

# Baiting the Reading Hook



*A school turns 9th grade students' disdain for reading into enthusiasm.*

**Jennifer McCarty Plucker**

It's an August evening, just before the start of a new school year. Students are filled with excitement and anxiety as they tour the school during freshman orientation at Eastview High School, a large suburban school outside Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. As I stand outside my classroom door, I anticipate the dread and disdain of the students who will be entering my intervention class for 9th grade students who are behind in reading. After years of struggle, their fear of reading is now disguised as apathy and scorn toward books, reading, and teachers who ask them to read (especially aloud).

So I gear up. Dressed in my best, my classroom squeaky clean, I offer a warm welcome to my new crew. One at a time, students enter my room. One young man, hat pulled down over his eyes, looking at the floor, says, "Do I really have to take this class? I hate reading." Another, "Are you going to make us read out loud?" Still another, "Is there a way for me to test out of this class?"

I remember what my father taught me as a child when we spent hours on the

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lake fishing. I must be patient, I must use the right bait, and I must always have my line in the water. I tell the students to give it a chance and have a look around. "See if there's a comfortable reading space you'd like to claim," I suggest.

Glancing around the room, students see fewer desks than in their other classes. Instead, there are comfortable reading corners with shaggy bright rugs, bookshelves filled with young adult books, and a wall covered with inspirational quotes, such as, "A room without books is like a body without a soul" and "Today a reader, tomorrow a leader." The questions start again:

"Do we get to pick what we read?"

"Who gets to sit in these comfortable chairs?"

"How come this room looks so different?"

The bait seems to be working.

In the 2008–09 school year, Eastview embarked on a journey to meet the needs of striving freshmen readers. In that first year, the students in our homegrown, research-based Academic Literacy 9 class showed growth at three to four times the rate of their peers (McCarty Plucker, 2009). How did we do it?

### Time to Read

Research has shown that high-achieving students read more than low achievers (Allington, 2006; Guthrie, 2008). To accelerate students' achievement in reading, literacy educators must ensure that striving readers are reading at least as much as their higher-achieving peers. We decided to narrow the discrepancy by providing a double dose of literacy instruction in an academic literary class that students must take in addition to their 9th grade English class. In the 2008–09 and 2009–10 school years, we had four class periods of the course, each taught by one of three highly trained and licensed reading teachers. This year, because of budget cuts, we have just three classes, two of them a

year long and one a semester long.

We keep the classes small (no more than 10 students per teacher). Students are selected on the basis of standardized reading tests, informal reading assessments in middle school, and recommendations from the middle school reading specialist. Typically, we are

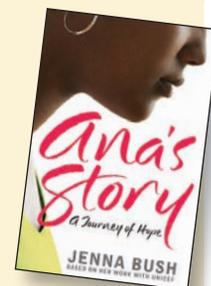
working with students whose scores on standardized state assessments are in the 10th–30th percentile.

We also hold sacred a minimum of 25 minutes of the daily 50-minute academic literacy class for students to read silently for enjoyment. Once our students have started reading for fun,

## Hot Reads for 9th Graders

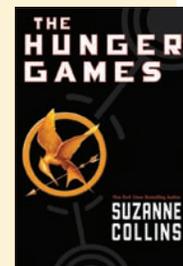
These are a few of the most popular books on my classroom shelves last year.

*Ana's Story: A Journey of Hope* by Jenna Bush (HarperCollins, 2007). Former first daughter Jenna Bush tells the remarkable story of Ana, a young woman infected with HIV/AIDS whom Bush met while interning with UNICEF in Latin America.



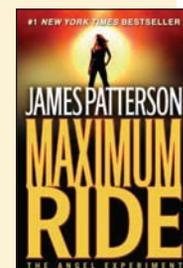
*Compound* by S. A. Bodeen (Feiwel and Friends, 2008). Eli, his sisters, and his parents have been living in an underground mansion since a nuclear war destroyed their home six years ago. According to his father, they have nine years to go before the air will be clean enough for them to emerge from their compound, but Eli is beginning to question his father's motives in this suspenseful thriller.

*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (Scholastic, 2008). Each year, the Capitol holds a lottery to choose one girl and one boy from each of the 12 districts of Panem to participate in the Hunger Games, a televised competition to the death that all citizens are required to watch. Katniss chooses to replace her younger sister in the games in this, the first of three books in a series.



*L.A. Candy* by Lauren Conrad (HarperCollins, 2009). Jane and Scarlett move to Los Angeles and land on a reality TV show that follows their "real lives" and tests their friendship. Based on the true life of author Lauren Conrad, who starred on MTV's *The Hills*.

*Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment* by James Patterson (Little, Brown, 2005). Max, 98 percent human, 2 percent avian, has escaped from the lab with her family but is being hunted by the Erasers (part wolf, part human). This fast-paced science fiction young adult novel is the first in a continuing series.



*Street Pharm* by Allison van Diepen (Simon Pulse, 2006). Ty Johnson must use his intelligence and savvy nature to keep his incarcerated father's drug-dealing business successful. A tragedy causes Ty to rethink his career choice.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (Razorbill, 2007). Clay receives a package in the mail containing cassette tapes recorded by a classmate who recently committed suicide. Each person who receives a tape is one reason she chose to die.

we brainstorm and set goals for stealing minutes outside school for reading (Miller, 2009). By the end of the school year, many of our academic literacy students have finished more than 40 books and are reading at least an hour each day.

### **A Homegrown Approach**

Rather than purchase a commercial reading program, we created a homegrown one (Ivey, 2009). We looked at our resources, considered our students' needs, and consulted the most recent research in adolescent literacy instruction and decided to use our funds to build a classroom library with high-interest young adult novels, create an appealing and comfortable environment for teens, and provide professional development for teachers.

Developing and maintaining a classroom library of high-interest

## **Literacy educators must ensure that striving readers are reading at least as much as their achieving peers.**

young adult novels can be a challenge. However, daily access to engaging books is imperative for the success of growing readers. Yes, we lose books. No, our classroom isn't organized like our media center. We tend to organize books by theme or likely audience, so we might have a table of sports books or of teen romances instead of books organized by authors whose names may be

unfamiliar to struggling readers.

We work to continually find books that give students just the right level of challenge—not so easy that students won't grow, and not so difficult that students won't understand them. We then help students figure out what books are just right for them. By February, students can often independently choose books that will accelerate their literacy growth.

### **The Right Strategies**

Instead of teaching strategies for strategies' sake, we take a reflective approach to strategy instruction. We start by helping our students share their thinking as they read. Once we learn what already comes naturally for each reader, we purposefully hone skills in other areas. For example, when our students are reading difficult text steeped in description, we encourage them

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to make mental movies as they read. When they are reading current events articles, we encourage them to ask questions. We teach students not to get discouraged when they're confused but to use metacognitive strategies to clear up the confusion as it happens.

Ultimately, we want our students thinking as they read, recognizing that reading is a complex process. One student shared his newfound thinking skills when he came into my room last winter, saying, "Dr. McCarty, I can't listen to my iPod when I read anymore. My metacognition voice is too loud!" I sensed annoyance, but also a hint of pride.

Knowing the research on adolescent engagement, we try to give students opportunities for choice and collaboration (Guthrie, 2008). When working with more difficult texts that require scaffolding, the choices are sometimes

limited, but there are choices nonetheless. For example, when teaching students to annotate a text by writing their thoughts in the margin, we might offer three current events articles and allow students to choose the one that appeals to them most. Or if all students are working with the same text, we might ask them to choose their purpose for reading. Do they want to understand the author's opinion? Develop an opposing argument? Look for holes in the author's logic?

Instead of making the classroom an electronics-free zone, we have students reflect on what distracts them from their tasks. We work with students to develop goals for taking control of distractions.

One young man had a love affair with his new iPhone. He thought he could hide it in the pages of his book during independent reading time and watch a

movie instead. During our one-on-one conference, I told him that I thought he might be addicted to his new iPhone, and we developed a plan for how he could avoid its lure during important work. Most days, he kept it neatly tucked away in his backpack. But on difficult days, he asked me to babysit his prized possession so he wouldn't be tempted. During the process, I had to gently remind him of his plan now and again, but the key was that he was in control, not me. Once the students learn to rely on themselves, instead of on the teacher, they can apply these skills to other situations.

Discerning what literacy skills students use outside school and linking these skills to academic tasks is another important component of our intervention. We've used online discussion forums, videos, digital posters, podcasts, texting, and classroom social



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networking sites to engage students and allow them to use skills they already have for academic purposes.

### The Sick Factor

One of the greatest lessons I have learned working with high school students is that sound reading instruction principles from our elementary colleagues must be integrated into secondary reading instruction. For example, just like elementary students, adolescents need to hear highly fluent readers. However, students won't respond to read alouds they consider lame, so we look for shared reading experiences that students think are *sick*—a word I really hope means cool when my students use it.

My students enjoyed *Skeleton Creek* by Patrick Carmen (Scholastic, 2009). The novel is written as a journal by a high school student named Ryan. Ryan's best friend Sarah communicates with him by e-mailing him videos, which are available online at [www.scholastic.com/skeletoncreek](http://www.scholastic.com/skeletoncreek). My students thought the sometimes scary videos that we watched in class were pretty *sick*.

Last winter, I knew that we needed to incorporate small-group reading instruction. But how was I going to make guided reading cool? When in doubt, try an acronym. We implemented CREW (Collaborative Reading Enhanced Work) Time. Simply calling it CREW Time made it cool. We adjusted our crews depending on what strategy or minilesson we felt the small groups needed. One minilesson we used with our crews was explicitly teaching students to take their reader response journal entries from lower-level thinking (making connections) to higher-level thinking (making judgments).

To practice reading with fluency, our students needed to read aloud, but they would rather clean gum off desks. So



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students performed stories for 1st graders.

### Celebration!

At the end of the 2008–09 school year, we had much to celebrate. Twenty-eight 9th graders had completed the course. Their mean increase on the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) reading test was 10 points, compared with similar striving readers who gained on average just 3.6 points or on-grade-level

peers who gained 4 points (McCarty Plucker, 2009).

Our students were experiencing academic success in other classes as well. To honor this, we threw a celebration banquet and had students invite their families and influential mentors. We invited our school district superintendent and administrators to see students receive such awards as Most Valuable Reader (MVR), Most Improved, and the coveted Lightning Award. The Lightning Award is given in many cocurricular activities and is seen as highly prestigious. For our class, it goes to the student who epitomizes the mission of our class by buying into the process, being a leader, becoming an avid reader, and using scholarly behaviors to accelerate his or her own reading growth.

At the end of the evening, each student walked out with a certificate of achievement and positive words about his or her academic growth. Our final note as we encouraged our students to *keep reading* was an invitation to a Books and BBQ event in July.

Our inaugural class is now in 11th grade. Last April, they took the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment in reading, which they must pass to graduate. Seventy-five percent of our Academic Literary 9 students met expectations on the exam. We are con-

## Daily access to engaging books is imperative for the success of growing readers.

we asked them to create unrehearsed reading podcasts of a children's story of their choice. They didn't balk at reading into a microphone! After a fun-filled week of fluency activities disguised as games, we had students rerecord the story they read at the start of the week, compare podcasts, and reflect on the difference. This led to experiments with readers' theatre and a field trip to a neighboring elementary school, where

### EL online

For another story of how a school intervened to help its reluctant readers, see the online-only article "Intervention as an Inside Job" by Rebecca Ballantine and Allison Gaines Pell at [www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct10/vol68/num02/Intervention-as-an-Inside-Job.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct10/vol68/num02/Intervention-as-an-Inside-Job.aspx).

tinuing to support the seven remaining students through a quarter-long reading support class called Reading Lab, also taught by an academic literacy instructor. The goal for this class is to help students not only pass the exam but also gain the skills necessary to do the difficult reading that comes with being an upperclassman and future college student.

Now that the program is in its third year, we're pleased to see that we've found an effective way to lure our students into reading. Students in the 2009–10 class responded similarly to those in the inaugural class. Their mean and median scores showed accelerated growth at three times that of their peers who were reading at grade level. And their enthusiasm was evident at the summer Books and BBQ event that brought both cohorts of Academic Literacy 9 students together for food, fun, and conversation about summer reading. Students who have been through the program now describe reading intervention with phrases like *fun*, *comfortable*, *a place to feel smart*, *my favorite class*, and *totally sick*. 

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