculty are adapting the best practices of literacy instruction. In *The Best Practices of Adolescent Literacy Instruction*, Hinchman and Sheridan-Thomas organize the work of 26 contributors to 19 chapters into three sections to guide the reader through the most current approaches to literacy instruction that “cognitive and sociocultural research suggest [are] engaging and effective for youth in grades 5–12” (p. xv). Though the practices discussed are displayed as effective for all adolescents, the work of these contributors has a clear focus on struggling students and schools.

Section 1: Responsive Literacy Instruction

The first section of this book discusses current “Perspectives Toward Adolescent Literacy Instruction.” The five chapters that are included within this section focus upon the concept of responsive teaching in the field of literacy. The authors unanimously suggest that nearly all adolescents engage in a variety of literacy practices outside of school and these must be accessed if the student is to succeed within the school. The divide that exists in many classrooms between the reading and writing done in and out of school works only to increase the student’s perception that school work is unreal and irrelevant in real world contexts. For this reason, the contributors recommend engaging in responsive teaching by determining what forms of literacy students are practicing at home and finding ways to apply them within the classroom. In “iLife: Understanding and Connecting to the Digital Literacies of Adolescents,” for example, Dana Wilber suggests incorporating strategies using blogs, LiveJournals, webpages, podcasts, and digital pen pals as ways to “build on the expertise of students” and “build bridges between schools and their communities” (p. 73). Another contributor, Shelley Hong Xu, recommends developing intersections between scholastic and personal literacies by developing what she refers to as hybrid spaces or areas connecting the academic works of the school to the interests of the student. She displays this concept through the example of an English language arts unit where students simultaneously analyze characters in the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson and characters on the popular reality television show *Survivor*. By developing

connections such as these, these contributors suggest that educators can build on students’ prior knowledge to provide them with analytic frameworks that are useful both in and out of school.

This first section concludes with a chapter by David O’Brien in which he summarizes the difficulty of the struggling student adrift in an academic world that appears entirely disconnected from reality: “Struggling students do not expect to gain anything tangible from reading; they read to meet externally established and imposed goals” (p. 89). He explains that even when these students do attempt to meet these external goals, they do not expect a successful outcome. Thus, O’Brien intimates that many struggling students have learned but two things from school: It is irrelevant, and they are not successful within it. For this reason he, along with the other contributors to this book, advocates reestablishing student self-efficacy by accessing the real world literacy practices of adolescents.

Section 2: Practical Practices

The second section of this book, “Developing Reading and Writing Strategies for Multiple Contexts,” contains eight chapters focusing upon ways to specifically implement responsive literacy instructional practices in various subject areas and classrooms. The purpose of this section is to provide the reader with an assortment of problem areas within literacy instruction and to address each of these practically and independently to display the theoretical commonalities that unite them. This section discusses instructional practices for English, mathematics, humanities, and science courses, while addressing students who are older or younger, struggling or more adept. Regardless of the content, the contributors explain that all educators are attempting to scaffold their students into the professional and academic discourses of their respective fields.

In “Fostering Acquisition of Official Mathematics Language,” Condruta Temple discusses a mathematics teacher who worked to help students create language to discuss mathematical concepts more clearly. In this case study, Temple explains that the classroom teacher taught students to work with mathematical concepts such as slope through the use of line equations and

then asked the students to develop definitions of these terms based upon their earlier work. After these definitions were complete, the teacher had the students apply them in various contexts, eventually formulating new equations based upon their definitions. By allowing the students to engage in the creation of the mathematical language in her classroom, this teacher not only guided them into this academic discourse, but also helped them “close the loop between the particular and the general, and in this case, the concrete and the abstract expressions of the key concept” (p. 242). Such strategies help students develop as writers and readers.

Though not all classes can develop all the strategies a reader needs to develop, Heather Sheridan-Thomas displays an approach that can be used across contexts in “Assisting Struggling Readers with Textbook Comprehension.” Sheridan-Thomas explains that it is difficult for any one content area teacher to provide enough practice opportunities for each reading strategy to allow struggling readers to become independent strategy users. However, if teachers across content areas can agree to use a small set of target strategies, students can get enough cumulative practice to make the strategies stick. In an environment with schoolwide approaches to reading instruction, adolescents can become accustomed to using similar approaches and developing their abilities to enter into academic discourses in all of their classes.

Section 3: Programmatic Literacy

The third section of this book, “Adolescent Literacy Program Issues,” focuses more specifically on ways to develop these schoolwide approaches. This section contains six chapters written by such esteemed contributors to the field of literacy instruction as Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and David Moore and discusses programmatic problem areas such as assessment, standards, and ineffective professional development, while continuing the book’s focus on responsive literacy instruction in a wide variety of environments. The chapters focus on the needs to differentiate instruction for learners with disabilities, to individualize assessment for all students to authentically determine what areas each student requires assistance within, and to engage students with histories of failure. Though this

section is directed more specifically toward an audience of school leaders who recognize the need for schoolwide change in literacy instruction, the chapters are written to be practically valuable to classroom teachers as well.

One of the most powerful chapters contained within this book, “Program Development,” is in this third section, representing the oeuvre of Professor David Moore, who cochaired the commission for adolescent literacy for the International Reading Association (IRA) from 2000 to 2004. In this chapter, Moore begins by providing a background of intervention materials used to develop programs for academic literacy at secondary schools. Moore goes on to describe the common characteristics to be found in all of these programs, emphasizing that they are “not meant to comprise a grab-bag of rainy day activities; they are meant to serve as a principled approach toward validated instructional practices” (p. 326). After displaying the five key components of effective literacy programs: (1) direction, (2) resources, (3) professional development communities, (4) responsiveness to students, and (5) monitoring for continuous improvement, Moore speaks briefly to the value of such programs implemented on a schoolwide level, adapted to each classroom, and differentiated to each student. Finally, he discusses the fact that these programs “are characterized by schoolwide cultures that enhance the literacies of all youth” (p. 335). Though the third section of this text is arguably the richest in terms of the quality of the content, Moore’s chapter deserves central focus as one of the most lucid and comprehensive discussions of secondary literacy programs to date.

An Educators’ Summary

In *Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy Instruction*, Hinchman and Sheridan-Thomas present a text that utilizes a sociocultural approach to instruction focused upon engagement and differentiation as ways to gradually scaffold secondary students into academic discourses regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. Despite the title, the editors themselves attest to the fact that the term *best practices* is used “to signal the presence of such tools, not to suggest that standardized practices be used with every youth” (p. xii). For this reason, the goals of this book are to cause

reflection and transformation in the field of literacy instruction at a time of increased focus in this area. As Donna Alvermann explains in the foreword to the book, “The editors...knew that the window of opportunity for communicating this message might be narrow” (p. xii).

On a more personal level, as an adolescent literacy teacher, I was highly pleased by the accessibility and practicality of this text. Though the chapters are positioned within and built from educational theory, each author specifically describes the practical implications of the contribution, many including actual worksheets and websites as resources for educators and members of school leadership. In addition, each chapter is preceded by a brief bullet point outline summarizing the discussion contained therein. By formatting

the text in this manner, the editors present a book that can serve as a powerful springboard for educators who wish to improve their instruction as well as a resource for school leadership to develop new literacy programs. In the words of Donna Alvermann, this book may very well become “the authoritative text to which advocates of adolescent literacy instruction and support staff for policymakers turn when in need of guidance” (p. xii).

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