

Next Practice for Standards Learning and To Support Struggling Students

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If we're to meet the challenges of upgrading learning to the level expected by the excellent Common Core State Standards framework, while at the same time narrowing the Achievement Gap, teaching practice must change to engage all students in learning activities that promote Standards understandings.

The student Peter's collaborative research project described in Chapter One, conducting research using the multiple sources of print, on-line and primary sources, culling key points, and honing a thesis for a web site and presenting findings to others is an example of the learning needed for today's world.

This is the type of learning that Common Core encourages. This web site research project is also an old project traditionally taught, but upgraded to include new practices. Peter's collaborative on-line research project is an example of the "Next Practice" needed to suit an educational environment in which students are adept with technology, when we differentiate learning to meet where students are to tap into needs and interests, and providing time to develop learning well. Students are coached to learn within a clear framework.

Research informs us that the two practices that promote achievement are project based learning (PBL) and differentiated instruction. We must adapt these to Standards and to all students.

Paideia Project “Fishbowl” Socratic Seminar Next Practice

A common best practice used effectively in the past that can be upgraded for the sense of urgency of today’s needs is the Paideia Project “Fishbowl” Socratic Seminar often used at the secondary grade level.

In this activity, students form two circles, an inner circle and an outer circle, using the familiar random count-off of one, two; one, two. The “ones” form an inner circle which is provided a short text, such as a poem, a challenging passage from class reading, or perhaps a new piece that introduces new material. The inner circle first has two readings, with two people reading the piece aloud. The inner circle is then left to discuss and analyze on their own. Students enjoy grappling with text independently, and learn from peers, who are closer to their learning level.

Working on their own, students are polite, seek meaning, feel free to offer insights, and more comfortable asking questions of peers.

In past practice the outer circle of students is provided cards, each with one instructions of what to silently look for and record in observing the inner circle’s discussion. The outer circle doesn’t speak, but observes and then reports out on the process, after the inner circle’s discussion. Outer circle individuals are asked to look for process areas such as whether one participant dominates the discussion, notes if one in the inner circle doesn’t talk, or who moves the discussion along.

This activity works superbly. Students learn from one another, learn how to read closely and analytically, acquire inference, note connotation, gain insight into the reading and meaning. Outer circle observers each have a job to do and note the process and report out on their task. Then the circles switch. Over time, students become finer readers.

However, we must sharpen and refine this practice for Standards learning.

In the old practice, inner circle students are provided text and analyze text among themselves. This discussion can go multiple, varied ways.

In Next Practice, we sharpen and focus the learning. We locate text that teaches specific reading and analysis Standards. We use material that’s a stretch for students (This is Standard 10: Comprehend complex text). On the reading

provided students, we focus the discussion with one or more questions, such as “How do specific words shape meaning?” “How do specific words shape tone?”(Standard 4) “What is a central theme of this passage? What words, details and ideas shape this theme?” (Standard 2). We can scaffold the questions if needed by starting with simple questions on stated information and moving to the higher level of tone, central theme, author’s purpose.

In “Name the Skill” learning, students can be asked in the provided written questions on their material to identify and use the terms inference, connotation, words that convey tone, figurative language and how it influences meaning, all Standards skills and traditional reading and literary analysis skills.

We set up students to work out understanding on their own. They love doing this.

Left on their own, most often if not always, students rise to the highest level of close reading, use of text evidence, apt inference and analysis. While it can be painful for the teacher to sit and just listen, and not intervene in our teacherly way, while we patiently watch, the discussions most often process learning at the level of where the students are, and end up on the right, appropriate note of reading and analysis. Complex text is deciphered and analyzed, and all understand, and learn from the process.

The outer circle participates by observing and commenting on process.

But with Next Practice, the outer circle also has a copy of the reading, not used in the traditional process. In this manner, the outer circle learns the analysis process and understandings by seeing the text and following the discussion. But the outer circle still only listens. In a second modification, the questions provided the outer circle to observe are content questions: “When is a good point made on close reading?” (Common Core Reading Standard One). “What is a good inference?” (Standard One).

After this practice of inner circle text analysis, the outer circle becomes the inner circle to examine text. When the teacher observes that outer circle students seem to have different text understanding, and text is sufficiently complex, the outer circle may use the same reading. But if the text seems exhausted of analysis, and students are ready for fresh text, the new inner circle are provided a new passage.

When the next passage to discuss is on the same Standards skills, this helps more struggling readers immensely because it reinforces skills learning. Students spend more time on the same skills for learning reinforcement and retention, and learn from peers.

In my own practice, a lively chatty otherwise chaotic class followed the traditional protocols perfectly. The students were in charge of the class, it was clearly focused, and they followed the rules because the students themselves had opportunity to speak, think, and learn. The students monitored each other on the rules.

Once in our sessions, in the inner circle one higher achieving student turned to the student next to her and quietly asked him if there were any words he didn't understand in the reading. I realized later that that was one of the questions I had given the outer circle, which was, "Who helps another understand?" As it turned out, there were words that student didn't know, and the group nicely helped him with the vocabulary. They were courteous, helpful, insightful.

With student-led discussion, it's interesting when a group gets off course with interpretation. The group on their own often pulls the analysis back to appropriate interpretation. This is when it's difficult for the teacher to not intrude, and honor the students grappling with text. If the inner circle doesn't resolve the reading appropriately, we can later -- after the activity -- discuss that interpretation is valid if supported by text. We explain analysis validity with that instance. Students become close, better readers.

The tables are turned in this "Fishbowl" activity. The students sit in circles in the middle of the classroom; the teacher only observes and notes from a corner of the room, and cannot speak.

Interestingly, with the teacher quietly off in the corner, struggling readers are more comfortable asking questions about text. Sharp readers wait their turn to speak. Each student can speak. A student who is a close reader will often hold off interrupting or speaking too early, out of respect to peers.



The students are the active participants and learners, working from where they are, what they can do, and how they can learn from peers.

New Next Practice

To extend learning, another Next Practice strategy -- following the fishbowl activity -- is then to have students write on the passage, explaining what they've



learned. Writing develops and reinforces thinking. Writing asks that we convey meaning. Writing about text promotes learning. We assess reading learning through writing. With writing, we can see which student learned in this exercise, who didn't, which student missed the mark. We see in the post-activity

writing what skills need more explicit instruction, and where students missed skills understanding.

Whereas once this “fishbowl” was a fine way for students to analyze material together, without teacher interference, now the Socratic Seminar fishbowl accomplishes that goal of students working together to discover and analyze text. But it also becomes with close teacher observation a way to assess student understanding of reading and analysis. We use this assessment to further support a needy student's learning. Students are well primed for the post activity writing through the discussion with peers, ready to write. They may well do their finest writing. The writing question in Next Practice Standards learning is best when a writing prompt is provided, such as, How do words and details create tone? What is a central theme and explain how it's seen in the text with details, words, ideas. (This is a released national PARCC test question.) Guided instruction with a specific question to write on supports needy learners. Higher achieving students may be given a more challenging question; students may choose which question on which to write.

With the shorter fifty minute class period, in Next Practice we have students write immediately after the discussion, to get their thoughts down while still fresh, capturing a learning opportunity for writing on analysis, targeting the writing on a

reading Standard. The next day, especially good writing pieces are then read aloud in class. The former outer circle becomes the inner circle the next day.

We can break old teaching patterns to extend learning for inclusive learning and higher level Common Core Standards.

Genre and Current Reading

A third example of Next Practice, in addition to collaborative research and the Fishbowl text analysis, is genre learning. Sports writers are experts with voice, tone, images, visuals, connotation, central theme, complex text, high level vocabulary to use context clues. With material close to interest of students who may otherwise be turned off to class, in sports writing it's not hard to delineate argument, claims and evidence (Standard 8) or "Assess how point of view shapes content and style of text" (Standard 6). When reports on competing teams are provided, in a quick on-line search, locating reports from the winner and the loser, tone is clear, seen easily by students in detail and word choice. If Boston beats New York, or Colorado beats Oakland, students see the same game from two dramatically different points of view in the two city newspapers. The term "author's point of view" is clear. Losing teams are condemned mercilessly, winners are exulted, only to be then quickly damned if they lose the next game. We can delight in the language.

Op-Ed newspaper pieces can also engender easy examples to identify analysis skills. Letters to the Editor that are particularly passionate and vehement are learning opportunities for word choice, details, creating central theme, indentifying tone, use of context clues for vocabulary. To differentiate, students may choose from the more dense, complex *New York Times* readings or local town newspapers.

Such newspaper readings are timely reports, quick responses to current issues. Such pieces work best when they're of the moment, on high interest topics, to especially engage lower achieving readers with text. Students more easily figure out meaning through interest. Dry old text not of personal interest kills reading development. Today's report on last night's exciting game capitalizes on enthusiasm. We're opportunists in the best sense of the word when we keep our

eyes out for striking new text. We can put the planned lesson aside to take advantage of potent writing to teach otherwise harder, more remote reading skills. Then we use these pieces as Mentor texts, referring back to them in applying reading skills from this simpler reading to more challenging text. Moving from simple to more complex helps the struggling student.

Technology and Standards Learning for all Students

Technology provides means to teach Common Core Standards, but best when Standards learning is emphasized over time spent on technology. Technology for the sake of technology doesn't boost learning.

Engineering colleges ask freshmen to work together to solve a problem and present their findings in a Powerpoint presentation, preparing students for the workplace. However, professors insist that students use no visuals, flying words, or fancy fonts, knowing well that their students would color their presentations with small characters pulling in letters, bounce words, waste time seeking the right clever graphic to amuse their peer audience. The emphasis balance must be on the learning, not the expansion of technology capability into fine design and especially pretty presentation. Presentation must be clear; we're not producing "Star Wars."

Book into Film Trailer

A film trailer is the film preview we see on TV as well as multiple times in advance of film features. Here the most captivating and revealing scenes are selected to entice an audience. In capitalizing on student film interest, for class presentation skills, students are asked to work together to determine key scenes in a book and character presentation, and to act these out in class, or present in video. Students often act out scenes from "Romeo and Juliet" in the school auditorium or another space, helping them understand plot and character. The sword fight scene with Mercutio, Tybalt, and Romeo is popular and reveals character. Students enjoy speaking the original otherwise incomprehensible language of the play. When students present on key scenes, with Next Practice they are assessed primarily on aptness of text analysis. Presentation can still be fun, and a fine learning strategy. Students remember what they do, in kinesthetic learning.

Again, the student otherwise left behind with dense text and the especially complex Shakespearean language learns from such activity with movement, making meaning of text.

Book Discussion Blogs

When students blog on readings, their questions, comments, observations, and insights are often more thoughtful than with in-class discussions. With blogging, students have more time to pose a good question, respond to another's question, learn from another's posting. Blogs can be monitored blogs so that the teacher has an opportunity to view a posting in advance, but usually this isn't necessary. Blog writing must be in standard English, not text or tweeting shorthand. A blog can be done simply by e-mail, or by the fairly easy to use Moodle or Edmodo. The application Blackboard's Discussion area is more sophisticated and easy to use. Students can create a new discussion thread in Blackboard on a topic of interest in the reading. Students respond to other students' posting and respond to others' responses.

A great value of on-line blogging on reading is that, as with the Fishbowl Socratic Seminar, blogging is students conferring with one another on text analysis and meaning. Discussion isn't above some students or too easy for others. Lower achieving students can ask a question, and post a comment. Students can correct one another, offer new insight, and learn from peers, who are closest to their learning needs. Students can ask a question of others and not be embarrassed, because it's not face to face. Each voice is heard. Shyer students can engage in the discussion, because they too can post an observation, not drowned out or shut down by more assertive voices. A more advanced discussion analysis thread can be introduced by the teacher or by a student to serve higher achieving students.

The teacher may or may not participate in the blogging, and thereby help set a tone for the discussion or pose a question. The teacher may guide the blogging toward Standards learning by posting the question, "What does Chapter Eight have to do with the rest of the novel?" This develops learning of Standard Five, "Analyze text structure, how a chapter relates to other chapters and the whole."

Blogging takes advantage of students' social media ability to discuss reading online, a natural means of communication for students. It's fun for students and helpful to learning when a student hooks up with students in another class reading a common classic text. One technology assistant set up a class in Arizona to blog on the same reading with a distant class, far from her own Boston area class. When students don't know one another personally, blogging is more open and honest; learning and knowledge aren't pegged by who one is in person.

Video Clips

The cliché is a picture conveys a thousand words. Upon visiting a teacher after school one day, I saw he was posting video he had taken with his Smartphone of his athletic team leaping hurdles. He painstakingly presented on the Smartboard screen for each student exactly what each had done in a practice, and stopped the video at a key moment to show what the student had done and discussed how to correct this. He played the video back and forth several times, noting points. He showed a positive model, pointing out correct moves. The viewers saw themselves and what they needed to improve upon. This visual of their own work presented objective information for learning.

If this teacher had used this in his classroom to show a group of students working effectively in small groups to tackle an issue, this provides a model for students of how to work well in such practice as small groups. We wouldn't embarrass students in a class showing poor interaction, but perhaps could take a short video to show students in an after school brief session of a group not performing effectively and a group that is productive, to provide a model. Taking a video of a good Fishbowl Socratic Seminar discussion provides a model for the protocol. New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady shows his new receivers videos of themselves that need correcting, and points out what he expects of them. (Monetary gain and high profile exhibition help incentivize.) Objectifying behavior via film of "this is what's right"; "this is not" can help struggling achievers perform better when presented in a positive way, and with positive examples of behavior for Standards learning.

Images and Text

Machu Picchu is a format of capturing visuals to match text presentation. Students enjoy finding the right visual to match words and use these in a Powerpoint presentation on text analysis. In Next Practice to maximize focus on the learning, to control the time-learning ratio, students may work together first to capture files of graphics and visuals to place in an on-line folder. If students are working on the same text, they can quickly locate several images that could connect with the text, together compiling a store of visuals. Student discussions of what visuals to capture from Clip-Art or other non-copyrighted graphics can center on what fits the text, a creative discussion that values insight and appropriateness. The Powerpoint can be limited to just ten slides, valuing conciseness. By trimming time and wording, students are forced to be more precise.

First students must determine their Standards theme, for example how key text details reveal a central text theme. Then they select graphics that convey this message. Students determine what they will state on theme and supporting detail, then chose visuals that convey this. In presentation, students show their Powerpoint presentation and present their statement of the central theme and details that support this theme, with graphics that match their explanation.

To keep the PowerPoint presentation brief, we electronically set a standard timing. The PowerPoint is adjusted to move in a brief 60 seconds or more time. Students must write text, then adjust text time or application time to match words and images.

Different groups of students may choose different central themes, illustrating that as long as theme is justified by text, it's valid. Capturing the right image to match text forces students to carefully analyze text and image. Viewing Machu Picchu is illuminating when visuals capture key points; students teach students. The teacher may want to view the PowerPoint first to assess words and graphics, to help the students perfect their presentation. More struggling students can be a part of the team, participating through selecting visuals, contributing with text scrutiny.



Adapting an Application to Presentation

I walked into a school computer lab one day to first see chaos. The teacher had had some training in Prezi, a broad-based, more adaptable presentation application. Students had been asked to work in small groups to determine what they felt were key quotes in a text, and to use Prezi to present their quotes and justify them. What at first looked like bedlam I then saw and heard was learning. Students were checking with each other to discuss text quotes, helping each other with the



application; the teacher and an assistant helped with the technical features. Some students more quickly picked up the technical aspects and helped others. It was a learning lab. Another teacher told me that in her school they had a rule that students must first complete the Prezi tutorial before they can ask a question. I

was sorry I missed this class's more formal presentations on key quotes and why they were important to the text, a basic underpinning of Common Core Standards and traditional literary analysis skill. When students garner information and present their material, we've hit real learning. With the Prezi learning lab, every student was seeking help and asking questions. A less adept student wouldn't be alone, but free to seek help.



Often school software program applications advertize as “self-paced,” “individualized” learning. Unfortunately, just sitting a student in front of the computer to mechanically move through software doesn't promote strong learning.

In a Standards environment, an informed teacher must set the Standards as the goal and determine how software can support this learning. We fine-tune the technology to hit needs. Teachers make the difference. Computers don't replace teachers yet.

Video Presentations

I often thought, I've been teaching apostrophes for twenty years and students still haven't learned them. Teacher presentations can be filmed to present. With one good lesson, we simply show that lesson in class. When one teacher has developed a skill of presenting "inference" understanding, this can be filmed and presented by others on a Smartboard. Powerpoints are often created, shared, and modified as needed. We don't need to always teach the same skills every year if we can take advantage of technology to film one good lesson and use that, share among others, and collect videos from others. YouTube videos now have excellent educational clips that we can search and find, such as on how to appropriately capture text from research to paraphrase and document accurately, not plagiarizing. YouTube has multiple videos on the Standard of the figurative language of simile and metaphor. Technology captures commonly taught areas and is available at no cost. For the student who struggles, clarity and means of presentation aids learning.

Not only does Next Practice extend to focus more heavily on Standards learning, but we can see from these brief illustrations that Next Practice also removes the burden from teachers to place the onus of learning on students, for the benefit of both students and teachers. When students work together, all students can learn.

