Independent Reading: The Importance of a Volume of Reading

Overview

In the Common Core era, students are challenged to read complex texts to build content knowledge, literacy skills, and academic vocabulary. Each EL Education ELA module for Grades 3–5 includes one or more "central" texts—complex texts that students work with in class and for homework, with support from the teacher and peers. It is important that all students have access to, and support with, reading text at the appropriate level of complexity for their grade level.

However, students also need a "volume of reading," which means just what it sounds like it means: any ways to get students reading a lot of text (including text beyond those central to a module and in addition to those that students read during school hours or with support). This volume of reading helps students build important world knowledge and acquire additional vocabulary, both of which are critical for reading comprehension and essential to the ability to read complex text "independently and proficiently".

What Influences EL Education's Approach

- The Common Core vision of what it means to be college and career ready as readers
- The research base on reading instruction
- Recognition that reading is an ability that demands ongoing practice to develop proficiency
- Understanding the importance of offering students a variety of texts and purposes for reading
- Knowing that the more students read, the more they learn about the world

Volume of Reading

Students need to read both complex text and a lot of text. According to Adams (2009), "To grow, our students must read lots, and more specifically they must read lots of 'complex' texts—texts that offer them new language, new knowledge, and new modes of thought" (p. 182, cited in CCSS Appendix A). If students are to be college and career ready, which requires the ability to read complex texts, they must be saturated with language and given opportunities to practice challenging reading. According to Allen (2009), "Reading is like every other human activity in that the amount of practice really matters, especially the amount of reading done while reading proficiency is being developed" (p. 60). Unfortunately, for many students who do not experience successful reading practice, they lose their enthusiasm for reading, which in turn leads

to decreased motivation to practice and ultimately develop reading proficiency. Ensuring that students are given ample opportunities to read a variety of materials in a variety of ways increases their motivation because teachers can tap into students' interests and give them enough practice for reading proficiency to develop.

To give students the amount of reading practice necessary, we should provide reading opportunities that are varied in purpose and type of text. Reading development does not occur in a linear fashion, and students' reading proficiency occurs at different rates (Common Core Learning Standards, n.d.). Students need opportunities to be challenged while reading, as well as opportunities to read texts that provide for easy fluent reading (CCLS, n.d.). These experiences can occur within a given topic of study (e.g., third grade Module 2A about frogs' adaptation or seventh grade Module 1 about the Second Sudanese Civil War). They also may occur during independent reading when students choose books based on personal interest. The ELA modules' recommended reading lists offer students a variety of options to choose from.

Reading to Systematically Build Knowledge

According to the Common Core State Standards, "Building knowledge systematically in English language arts is like giving children various pieces of a puzzle in each grade that, over time, will form one big picture. At a curricular or instructional level, texts—within and across grade levels—need to be selected around topics or themes that systematically develop the knowledge base of students. Within a grade level, there should be an adequate number of titles on a single topic that would allow children to study that topic for a sustained period. The knowledge children have learned about particular topics in early grade levels should then be expanded and developed in subsequent grade levels to ensure an increasingly deeper understanding of these topics" (p. 33).

Engaging students in research reading on the module topic helps to build both their knowledge of that topic and the world, as well as crucial academic vocabulary that they can carry with them to another text in the same or different domain.

Reading for Pleasure

According to Clark & Rumbold (2006), "Reading for pleasure refers to reading that we do of our own free will anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading. It also refers to reading that, having begun at someone else's request, we continue because we are interested in it" (p. 6). The Common Core has brought about a great deal of focus to the cognitive aspects of reading: word recognition and comprehension of complex texts. It is important for us to keep in mind, however, that even if students can read, it does not mean they will choose to do so.

Reading for pleasure can differ from or overlap with research reading. At times, students may choose to continue reading a given topic, such as horses, because it is a topic of personal interest. Other times, students may move from topic to topic as they finish one book and start another. Both types of reading play a pivotal role in students' literacy lives and help foster the "volume of reading" so clearly called for in the Common Core Learning Standards. Reading for pleasure is crucial to promote student engagement and achievement. It is a key strategy for building lifelong readers and allows for developing readers to learn about their own reading likes and dislikes as they construct their reading identities. Independent reading is an

opportunity for students to enlarge their world and find relevance. The authors of the Common Core note that students "need the satisfaction of easy, fluent reading for which the standards allow" (Appendix A, n.d.). This of course must include additional texts on the topic of study (see K–5 Recommended Text List). The authors of the Common Core also clearly affirm and recognize the merits of allowing students to choose books on topics of their personal interest, noting that those books are likely to bridge a vast range of complexity.

Allowing students to choose texts for independent reading helps them discover what they want to read, as well as uncover new knowledge and connect with their world. Teachers and library media specialists can play a vital role in fostering a rich reading life for all students.

Teachers often are concerned about holding students accountable for independent reading. There are a variety of ways to track independent reading requirements, but the most successful ways include placing the responsibility on the student. Creating a plan for launching independent reading that includes clear class routines, goal setting, and systems for accountability and student ownership creates a culture of reading in the classroom and the school that will promote students' literacy development. For specific recommendations, see ***Launching Independent Reading in Grades 6–8: Sample Plan*** and ***Launching Independent Reading in Grades 3–5: Sample Plan*** on Curriculum.ELeducation.org. These plans are designed to enhance and extend the strong programs many teachers and schools already have in place.

Millennial Readers

The millennial generation is both technologically savvy and self-savvy. It often defines the merits of activities based upon a quick cost-benefit analysis. That is the essence of the *relevance* promoted by the Common Core. Traditionally, when students are assigned independent reading projects, they are asked low-level questions that can be located through a simple search online. We need to offer students both rigor and relevance. When rigor is packaged with relevance, it increases student motivation. This can be accomplished through the questions students are asked about their independent reading text. Imagine, for example, that students have been asked to choose and independently read a biography. Below are some examples of questions that could be used to engage young readers, and to increase the rigor of a task such as a biography report:

- What is the everlasting footprint that your person left behind? Use evidence from the text to support your reasoning.
- Would your person be a good person to nominate to a hall of fame? Use evidence from the text to support your response.

Recommended Texts

Each EL Education ELA module includes a list of recommended texts in a broad complexity range for each unit. These books can be used for independent research on a given topic, or students may choose them to read for pleasure during independent reading time at school and at home. They may also be used for small group instruction. Because these book choices have already been identified as aligned to the topic, they are a good starting place for helping students to select books and increase their volume of reading.

Other Resources

Your library is an amazing and often underutilized asset to promote a volume of reading. There are a number of reading programs across the country that encourage classrooms to build "libraries" for convenient student reading choices. These classroom libraries play a positive role in developing lifelong readers. Yet they sometimes have limited choices for students. To support the individuality of each student, encourage students to access the thousands of titles and choices that can be found in the local and school libraries. School librarians are also often an underutilized asset to promote a volume of reading for students. Contact your school librarian for support in this area, as he or she is often eager to help.

Launching Independent Reading in Grades 3–5

The lessons in the EL Education modules for Grades 3–5 are designed to focus on teaching students to read, write, and speak about complex texts. The instruction outlined in the modules provides a 60-minute block of time each day to teach students reading and writing standards. However, it is assumed that teachers will provide additional time within their literacy blocks for supporting students in reading a high volume of text at varying degrees of complexity.

The purpose of this document is to serve as a resource to elementary school English Language Arts teachers in launching and sustaining a strong independent reading program. Many teachers already have robust plans in place: Please view this document as a resource to enhance or extend your existing work.

Creating a plan for supporting your students in independent reading is context-specific and varies greatly based on a school's schedule and staffing model. If your current routines include reading connected to topics, or "research reading," and they are working, it probably makes sense to stick with them, though you may find some interesting ideas in these documents. If you do use the plans here, there are a number of choices to be made about what structures and routines will work best for you and your students. Recall the importance of an independent reading program that elevates both choice and research reading (with texts related to the module topic). The balance in that relationship is a hallmark of what's provided in the sample plans.

Guiding Principles

Students need to learn the skill of selecting, evaluating, and comparing books that interest them and that can be read independently. Teachers need to teach the skill of selecting, evaluating, and comparing texts, and then check in to see how students are doing through a structure for independent reading. This skill aligns with CCSS ELA RL.9 and RL.10, but is equally important when students are selecting and evaluating informational text. Because RL.10 specifically requires students to read a volume of complex text at their given grade level, this standard is best taught through a structure for independent reading.

Students need accountability for their reading, both on a weekly basis and when they finish a book. This accountability comes from reading logs as well as from conversations with teachers and peers about what they are reading.

Social interactions energize independent reading. This is the principle behind book clubs for adults, and it is equally true—if not more so—for young readers. If possible, have students select independent reading books in pairs or trios, so that they can talk about their book with another

student. Also, if students begin to buzz about a particular book or series, look for that, build on it, nurture it—this will do more than anything else to get kids actually reading.

Launching a successful independent reading program takes class time—to teach it, to check in, to motivate students, and for students to actually read. Struggling readers, in particular, need time at school to read. And many students of all reading abilities may not have a quiet space at home for reading, or support from adults beyond the school community. For these lessons to be successful, find additional time in the school day (homeroom, DARE time) for students to read independently.

Logistical Considerations

Launching Independent Reading: The launch of independent reading will vary by school and teacher. The plan below describes a series of lessons to launch it. This plan could be implemented as a stand-alone week of English Language Arts class or interspersed (a day at a time) into the curriculum. The "module overview" and "unit overview" documents signal to teachers the point in the module/unit by which the launch process needs to be complete. Teachers should pace and time the launch based on what works best for their students and school schedule.

NOTE: Refer to the "Conferring during Independent Reading" section below for strategies to use to ensure students are reading books they can understand and enjoy. Extend students' choice to include a wider range of reading materials than just "books": magazines, newspapers, manuals, websites, etc. These materials possess the ability to spark students' interest and grow their knowledge as much as—and sometimes more than—traditional young adult fiction, for instance.

Maintaining Independent Reading: Within each EL Education module for Grades 3–5, teachers are given suggestions for when students should review recommended texts related to the module topic and select texts for independent reading. Lessons in the modules also include time during homework for students to read these texts independently. However, because the module lessons are just for one hour of literacy instruction per day, it is assumed that teachers will provide additional time to launch and support independent reading beyond that one-hour time frame. This could be done during an extended literacy block or at some other point in the school day. It is also assumed that students may read texts related to the module topics *and* other texts on topics of their choice.

Communicating with Parents about Independent Reading: Consider how you will communicate with parents about independent reading, as their support will be important. Although it can be difficult to have students get a reading record signed every night, consider sending home completed reading logs (after four check-ins—so every two to four weeks) for parent signatures, and consider how to routinely follow up with parents whose students are not completing the assigned independent reading.

Student Goal-Setting and Accountability: You will need to decide what sorts of goals you want students to set for their reading and how often (weekly or twice weekly) you will check in with students about their reading. The launch sequence described below includes twice-weekly check-ins on progress as the independent reading routines are getting established. Based on the needs of your students, you could continue that pattern or scale back to weekly check-ins. (Some teachers wish to have students record their reading every day; you could supplement the materials below with such a record.)

Publishing Book Reviews for Authentic Audiences: Students benefit from having an authentic audience (beyond their teacher) with whom to share their learning and opinions about the books they read. Peers are a great audience: Having students share reviews with one another has the additional benefit of adding to the "buzz" about books their classmates might like. Consider the various options for "publishing" reviews, and select the one that works for your students' situation (e.g., simple reviews on index cards to post on a bulletin board, a class book blog, Goodreads, or student-prepared book talks). Having students write or deliver oral reviews of their books has the added benefit of addressing standards related to written argument (W.1) or public speaking (SL.4).

Conferring during Independent Reading: Conferring one-on-one with students about what they are reading serves both instructional and accountability purposes: A conversation with you about reading will create more accountability for a student about her reading than a log she turns in. Conferring is a rich teaching practice and allows you to build strong relationships with your students as readers and as people. The heart of conferring is simply to ask students, "How's it going?" "What are you learning?" and "What are you figuring out as a reader?"

While students are reading silently in class, circulate to observe and confer. Notice patterns in the types of books students are choosing, and in how well they are sustaining engagement with their chosen book. Confer with students to ensure that they are reading books they can understand and enjoy. Conferring can include the following:

- Asking a student to read a paragraph or two out loud, noting any miscues (if there are a lot, the book might be too hard)

- Asking a student to talk about what is happening in that excerpt, stating simply: "Tell me more!"

- Helping students use "fix-up" strategies when they get confused (e.g., rereading, visualizing, using context clues to determine unknown vocabulary)

- Asking students what they like/don't like about a book and why (push them to cite evidence)

- Suggesting titles that the student might find interesting and appropriate