



Making Textbook

Many middle school students view textbooks with alarm. These five practices can motivate them to read informational text.

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As students enter middle school, they often find that textbooks dominate the landscape in their social studies, science, mathematics, foreign language, and language arts classes. Learning from these texts—so essential to success in middle school—requires not only basic reading skills, but also higher-order reading comprehension and reasoning.

Yet teachers face several substantial challenges in helping students cope with complex informational texts. The most overwhelming obstacle is boredom; even students who enjoy reading non-fiction often find informational text dry

and uninteresting, and many students actively avoid it when possible. Another problem is students' lack of skills; although they may be able to read aloud fluently, understand the literal meanings of sentences, and make simple inferences, many middle school students struggle with higher-order literacy skills—for instance, forming connections to integrate information from multiple, disconnected sections of text.

A third problem in helping students cope with informational texts is the textbooks themselves. Most textbooks are narrowly geared toward the 20 percent of students in the middle of the ability spectrum. Students at the high end



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Reading Meaningful

may already know the information in the text; students at the low end may have trouble even decoding the words and recognizing the vocabulary. Middle school teachers, as subject-area experts, understandably prefer to focus on teaching students the content in their discipline rather than teaching them literacy skills.

During the last four years, with our colleagues at the University of Maryland, we have explored ways to overcome these challenges. We have surveyed more than 3,000 students and conducted extended interviews with more than 250 students of diverse ethnicities and achievement levels to learn

about their motivation and engagement in reading. Drawing from this research and that of others, we have found five crucial practices that motivate adolescents to read informational texts (Guthrie, 2011).

Develop Dedication

Research suggests that students gain most of their knowledge of world history, basic science, economics, literature across cultures, and so on through extended reading. Such extended reading requires dedication—time, effort, and persistence. In fact, some studies have found that this kind of self-discipline is more important than IQ in

predicting high school grades (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

Textbooks alone rarely motivate students to develop dedication. To foster student dedication, effective teachers use a variety of texts. They go beyond the textbook, incorporating the Internet, relevant trade books, and articles from science or history journals. Instead of offering a curriculum that is a mile wide and an inch deep, they provide in-depth units of study in which students have a chance to read extensively and deeply about topics.

One leading 8th grade science textbook covers *symbiosis*—which

includes the complex concepts of *mutualism*, *commensalism*, *parasitism*, and other forms of plant-animal relationships—in just one page. Contrast this approach with a 7th grade instructional unit developed by our Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) project at the University of Maryland (www.corilearning.com). This unit spends one week on the concept of *mutualism* alone and integrates many trade books, videos, and Internet sites, as well as *Scientific American* articles, on this topic.

Reading multiple and extended texts helps students develop higher-order reasoning as they integrate information within and across texts to develop a coherent understanding of the topic at hand. Students commonly notice apparent inconsistencies across texts that prompt them to ask complex questions about the topic. Coming out of their own curiosity, these questions motivate them to do more reading. As students integrate the big ideas by connecting information from different texts, they learn to think in the discipline.

Build Self-Efficacy

To develop dedication, students must believe that they can comprehend informational text. But we've found that nearly one-half of middle school students find science and history textbooks intimidating (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Klauda, 2012).

When students struggle with reading the textbook, teachers sometimes sideline the book and teach the content directly. Avoiding the textbook, however, is a mistake. Students need repeated experiences of successfully learning from their textbooks and other informational texts to build their overall self-efficacy as readers and learners. When students gain expertise in a topic by engaging with informational text, they develop a belief in themselves as readers.

A crucial step in motivating students to read content textbooks is to match



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the text to students' levels. When the available textbook is too difficult for individual students, effective teachers provide supplementary texts, such as trade books or online materials. For struggling readers, teachers must ease into difficult texts by providing more manageable texts and ensuring initial success with them. Different media, such as videos, can also support students' understanding by supplying background knowledge that students can link to informational texts.

Just as important as text selection is task selection. To help students gain confidence in higher-order thinking with complex text, effective teachers gradually increase task complexity, moving from lower-level to higher-level tasks. They may begin with literal comprehension tasks in which students simply state the obvious meanings of key text elements, such as topic sentences or conclusions. Progressing to inferential reading, they ask students to connect headings to conclusions in the text. Stepping forward into integration tasks, teachers may require students to link knowledge from one section of a text to another section of a similar text—for example, to link a section

from an online article to a section of a trade book. Finally, teachers may ask students to explain their text-based knowledge in their own words to peers, in spoken or written form. During all of these activities, teachers increase students' confidence by providing encouraging feedback.

Finally, effective teachers help students gain confidence by assisting them in setting and accomplishing their own reading goals. For example, teachers can help students set a goal for how many pages they will read in one class period. Students can then increase that goal daily. As students improve in setting and reaching goals, their sense of efficacy grows, which empowers them to expand the scope of their reading.

Show Students the Text's Value

When students believe text is important, they read it. Unfortunately, this belief is rare. In our interview study, 45 percent of 7th grade students reported that reading informational text was "a waste of time" (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Klauda, 2012). This devaluing was most common among higher achievers, who enjoyed their literary reading but found informational text

dull and unrelated to their lives.

Too often, students believe they can learn what they need to know by simply listening in class and following procedures without referring to the textbook. A first step for teachers in increasing the perceived value of reading is to help students understand how reading the text benefits them across a range of situations.

For example, in one study, teachers asked students to write a paragraph about how the material they were learning in a section of their mathematics or psychology textbook was relevant in their personal lives. After students completed this task for five different textbook sections, their belief in the value of the book increased. They saw the relevance of the text, and their achievement in the course also increased (Hulleman, Godes, Hendriks, & Harackiewicz, 2010).

Effective teachers give students opportunities to apply the informational text they read to concrete classroom tasks—for example, they may ask students to read a two-page section of a textbook and then use the information they obtain to draw a diagram or to explain the topic to a classmate. Or students may read several texts to prepare for a team debate and then reflect on how the information they learned through their reading gave them the expertise they needed to perform well.

Use Social Motivation

Every middle school teacher is aware of the power of social dynamics for students in this age group. Yet teachers rarely tap into these social processes to strengthen informational text reading. Social motivation can inspire dedication to text reading if students want to impress their peers and not let them down by failing to fulfill their role in the group.

Effective middle school teachers set up frequent opportunities for collaboration to support students' social motivation for reading informational text.

Social interaction around text has to be well managed to ensure that students listen to one another, but it is neither complex nor impossible. A wide range of interactive and collaborative arrangements can work in classrooms.

One simple way to support collaboration is to arrange desks in pairs and incorporate two-minute paired activities into each lesson. For example, students may read one page of text silently and then briefly share with their partner the most important point made on that

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page. In these interactions, students clarify their own thinking by expressing their views to someone else; they may also be spurred to reflect on the key information from the text in a new way when they hear their partners interpret it. Thus, in a brief read-and-share activity, students become active learners and deepen their text comprehension—and enjoy the social interaction.

Another successful approach is *collaborative reasoning*, in which a group of students discusses a story or an informational text (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001). Students build on one another's thoughts to explain the major theme of the text by successively adding key elements as they take turns contributing to the synthesis. This activity can help students become more skillful in interpreting complex text.

Some form of collaboration is possible in any classroom with any text. To be productive, collaborative or cooperative student work should be accountable, interactive, and text-based. For example, teachers may ask students to collaborate in writing a summary, drawing a graphic representation of a text, or building an argument for a position they will explain to others.

In all such interactions, effective teachers provide appropriate degrees of structure depending on class size, as well as students' cognitive skill and comfort with social interaction. Some students will do best when given a simple, clear, concrete goal and a short time to complete the task. For example, the teacher may say, "Read this paragraph silently and then reach agreement within your group on the three most important words in the paragraph. Be prepared to defend your choices to the

class. You have three minutes." More advanced student groups can handle multiple goals, looser interaction requirements, and more choices about how to express the knowledge they learned from the text.

Give Students Choices

Middle school students need to feel in control of their world. Making simple choices is a rewarding form of control. Thus, teachers who give students choices in their informational reading help them develop an interest in reading.

We are not recommending that teachers let students choose whether to read a textbook or whether to complete assignments. Rather, we are suggesting that teachers provide more limited choices—which paragraph to emphasize in drawing conclusions, or which examples to read closely, for example. Students may be allowed to choose which portions to emphasize in a science chapter that includes more topics than the teacher can fully cover. Choice helps adolescents find materials relevant to them, which increases their delight in reading.

Options in learning can extend beyond the text. For example, teachers

can give students the choice of showing their understanding by either writing a paragraph or drawing a diagram. They can allow students to choose a partner to work with in a text-based project. They may give students 10 minutes to discuss a text with a partner anywhere in the classroom. Such options do not dilute the curriculum, undermine the teacher, or reduce the students' cognitive responsibilities. On the contrary, such choices during a lesson increase students' investment in performing well. Making a choice is its own reward, but it also enables students to make reading relevant to themselves.

Students Can Master Informational Text

As part of the Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) project at the University of Maryland, we have trained middle school teachers to use

these five essential practices. We have found that when teachers implement the practices fully for at least four weeks, students increase their motivation to read informational texts as well as their achievement.

To succeed in secondary school, students must be able to tackle informational text—especially today, when the common core state standards have raised the bar for the difficulty of texts that students are expected to read. By providing engaging, supportive classroom instruction, effective teachers can help middle school students overcome their initial reluctance and master the art of learning from informational text. 

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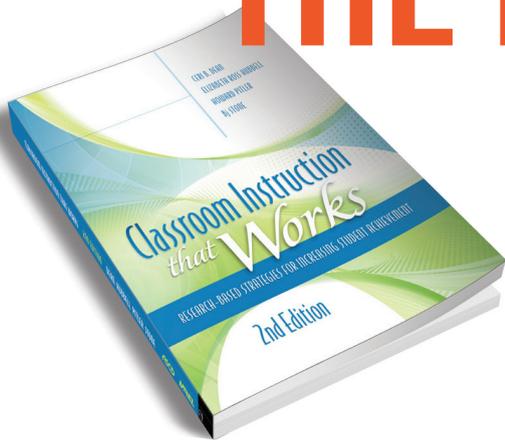
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