

## **Development: A Vital but Often Neglected Part of R & D**

*Janet Angelis, Elizabeth Close*

In all fields where serious research is conducted, results are published in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals whose purpose is to provide information so that other researchers can expand their understandings and seek to replicate results. Results generally take much longer to reach the field, especially when the funds that support research fail to support development. Such is likely to be the case in pending legislation to reauthorize the U.S Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), which places strong emphasis on additional and more rigorous research in education and pays little attention to the development process.

But education researchers have a vital role to play in bringing their results to those who will put them into place in the classroom -- first by working with teachers to develop and test research-based curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment techniques, then by describing and sharing these strategies in forms that additional teachers can use.

In a sidebar to this article is a listserv posting that Long Beach (CA) reading teacher Juli Kendall made to MiddleWeb.<sup>\*</sup> In it Juli describes how she used *Improving Literary Understanding through Classroom Conversation*, a booklet from the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA), to assess and improve instruction. We were pleased, of course, to see evidence of a teacher making such good use of a publication that we had produced for that very purpose. More importantly, Juli's example provides an illustration of why researchers should work with practitioners to develop – and test and refine then share – strategies that enable other teachers to put research findings into practice.

First, we'd like to describe briefly the development process that led to the booklet that

Juli found so useful. Beginning in the late 1980s, Judith Langer and a team of researchers began an eight-year study that looked closely at classrooms that were helping students engage in deep understandings of literature. They worked with more than 50 teachers of grades preK-12 and into the first year of college to learn more about how readers think when they read and discuss literature and how teachers can help students use discussion to think more deeply. They also interviewed selected students and analyzed their work. Later in the study, Langer began working with classroom teachers to develop instructional strategies to capitalize on what they were finding. Together, researchers and teachers developed approaches that enacted the features of effective literature instruction. They tested these approaches across the grade levels in diverse classrooms to measure the effectiveness of these approaches in improving students' literacy skills.

During and after the eight years of the study, researchers worked to disseminate the findings to professionals at all levels. They wrote research reports, journal and newsletter articles, a trade book, and the *Improving Literary Understanding* booklet; gave conference presentations; and advised the producers of an educational television series featuring the research (currently available from Annenberg/CPB). Because of these efforts, many teachers learned about and are using the findings to improve instruction.

Some of the essential features of the development work these researchers and teachers undertook included:

?? Teachers were involved – in the research, in designing the strategies, in testing them with real students in real classrooms, and even in writing articles, presenting at conferences, and preparing publications for other teachers.

?? Strategies were captured in understandable language and in flexible approaches that teachers can reflectively use in their own settings to meet their own student's needs – not a “cookie cutter” approach but a “foundations of good practice” approach.

?? It took time – time to try and test new practices, time to share results with others, time for schools to enact and support changes that had been shown to be effective. (The events described above have taken place over the course of 15 years.)

Supporting sound education research is essential. So, too, is supporting a development process in which researchers work with and for teachers to build the bridge between educational research and improved educational practice.

## SIDEBAR

### **Juli Kendall's Weekly Reading Workshop Journal\***

*As part of a MiddleWeb listserv project on using Reading Workshop, an approach to teaching middle school reading, Long Beach (CA) reading teacher Juli Kendall is keeping a weekly journal. In January, she posted the following entry to the listserv.*

#### **Week #16 Envisionments: Helping Students Improve Literary Understanding**

During November, when it was easy to be coasting and I was searching for inspiration, a fascinating pamphlet arrived in the mail. Published by the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement, "Improving Literary Understanding Through Classroom Conversation" is based on the work of Judith Langer. In it, she and her colleague, Elizabeth Close, give a thumbnail sketch of the concept of *envisionments* and some strategies for classroom use to improve literary understanding. (Download this booklet free online: <http://cela.albany.edu>.)

Since our instruction focuses on how reading is all about understanding, I found this

definition compelling.

*"Envisionments* are understandings – the wealth of ideas that people have in their minds at any point in time. Envisionments include related ideas and images, questions, hunches, anticipations, arguments, disagreements, and confusions that fill the mind during every reading, writing, speaking, or thinking experience." (p. 6)

To see how our Reading Workshop measures up to these ideas, we used the three "strategies that support struggling readers," listed on page 12 of the booklet, as benchmarks. By reflecting on our teaching, we discovered what we are and are not doing. The information we gathered will improve our instruction and help us develop models of understanding for our students.

*1. Involve all students in all aspects of class discussion.*

We reviewed what we do in our class discussions: We ask students to make predictions before reading based on their prior knowledge and experiences. Students share the connections they make to the text with the whole group, as we read aloud. We ask students to retell the story and share their connections with their reading partner. They use their post-its to list the connections in their Reading Journals. But what evidence/student work do we have that can tell us whether all students are involved in all aspects of the class discussion?

*2. Help students focus on ideas by providing guiding questions that will deepen the discussion (avoid questions with yes, no, or one-word answers).*

- ?? What might you do in a similar situation?
- ?? Why do you think the character did it her way?
- ?? What is the character feeling? How might this affect his actions?
- ?? How does the setting help you understand the character's feelings?
- ?? If you were telling this story, how might you end it? Why?
- ?? How might this story be different if it happened in another time period?

After running records, we sit with students individually and ask them to retell the section they just read. We also ask them questions such as "What will happen next?" "Who is telling the story?" or "What is the problem?" We use their story retelling and their answers to the questions to see if they comprehend what they read. But what evidence/student work do we have to know that students focus on ideas by using guiding questions that will deepen the discussion?

*3. Provide direct instructional scaffolding with guided activities that help students develop envisionments.*

The authors mention six types of guided activities. "Design activities to support students' ideas and questions" is the first suggestion. We use **paired readings** on a daily basis.

Students use **note taking while reading** by writing on copies of text or using post-it notes. We include **journal writing** every day. But we do not make use of **quick writes**. This might be a good way to document if all students are involved in all aspects of the class discussion.

"Provide alternative ways to access material" is next. We use **books on tape**. Janet Allen's books, *There's Room for Me Here* and *Yellow Brick Roads*, encourage their use with less proficient readers.

"Asking questions that help students make connections with the full text, with their own experiences and other readings" is one of our strengths. Our work with *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmerman) and *Strategies That Work* (Harvey & Goudvis) has really helped us with making connections. However, we want to do more about "encouraging students to listen to and respond to the ideas of others." Questions like "**Does anyone agree or disagree? Why?**" will help us get started.

We need to improve in providing "opportunities for students to engage in related activities in multiple formats that make the thinking of their peers visible and develop their understandings of the work." Of the five suggestions listed (**role-play, think-aloud, dramatic presentations, fish bowls and art representations**), we only include **think alouds** on a regular basis. We want to find more opportunities for these activities.

The last suggestion is to "provide individual copies of guiding questions" using **bookmarks** or **sticky note reminders**. We created laminated bookmarks that include the guiding questions. Everyone has several copies in different colors. We're excited about the possibilities for using them both in independent reading and partner reading. But how will we know that students focus on ideas by using guiding questions that will deepen the discussion? We'll need to develop some new performance tasks that include questioning.

There is much work to do, especially involving all students in all aspects of class discussion and using guiding questions. As we incorporate more of these strategies into our Reading Workshop, I hope we will find that "when less proficient readers engage in thought provoking literary discussions, they perform more like proficient readers because the thinking of their peers is visible to them and they have models for building understanding." (p. 13)

*Find out more about this project at*  
<http://www.middleweb.com/ReadWrkshp/RWindex.html>

\*Used with permission of Juli Kendall and the MiddleWeb listserv.

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