

Classroom Materials

Carol Hryniuk-Adamov
Susan Barnabé

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Pulling Together: Integrating Inquiry, Assessment, and Instruction in Today's English Classroom

Leyton Schnellert, Mehjabeen Datto, Krista Ediger, and Joanne Panas. 2009. Markham, ON, Canada: Pembroke.

Where was this text five years ago when we first joined a professional learning community to discuss adolescent literacy issues? This volume would have taken us into deeper dialogue and given greater insight into the demands of structuring literacy-rich adolescent learning environments. The conversations led by these authors—Schnellert, Datto, Ediger, and Panas—provide insights into their classrooms, teaching, and thoughts. Each chapter provides tools for a rich day of professional development and offers teachers a ready plan for implementation in their classrooms.

Readers of this book will find very practical answers to the complex questions teachers are wrestling with in their planning: How do teachers incorporate necessary elements of instructional design in terms of the backward design (beginning with the end in mind) of English and cross-curricular units? What are the possible ways to increase formative assessment for learning? How can teachers use multiple genres and text sets at different reader levels in cross-curricular thematic units? How do teachers increase formative, ongoing self-assessment and peer assessment in meaningful ways for adolescents? How do teachers increase student involvement and ownership in the instruction and assessment process? How can teachers increase students' assessment as learning and teach students to become more metacognitively aware, consciously thinking about their learning? How do teachers tackle the challenging content and make it enjoyable and stimulating? How can teachers manage to pull the key components of instruction and assessment together in meaningful ways?

In this book, the authors share numerous projects and collaborative teaching experiences in language arts and content areas. The writers are educators who have developed English language arts (ELA) curricula for their Canadian province, British Columbia. Schnellert also collaborates in professional learning communities and initiatives in the Yukon and Northwest Territories in Canada.

While the text cites strategies, vocabulary, and references to British Columbia's curricula, giving it a regional flavor, the pedagogy is very sound and immediately applicable to a wide range of classrooms. The authors elaborate on their foundational principles and practices. Each chapter discusses the in-depth thinking behind the authors' instruction and is grounded in their diverse classroom practices. The authors provide their thinking and core understandings that drive their planning and instruction. Inquiry questions guide the unit organization. The authors relate,

We consistently use three structures throughout our planning and instruction: explicitly teaching thinking skills, gradually releasing responsibility to students, and assessing both formatively and summatively. Metacognition is also key, as is teaching for the diversity of learners in our classes. (p. 6)

The dialogue with readers is supported through sidebars in which authors define terms, discuss ideas, and guide the reader further into the instructional settings.

The first three chapters detail the authors' principles and practices that underpin their planning and teaching. The subsequent chapters present their thinking and core understandings, or the "big three," of ELA: oral language, reading, and writing. The authors refer to these big three, yet they incorporate all six ELA strands—listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing, and representing—within their teaching and assessment.

Chapter 1, "Working Together to Build Practices," addresses learning and thinking in ELA. The authors evaluate learning when students (a) improve the skill over time, (b) are able to synthesize from a variety of texts, (c) are able to apply strategies and approaches to new situations, and (d) are engaged in metacognition and self-regulation. Butler and Schnellert describe self-regulating learners as those who "define expectations; set goals; select, adapt, or invent learning strategies; self-monitor outcomes; and revise goals or approaches to learning in order to achieve desired outcomes" (as cited on p. 18).

The authors' strategies for success in ELA emphasize the importance of comprehension, which includes activating prior knowledge, predicting, developing questions, making connections, and inferring.

Educators continue to develop the comprehension elements of building schema, visualizing, using fix-up strategies to repair meaning, organizing information, summarizing, synthesizing, and applying. Response and analysis includes responding personally, considering audience and purpose, perspective taking, identifying bias, and making reasoned judgments. The skills and strategies that are covered through composition consist of identifying a purpose and audience, generating ideas, choosing appropriate forms, organizing ideas, drafting, elaborating, developing voice and style, and revising. Finally, self-regulation in interpreting tasks, setting a purpose, self-assessing and setting goals, reflecting on one's thinking, using feedback, and adjusting approaches completes the repertoire of strategies for success.

Chapter 2, "Integrating Planning, Assessment, and Instruction," looks at the strategic teaching and the gradual release model toward self-regulated learning. The authors emphatically state, "We don't believe in teaching strategies for strategies' sake or content for content's sake" (p. 136). They show how to foster profound thinking by embedding strategy and skill instruction in highly engaging units of study. The authors discuss the gradual release of responsibility, the well-known work of Pearson and Gallagher (1983), and outline another way toward gradual release: "1. I do, you watch, 2. I do, you help, 3. You do, I help, and 4. You do, I watch" (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube, 2001; p 16).

Chapter 3, "Responsive Teaching and Assessment," reviews planning and linking ongoing formative and summative assessment. Surveys and class profiles are discussed as well as useful rubrics for challenging topics. Creative line masters composed of many practical and innovative tools, frameworks, and procedural guidelines are presented throughout the text. These tools have the potential to increase the quality of collaborative interactions between student and teacher throughout the formative assessment process as well as to increase students' use of assessment as learning, in which they learn more about their own learning processes, deepening their metacognition.

Chapter 4, "Thinking Through Oral Language," addresses oral language. The authors state that, although speaking and listening are core communication

skills, little time is devoted to teaching these skills explicitly in grades 9–12. They advocate much practice with partner talk, small- and large-group discussions, presentations, and focused listening. The importance of listening is addressed in many ways, including analysis of famous speeches, personal and critical responses to oral presentations, and poetry literature circles.

Chapter 5, “Rethinking Reading,” helps the reader move toward rethinking reading and reinforces the social aspects of inquiry. Core understandings are discussed to base the classroom instruction in assisting students with negotiating texts. Examples from the classrooms include reading workshops, thinking strategies, literature circles, and inquiry circles. “An inquiry circle applies a literature circle structure to informational text” (p. 62).

Chapter 6, “Writing as Thinking,” provides insights into the writing process, but the authors admit that there is no one uniform process to teach writing and “how best to teach students to write is a question we continue to think about and discuss” (p. 77). The writers underscore the “need to model and teach what good writers do,” which “varies with the form and the task” (p. 78). The authors encourage teachers to model how messy and recursive the writing process can be at each stage, especially peer revision and editing. Furthermore, they call for teachers to help students understand themselves metacognitively as writers “by noting their strengths and challenges, selecting strategies, and setting goals for their writing—with our support” (p. 78). Many excellent assessment prompts and rubrics for in-depth assessment with examples of descriptive feedback are provided to enhance writing processes.

In Chapter 7, “Embracing New Literacies,” the authors honor the out-of-school literacies that students bring to the classroom. The writers indicate, “No matter what people say about adolescents’ levels of literacy, they are often deeply literate in ways that we are not aware of or do not utilize” (p. 92). The authors readily acknowledge that teachers may have varied reactions to the new literacies and technology in the classroom. They may choose to shut down, embrace them, or respond by carefully “integrating new forms of literacy into teaching, coupled with a desire to ensure that we think through how they

are of value to our students and fit with our learning goals” (p. 93). The authors emphasize, “We need to embrace technology—it’s not a choice. It’s embedded in our curriculum and in our students’ way of knowing and being” (p. 94). The authors provide a Communications Technology Unit, which addresses the question, “How does technology relate to what it means to be human?” (p. 94). Another unit focuses on the development of global interdependence through an online literature forum.

Chapter 8, “Constructing Critical Literacy,” is thought-provoking. According to British Columbia’s Ministry of Education, “Critical literacy practices encourage students to discover how texts position them as readers and viewers and also to become more self-consciously aware about how their own textual practices work in the world to represent, position, and potentially silence others” (as cited on p. 108). The authors talk about how “creating [a classroom] environment where different perspectives and experiences are welcomed is key to the development of critical literacy” and where they “find ways to give voice to those who may be silenced in the dominant culture of the classroom” (p. 108). The authors indicate their “end goal is not necessarily to come to consensus, but rather to come to a place of shared understanding that takes into account a diversity of perspectives” (p. 108).

The authors have presented teachers with two potentially powerful units to teach critical literacy. They explore the construction of identity in a unit entitled “Self and Other.” In another unit, “The Darkness in Humanity,” targeted for grade 11, students examine darker themes, such as evil, war, and violence, in a variety of texts to address the main question, “How can we make sense of the darkness in humanity?” (p. 119). These thought-provoking units show how critical literacy can be addressed concretely with diverse students by using oral, literary, and multimedia texts at a range of levels in middle and high school.

In Chapter 9, “Integrating Content Areas,” the writers help teachers focus on how certain skills and strategies are “important for, and specific to, disciplinary study (history, the sciences, etc.)” and enable students to make “more authentic real-world applications” (p. 135). Ways to integrate science and language arts outcomes are provided to tackle interdisciplinary

inquiry questions such as, “How can we honor the interconnectedness of our environment?” “How are humans affecting the environment?” and “What can we do to sustain the environment?” (p. 137). These units provide great springboards for interdisciplinary dialogue and collaborative teaching.

This book will transform classroom practice. Teachers will have myriad new ways to increase student engagement in instruction as well as active involvement in formative and summative assessment. Educators will feel empowered by clear planning templates of how to pull all the necessary pedagogical elements together using stimulating learning sequences to address challenging content by incorporating oral, print, and multimedia texts with comprehensive rubrics, creative line masters, new vocabulary strategies, and important links to innovative, large-scale assessment tools.

These authors clearly communicate the power of teachers’ collaborative writing efforts. Their innovative work reflects the dynamic strength in their current pedagogical partnerships. Readers will feel like they have entered into professional dialogue with a dynamic learning community. They will welcome the benefits of sharing this innovative team’s collective pedagogical wisdom and creatively planned instructional units. This stimulating book powerfully

demonstrates the benefits of teacher collaboration and is a testimony to the educators’ spirit of cooperation.

Readers interested in learning more about *Pulling Together: Integrating Inquiry, Assessment, and Instruction in Today’s English Classroom* can visit www.stenhouse.com/html/news_176.htm, where Leyton Schnellert discusses the origins and inspiration for this book in “Questions & Authors: Integrating Inquiry, Assessment, and Strategic Teaching.”

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Reviewed by Carol Hryniuk-Adamov, reading clinician, Child Guidance Clinic, Winnipeg School Division, and instructor at University of Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada; and Susan Barnabé, reading clinician, literacy consultant, and past president of the Manitoba Reading Association.

The department editor welcomes reader comments. Materials for review can be sent to Carol Hryniuk-Adamov, 7 Glastonbury Boulevard, Winnipeg, MB R3P 0B5, Canada; e-mail cadamov@shaw.ca.