# 1 Accelerating Literacy Learning

*"Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children."*

—Chief Sitting Bull (1877)

## ACADEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

In the dark ages when we started teaching, we were not held accountable for much of anything related to student growth and achievement. Dialogue with the principal went something like this:

> Your students are sitting in their chairs and raising their hands. It is good that your lesson plans are ready for the substitute. Have you thought about the new deadline for getting your grades into the office?

Then we began to focus on the expectation that teachers would follow a process when instructing. The dialogue with the principal then went something like this:

> Your wait time is good and the ideas for initially engaging students at the start of the lesson seem to be working. You may want to write out two or three questions ahead of time to check for understanding.

But the 1990s brought us standards-based education, and the focus for accountability became student learning. The dialogue with the principal in many schools now goes something like this:

a teacher plan time, they do not help students learn. So we must add a framework that makes sense in diverse classrooms of all academic disciplines. We must plan ahead for students if they are to be literate, lifelong learners in the twenty-first century.

# FOUR CORE COMPETENCIES IN LITERACY

We cannot focus our literacy efforts only on early reading skills. We do regard and define a level of functional literacy as essential. Foundational use of phonics, demonstration of fluency, oral language use, early writing, and initial meaning creation are critical aspects of functional literacy. But our twenty-first-century learners need more than a functional literacy basis to plan for a future that will include new careers and technologies we cannot even imagine. Complex international influences, changing and emerging employment situations, and interpersonal and social conditions all require us to read, write, speak, and listen for a variety of purposes and then to take action based on the acquisition of that understanding. "Instruction in metacognitive strategies can improve reading comprehension. Good comprehenders read to purpose and actively monitor their own understanding of what they read" (RAND, 2002, p. 92).

In this book, we look at four major competencies in literacy that help us weave student learning strategies into the future:

1. Functional literacy

2. Content area literacy

3. Technological literacy

4. Innovative literacy

What do we need to know about these literacies, and how will they help us close the learning gap for diverse students? Table 1.3 (see p. 8) and Figure 1.1 (see p. 10) offer definitions and explanations of how these literacies can work together to help our students survive and thrive in the twenty-first century.

## Standards and Curriculum

The four literacies act as a lens for the standards and curriculum for which teachers are accountable, and they can help us frame the critical elements for which we want to hold students accountable. Each of the four literacies is critical to the overall development of our students and their ability to access and process information at an accelerating rate in an ever-changing world. Although each one can be taught separately, most

them continue their personal growth. While they examine the beliefs and actions of characters in literature, history, and the scientific world, students can reflect on their own developing beliefs and attitudes. Using case studies, dialogue and debate, exploration activities, problem solving, journal writing, and discussion in any content area gives students an opportunity to explore their relationships with others and practice introspection.

Teachers can capitalize on the opportunity to weave personal development into content area learning.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF ADOLESCENTS

Each of the four basic characteristics of adolescents—physical, social, emotional, and intellectual—has educational implications. Teachers can use the unique characteristics of adolescents to enhance literacy learning (see Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1**    Characteristics of adolescents and implications for literacy

| Characteristics | Implications | Reading | Writing | Speaking and Listening |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Physical**<br><br>• Rapid, uneven growth<br>• Clumsy and awkward<br>• Energetic, low fatigue<br>• Conscious of appearance<br>• Experience puberty and sexual feelings | • Need movement, rest, and change<br>• Can't sit still long<br>• Need physical activity<br>• Respond to active approach to learning<br>• Need information about their changing self | • Moving to small groups for partner reading or information circles, etc.<br>• Reading materials that portray the adolescent and the demands of physical challenges | • Provide a variety of writing spaces in the room where students can go to write<br>• Provide a variety of materials, media, and computer access | • Include role-playing and mime in storytelling and to rehearse content material<br>• Use drama<br>• Move to groups for discussion and elaboration |
| **Social**<br><br>• Want independence<br>• Peers are important<br>• Peer pressure influences<br>• Seek wider world<br>• Developing identity<br>• Developing values | • Seek choice<br>• Small-group activities<br>• Exposure to diversity<br>• Exploration of social situations<br>• Need positive role models | • Provide materials that explore social issues in whatever genre is being used<br>• Provide partner and group reading and discussion | • Genre and topics that would allow for exploration of social issues<br>• Partner and group writing opportunities | • Partner interaction<br>• Small-group processing<br>• Peer editing and "critical friends"<br>• Literature/ information circles<br>• Discussions and dialogue that facilitates thinking<br>• Prewriting brainstorming |

**Table 4.2    Strategies for English language learners**

| New Learning | Suggested Strategy |
| --- | --- |
| Early learning of nouns and key words | Use pictures and words together. |
| Understanding English dialects | Point out informal patterns, help students to match the correct form to the purpose at hand. |
| Learning nouns and adjectives | Provide and create pictures. Writing descriptions and short expository pieces like newspaper articles helps. |
| Learning about the complex use of English pronouns | Read personal narratives and highlight pronouns. Write a letter to a friend. Write about themselves or their families. |
| Learning root words | Not all languages have root words and word parts: These may have to be highlighted. Use a computer to make bold some of these root words in a reading selection. Underline roots in short written pieces. |
| When students know very little English | Use picture clues, speak clearly but not louder, use appropriate gestures and facial expressions paired with simple sentences, single words, or noncomplex phrases. |
| When students are confused by idioms and expressions | Substitute known words; use examples or picture clues. For example, *used to* is an idiom that means "accustomed to or familiar with something." |
| Early learning of object names | Highlight key words in your classroom with pictures or objects. Label things around the classroom. |
| Avoiding negative feelings | Learn to carefully pronounce the student's name correctly. Make certain they are not left alone, and make certain students feel welcome in your classroom. Negative feelings on the part of the teacher require no translation. |
| What is the English level of your student? | Most districts have specialized personnel who can give you this information initially. Remember, many new English speakers understand before they risk speaking and trying to pronounce complex English words. |

**Table 6.1** Technological and information literacy

| Stage | Student Actions for Literacy |
|---|---|
| 1. Defining | • Formulates and refines of questions that clarify<br>• Refines problem or task through questions<br>• Identifies key words<br>• Interprets and predicts results<br>• Develops focus through grouping of ideas or results and further refinement of questions or goals<br>• Formulates hypothesis-like questions as refinement progresses<br>• Uses modeled techniques<br>• Self-evaluates clarity of questions<br>• Establishes increasing expertise in using multiple sources<br>• At each click, these questions will be further refined until the problem or task reaches a level of usable definition for the search |
| 2. Locating | • Follows a search plan<br>• Recognizes currency of information<br>• Looks for multiple viewpoints and bias<br>• Uses complex library and search systems, both subscription and nonsubscription types<br>• Determines cross-referencing needs and uses appropriate indexes<br>• Uses primary and secondary sources<br>• Recognizes purpose and intent of both sources and information<br>• Generates examples to deepen understanding<br>• Understands the strengths and weaknesses of search engines<br>• Accesses government and research-based sources<br>• Uses a variety of media, not just Internet sources |
| 3. Selecting and analyzing | • Skims and scans<br>• Keeps a multidimensional view of a site and previous sites in mind to effectively navigate (thinks in site map terms)<br>• Clusters and combines information<br>• Develops a method of recording and saving needed information or sites<br>• Uses accepted Web site visual clues to find information (tabs, buttons, boxes, color, print size and boldness, site maps, etc.)<br>• Compares and contrasts information from multiple sites and resources, including statistical data<br>• Collects an adequate body of evidence or information before drawing a conclusion<br>• Complies with electronic copyright laws and etiquette or "netiquette"<br>• Devises electronic note-taking methods and templates that suit personal preferences<br>• Records bibliographic information<br>• Looks actively for bias, omissions, and errors<br>• Spots contradictions<br>• Recognizes positive and negative influences<br>• Looks for logic, contradictions, judgments<br>• Correctly creates footnotes or endnotes, recording source information accurately |

*(Continued)*