Talking about Texts

The aim of this document is to help you plan a lesson or sequence of lessons that develops students' subject-area knowledge **and** their subject-area reading.

The approach outlined here is designed to address three common limitations of existing literacy practice in low SES secondary schools in NZ.

Reading mileage: Students' ability to read complex subject-specialised texts is enhanced by repeated opportunities to read texts that have similar properties and which pose similar reading challenges to those they will later encounter in assessments, tertiary study, and in that discipline more generally(Allington, 2014). Furthermore, it is vital these opportunities are provided in subject-area classrooms as students are unlikely to encounter these specialised kinds of texts in other subject areas or out of school. Previous studies indicate that teachers sometimes avoid using complex written texts with groups of students who struggle, or who are perceived to struggle, with reading and opt instead to ameliorate reading challenges using modified texts and more direct forms of teaching (DiGisi & Willett, 1995). Some groups of students suffer from an "in-school literacy underload". Recent research in NZ shows that students in low decile classrooms may have fewer opportunities to read than students in mid-decile classrooms (Wilson, Madjar, & McNaughton, 2016).

Dialogic approaches. Recent literature shows that one of the most powerful ways to raise students' subject-literacy is for them to exchange ideas in more open-ended discussions for the purpose of improving students' understanding and interpretation of texts (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). What the different dialogic approaches to comprehension development have in common is more time for open-ended discussion, greater use of authentic open teacher questions to explore rather than "test" students' understanding, and attempts to increase "uptake" whereby teachers prompt for elaboration and incorporate and build on students' ideas (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Despite the promise of dialogic approaches, most classroom talk still follows the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (I-R-E) pattern whereby teachers initiate discussions by asking question they already know the answer to, students respond, and the teacher evaluates responses against predetermined criteria of correctness (Applebee et al., 2003).

Scaffolding. To be effective (and to classify as "real" scaffolding) three conditions must be met. Scaffolding should: 1. Be *contingent (*responsive to learners' performances and needs at a given point of time); 2. *Fade* (support should be gradually withdrawn), and 3. There should be *transfer of responsibility* to increase learner control (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2014). Some efforts to "scaffold" literacy in subject areas may inadvertently exacerbate students' literacy issues by removing cognitive challenge, constraining students' own responses and strategy use, and by fostering dependence and learned helplessness.

Task

The approach outline here is based around a set of two or three texts. Using multiple texts is

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important as synthesis and comparison across texts should become increasingly important as students advance through their years of schooling. The overarching aims of this sequence of activities are two-fold: to develop students' knowledge *through* reading and their knowledge *of* reading.

A. Create a text set

Create a *text set* made up of three texts based around the same topic. The texts should each be of about one to three pages in length (possibly shorter in chemistry?). Include one easier and one harder text. For the harder text, it may be helpful to complete the text analysis sheet identifying features that might make it harder for students to comprehend.

One purpose of the easier text is to act as a scaffold that introduces key ideas and vocabulary. You might make an existing published text easier by "amplifying" some of the language e.g. by adding some more background information or providing embedded explanations of more difficult vocabulary. The aim of the harder text is to provide a higher level of challenge that will extend all readers.

The texts might be *competing* texts i.e. present different viewpoints on the same topic, or *complementary* texts. For example in biology or chemistry, one text might introduce a concept (e.g. explanations of different mechanisms for natural selection from a text book) while the others might focus on an application of that concept (e.g. description of a population that has evolved). In chemistry one text might outline a problem-solving approach and the other might be a word-based problem to solve.

B. Identify the subject-purpose(s) for using these texts

Identify subject-based learning outcomes related to students' reading of the text. e.g. *By the end of this lesson students will be able to justify, with close reference to the play and two critics why they agree (or not)that Lear was "more sinned against than sinning" or, By the end of this lesson students will be able to explain oxidation reactions using the following reagents: MnO_4^-/H^+, $Cr_2O_7^{2-}/H^+$, Tollens', Fehling's and Benedict's.*

C. Plan for preparing students for reading

Outline activities (lasting about 5 minutes) that develop students' understanding of the **reading purpose**, strategies for **getting the gist** (e.g. skim and scan) and **prior knowledge** activation and/or building. Think carefully about what prior knowledge is needed to build an appropriate mental representation and don't labour this aspect of the lesson too much.

D. Plan for students reading of the texts

Describe how you will engage students in actually reading the text. The responsibility here should be on students reading themselves, probably silently as individuals, possibly as pairs (I read the whole text to you, you read the whole text to me) but NOT teacher reading the whole text aloud and DEFINITELY NOT round robin reading).

Identify risks (e.g. reluctance to read) and teacher moves to mitigate these risks.

E. Plan for students' engagement with ideas in the text at a basic level

Describe activities that will help students understand the texts at a fairly basic or literal level. Consider the key information they need to achieve the subject-based learning outcome and aspects

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of the texts that might cause confusion. Don't make these activities too scaffolded i.e. no elaborate sequences of short answer questions or long periods completing teacher-created retrieval tables. See the accompanying document with cooperative summarising ideas you might use or adapt at this stage.

Identify risks (e.g. misunderstandings) and teacher moves to mitigate these risks.

F.   Plan for small group discussions in which students will engage with ideas in the texts at a deeper level

1. The intention here is that you (as teacher) will be an active participant in each group's discussion. This means that you will have to make decisions about:
   a. How to group students (generally heterogeneous groups would be preferred, but you might have specific reasons for ability based groups at times) and how you will rotate through groups e.g. if class was split into four groups, you might run two 20 minute discussions per lesson over two lessons. You would possibly begin a lesson with a whole-class orientation and then have a five minute break between discussion to check and conference with students)
   b. Where you will conduct the discussions and the best seating arrangement etc.
   c. How the other students in your class can be productively engaged in independent learning activities (so that you can focus on the discussion and the opportunity cost of you not being available is minimised).
2. Consider *ideas* in the texts that YOU think are important for students to engage with in discussion (i.e. ideas which contribute to valued subject-specific learning outcomes). It might be helpful to imagine (or even script) what your 'dream' discussion about this text would be like. This is important for you to think about beforehand because you need to have some sense of the *general direction* you want the discussion to go in BUT be aware that there is a delicate balance to be struck here between a genuinely dialogic discussion that is, by its nature, unpredictable, and one that is purposeful and relevant to the achievement of valued learning outcomes in your subject).
3. Plan an *initiating statement/question*. This should be specific enough to lead students in the direction of valued subject outcomes but be broad enough to allow genuine student voice and to lead off in unexpected but productive directions. Depending on the context and purpose this might be a rich question or a provocation of some kind.
4. Plan a sequence of sub questions/statements that you *might* use to frame the discussion
5. Write a series of possible prompts that you could use if the following situations arise:
   - Students do not respond at all
   - Students respond but only give short responses
   - Student's response is incorrect or inconsistent with information in the text
   - Student's response is unclear
   - Students do not provide reasons for their responses
   - Students do not refer to the text when they respond
   - Some students participate too much/others not enough

G. Help students develop processes and strategies for independent reading

Plan activities that you can weave throughout the lesson or sequence of lessons that focus on students' metacognition and which develop students' use of processes and strategies for reading in your subject.

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