

Helping Adolescents Read and
Write in the Content Areas

Stuck

in the

MIDDLE

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Heinemann

DEDICATED TO TEACHERS™

Foreword by **Rick Wormeli**

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CHAPTER

1

The Nonnegotiables: Six Principles for Teaching

Tommy runs into the classroom. “What are we doing in science today?” He races to his desk, gets out his textbook and notebook, and readies his pencil, eager for class to begin. This happens every day. A seventh grader, Tommy is in a mainstreamed science class for the first time. His tested IQ is in the low-functioning range, his reading level is first grade, he argues that X is not a letter in the alphabet, but he loves coming to science class. He is the most eager learner in the room.

Adrienne reads aloud haltingly and very quietly from her literature anthology. Her classmates and teacher struggle to hear. Despite repeated prodding, Adrienne will not read louder. She has no problem being heard in the lunchroom or in the crowded hallways, though.

Kyle is trying to get his teacher to let him explain the new strain of flu present in their state. He wants everyone to be alert and take precautions. The social studies lesson on latitude and longitude is being held up by his insistence. His classmates, accustomed to Kyle’s lectures, roll their eyes. His learning labels read “academically talented” and “Asperger’s syndrome.” He reads very well when he is focused. When he is not, his comprehension is spotty and incomplete.

Billy’s eyes never leave the teacher. He wants to do everything correctly to get the good grades that make him and his parents happy. He is very focused, happy to be in school, and progresses despite his learning disability and difficulty reading.

Deanna is never without a book. She devours Twilight, reading it in between classes, in the cafeteria, and on the bus. Not so with her history book. She says it’s just too hard to understand.

Ruth turns around and talks to her friends, smiles at the cutest boy in the room, and passes in her homework. As usual, most of it is correct. She reads well, but hates reading the textbook because it is “s-o-o-o-o boring.” She has no learning labels. Just a typical hormonal teenager!

Do these students seem familiar to you? Chances are you can substitute names of your own students. They join a cast of millions who bring a range of reading abilities or inabilities, their love or dislike for reading, and their interests and disinterests to our content-area classes. With the new prominence of high-stakes testing, programs in reading and writing proliferate in today’s schools. Yet relatively little attention is paid to the application of these processes in the content areas, where students must *use them to learn* every day. Unlocking informational text can be challenging even for the best readers, and the challenge is compounded for those who have difficulty.

Content-area teachers have a unique opportunity to help students not only learn the material but also improve their overall literacy. Over the past thirty years, we have developed and implemented teacher-friendly, student-oriented strategies to help all students learn through reading and writing—strategies we present in this book. In these pages, we share with you ways to differentiate instruction so that all students learn more content, more effectively, while simultaneously improving the reading and writing abilities they bring to our classes.

You may be a beginning teacher, overwhelmed by the newness of everything. Or you may be an experienced teacher, strangled by the time required to lead committees, write curriculum, and mentor new colleagues. Regardless of the stage of your career, if you’re a teacher, you’re on a never-ending search for ways to reach your students—ways that have passed the test of real teaching, to real students, in real time. You’re in luck—you’ll find a collection of these strategies here. If you are overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of students and learning styles, if you need help differentiating your instruction, if you want to know how to help struggling readers learn content, or if you are just looking for new ideas to add to your repertoire, this book is for you

■ The Nonnegotiables

As we develop our teaching craft, we filter everything through six guiding principles—our “nonnegotiables.” These principles are derived from our experience, our years of talking about what we believe, and our research into what works for other teachers. Here they are:

1. *All* students can learn.
2. *All* students need good teaching (both content and process).
3. Instruction needs scaffolding.

4. What happens before, during, and after lessons needs to be rethought—and prethought.
5. Teachers need to do whatever it takes.
6. Teachers need to learn from students, not just teach them.

All Students Can Learn

We believe that *all* people can learn. They just can't learn in the same way on the same schedule. It's so easy for teachers to forget this. When we were students, many of us found school to be a series of successful experiences, so much so that we decided to spend our careers there. Learning subject matter through reading and writing came easily, for the most part. It's hard for us to fully understand what it's like for those who have difficulty.

One of the most humbling experiences we have had as adults has been learning and keeping up with new technology. Our false starts and missteps have taught us a lot about teaching and learning and are a reminder of how difficult it can be to learn something challenging. Donna recalls burning a CD for the first time:

I had some pictures to share and a friend said, "Just burn a CD." "Hmmm," I thought, "well, I know that a CD can mean one of those shiny little disks or it can mean certificate of deposit. Probably it's the former. And burn. Fire? Smoke? Heat? Can't be." I looked at all the icons dancing around the edge of the computer screen. Not one of them said "Burn a CD." I clicked on the "Help" icon. It said nothing about burning a CD. So I typed "burn a CD" into the box next to "Search." One of the options was, "Copy files and folders to a CD" and "Tips for writing CDs." Nothing about burning. "Are copying, writing, and burning the same thing?" I wondered. I clicked on "Copy. . . ." Immediately, a split screen popped up listing (in very small print I might add) six sequential directions and four bulleted notes. I stared at the words. I knew they were English because I had seen all of them separately many times before. Linked together, however, they made no sense. I stared at them, willing my head to turn them into something meaningful. They mocked me. *If the files are located in My Pictures, under Picture Tasks, click Copy to CD or Copy all items to CD, and then skip to step 5.* I wanted to skip town. I reached for the phone and dialed my son's number. I said, "Brad, I have to burn a CD. Will this involve fire?" I had awakened him and he muttered, "Mom, you don't deserve to own a computer. . . ."

Donna ultimately learned to do it, but only when her son, now awake and apologetic, walked her through it step-by-step. As a matter of fact, she found that

it's quite an easy process. So easy, her friend Sandy tells her, that her three-year-old granddaughter does it without needing to be shown how!

Donna needed someone to show her another way. She was working in an area that was foreign to her. Her word identification skills weren't enough: she couldn't make meaning. To many students, the course textbook is like this. They see words they recognize, or maybe not, but the meaning just won't come. Like Donna, they need someone to show them another way.

All Students Need Good Teaching

We know that good teaching is critical for those who struggle. But we contend that good teaching is good for everyone. We both remember Mickey, a stellar scholar and well-rounded young man. He applied only to the most selective universities and was accepted by all of them. When we saw him on a break from his Ivy League university, we asked him how things were going, certain that he was sailing through his freshman year with no problems. What he said shocked us. "I'm studying six to ten hours a day and I'm number twenty out of twenty-five in all my classes." How could this be? He was a brilliant student! But he had entered another realm, a rarefied atmosphere where everyone was as academically gifted as he was.

Good teaching attends to both *content* and *process*. Mickey had mastered the content of his K–12 courses, by what means we do not know. He was able to "get it," most often without anyone teaching him *how* to "get it." Suddenly he was faced with studies more difficult than he had ever known. He lacked a conscious knowledge of the *processes* of learning. He had a problem—how to get to the content when the learning was not coming easily or quickly. Struggling students face this problem every day. The gap between content and process has caught up with them. We need to model and make transparent the processes for learning for *all* students so that *whenever* they begin to struggle, they have the tools they need to keep moving forward. We need to teach *all* students well.

Regardless of the subject we teach, we want our students to get our course content. Beyond that, however, we believe that we all have a higher goal. Of course we need to prepare them to be able read in a broad sense (from print text, visuals, digital text, the world) and compose texts (written, drawn, oral, digital) to get through our courses and our schools. But, as a bigger mission, we need to prepare them for life beyond our doors, well into adulthood, so that they are equipped with strategies for accomplishing whatever they choose. For Mickey, it was an Ivy League education. For others, it might be to learn procedures and communicate successfully on the job site, in the community, and as a citizen. For all, it is much more than showing progress on a standardized test. Good teaching of both content and process is an issue we can ill afford to ignore. It is the right of all learners.