TIPS AND TRICKS FROM KELLY GARRICK

Language Arts Insider

A Valuable Resource for Content Area Teachers

Why do students write?

- **Writing encourages thinking.**

- **Writing allows them the opportunity to communicate**

- **Writing helps them discover new things; about the world, about themselves, and about their abilities.**

Quality Writing: What are the Keys to Student Success?

Students like to write about things that interest them. It is no wonder that often times it is difficult to get students to produce quality writing in our content area courses. If students are not interested in the American Revolution, they would probably rather show up to prom in last years dress than have to write an essay about it. "Students have to care about their writing to write well—only then will they take revising and editing seriously—and they care about things in which they are interested." (Routman, 213).

Often times middle and high school students also struggle with knowing what good writing is. Students have learned throughout the years that good writing depends on good mechanics, conventions, and organization. This can place a lot of pressure on students and take the enjoyment out of the writing process.
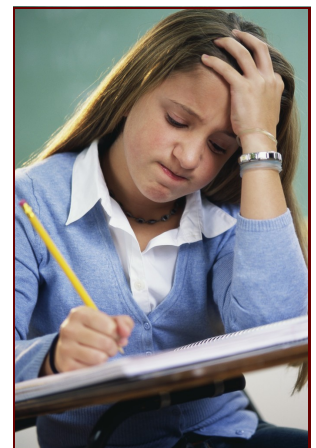
So how can we foster quality writing in our students? Some suggestions are given in the text entitled *Conversations*, by Regie Routman. Giving students a **Choice** is a good place to start. "When we can write about what we value, about our passions, then what we say is more likely to be vibrant and interesting…" (Routman, 215). Content area teachers may find this challenging due to the fact that they must have students write on topics that are aligned with the curriculum. A suggest would be that instead of assigning all students one essay prompt on the American Revolution, give them four different prompts to choose from that are still dealing with the concept of study. Also, make the choices varied in their approach of the topic. This gives the student freedom of choice and ownership of his or her writing.

We can also help those students who are stuck in a rut, focusing on the conventions of writing and missing the enjoyment of expression. One easy way is to implement **Quick-Writes** into your classroom instruction. "In a quickwrite we focus on getting our ideas down quickly without worrying about mechanics or revisions" (Routman, 216). This allows students to feel the uninhibited freedom of expression that will hopefully get them energized about writing.

Writing Nuggets of Knowledge

Here are some extra tips for helping your struggling writers break through into the wonderful world of writing:

- Explain the purpose for writing

- Encourage them to examine who their reader will be and write to that audience.

- Provide an environment that is comfortable and non-threatening. Allow occasional collaboration within the classroom community.

- When possible, allow students to choose their prompt or writing topic.

- Provide a clear rubric for grading.

- Inform parents of how you are teaching writing in your classroom. They are your best ally.

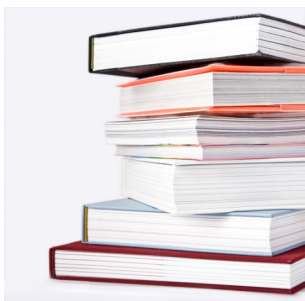- Model good writing as well as the enjoyment of writing.

Instructing Struggling Readers in Content Area Courses

You can be the teacher that makes reading content area texts enjoyable for students!

"Nonfiction is more than information conveyed through words. It is a carefully crafted genre. It is a literature of fact that combines both verbal and visual text."

—Richard M. Kerper

We have all witnessed a student that struggles constantly with content-area texts. This is not hard to believe, due to the fact that many times grade-level textbooks for the content areas are written at students' *instructional* level, rather than their *independent* reading level. Tough vocabulary, unknown words, and difficult content are a recipe for disaster for many students. Content Area teachers can do a lot to help their struggling readers.

First of all, it is important to note that there is a lot involved with reading a non-fiction text. Not only do these texts provide new vocabulary and concepts, but they also require students to view and decipher other visual elements, such as charts, tables, and graphs. Teachers must be aware of these elements and teach students how they can be properly interpreted. This is vital because many times these text structures are crucial to the meaning of the text.

Also, when assigning a non-fiction text for content area instruction, it is important to first build background knowledge. "We must be sure to check whether our students have adequate background knowledge and provide it for them with they don't" (Routman, 448). Without providing the appropriate background knowledge we cannot expect students to make connections between the text and themselves.

Next, "to ensure that our students read textbooks in a meaningful way, we first need to show students how textbooks work" (Routman, 460). We can do this by introducing students to the text and by guiding them through the different text features and explaining each ones' use. I can recall a time when I was teaching 4th grade and one of my students was looking up a science term in the dictionary. I was pleased, of course, but I asked her why she didn't just use the glossary in the back of the book. Her response surprised me, as I'm sure it would most teachers. She had no idea that there was a dictionary of terms from the text tucked away in the back of her book. I obviously took that as a sign that I needed to squeeze in a mini-lesson. Some text features to point out are:

- Table of Contents
- Text Organization
- Visual Aids
- Glossary
- Appendix

Difficult vocabulary can also cause many issues for students when reading content area text books. Here are some strategies to teach students:

- Use context clues
- Use picture clues
- Pull the word apart. Does it have a root?
- Look in the glossary or dictionary.

## Reading Nuggets of Knowledge

Here are some extra tips for helping your struggling readers tackle difficult content area texts:

- Use appropriate books—grade level and content.
- Teach Self Monitoring—help students monitor their own reading and apply the correct strategies when needed.
- Promote Fluency—This can be done through repeated readings, retellings, and guided practice.
- Promote strategic behavior—

encourage students to use strategies that they have learned while reading difficult texts. With practice, they can eventually utilize strategies without even making a conscience effort to do so.

Other strategies to consider when faced with difficult words:

- Chunking
- Examining roots
- 'Tapping' out the syllables
- Using context clues
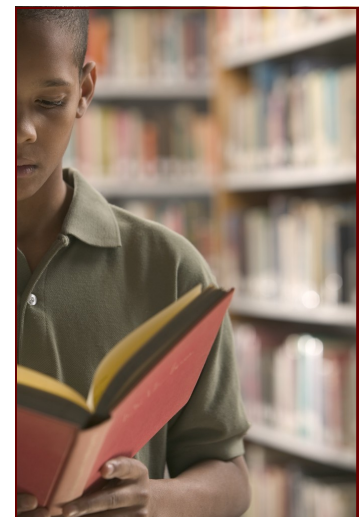
You are Not Alone: Collaborative Teaching Communities

The teaching profession is an ever changing, growing, demanding job. It is important that teachers recognize the allies that they have in each other. "It is only through collaboration and collegiality that we grow and thrive" (Routman, 520). I realize that we all think that we have great ideas and that we have it 'all figured out,' but think of the impact collaboration can have on student achievement as well as the morale of the school environment.

When I was a classroom teacher, I once had a co-teacher complain to me because she felt that another teacher on our team was 'steeling' her ideas. Can you imagine? I explained to her that this is the ultimate compliment and that she should be excited to share her wonderful ideas with the team. Unfortunately, this outlook is prevalent in schools and it only stifles creativity and leads to stagnant and tired teaching.

Regie Routman's text, *Conversations,* offers a variety of suggestions for how to build a collaborative community within our schools. The first steps mentioned are:

- Talk with one another about practice

- Observe one another engaged in practice

- Work on curriculum together

- Teacher one another what they know.

Don't take your most valuable resources, your colleagues, for granted.

"...I don't know any group of professionals who come to their work with so much genuine love and basic decency and generosity of spirit as school teachers."

—Jonathon Kozol

Take Professional Development Seriously

What is our ultimate goal with students? I know that my teaching philosophy is to create life-long lovers of learning. How can I expect to do this if I myself am not pursuing knowledge whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Quality professional development opportunities are invaluable to teachers and should be implemented in all school districts. These learning opportunities should involve teachers working together, sharing ideas,

talking, and discovering new and innovative teaching practices together. "Meaningful change cannot take place without effective, informed teachers" (Routman, 521).

When presented with the chance to participate in staff professional development, I challenge you to make the most of the opportunity and 'steel' as many ideas and practices from your colleagues as possible. Also, be willing to share your skill set with your co-workers. You may have the tools in your back pocket that can help reach and teach a student in that teachers class. Think of these opportunities as your chance to reach beyond the lives of the 24 students in your classroom and into the lives of hundreds more throughout your school community.

Classrooms as Collaborative Communities

Once we have developed a collaborative school community, we can then begin to focus on creating and inviting classroom where communication, collaboration, and creativity are fostered.

"Classrooms that are 'genial,' high-functioning environments share five characteristics that guide the learning that takes place there:

- Freedom to choose
- Open-ended exploration
- Freedom from judgment
- Honoring every student's ex-

perience

- Belief in every students' genius; genius is defined as 'giving birth to joy' (Armstrong 1998, 1)" (Routman, 536-537).

How teachers organize their classrooms also speaks volumes about what they value. It is important to create a classroom environment that demonstrates your philosophy about teaching. Some options that help create a classroom community are as follows: library with cushions for comfortable seating, clustered desks, and students' work on display.

Sample classroom arrangement from page 547 of the *Conversations* text:
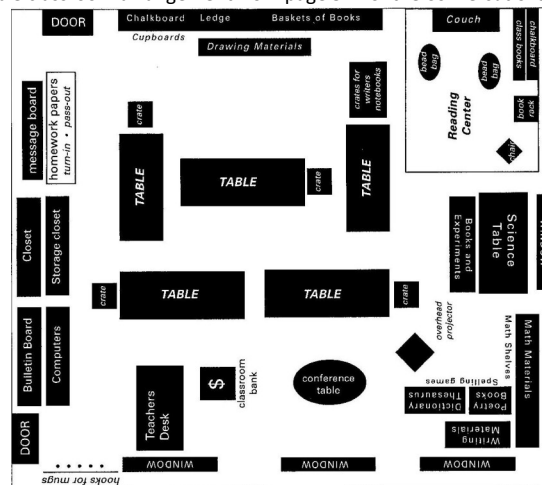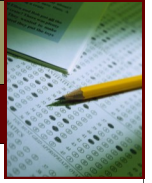
Evaluation: An Integral Part of Teaching

"No single test can accurately measure what a child knows or a community needs to know. An array of assessments needs to be available for multiple purposes—accountability, school evaluation, repoting to parents, and instructional improvement."

—Anne C. Lewis

Did you know that the word assessment is derived from the Latin word *assidere* which means to sit beside someone (Routman, 557). Shouldn't we all look at assessment as an opportunity to sit beside our students and get to know them as individuals? I have found that when evaluating students, teachers often just 'go through the motions'. It is important to realize that assessment should be meaningful and service a purpose. According to Regie Routman in the text, *Conversations*, assessment must do the following in order to be relevant:

- Serve the Learner: assessment must promote learning, rather than just measure it.
- Interact and align the instruction and have value for the student, teacher, and parent.
- Teachers, parents, and other stakeholders need to understand and value the process
- Formal, standardized assessments provide the BIG PICTURE
- Self-assessment is critical.

Types of Valuable assessment to consider:
- Portfolios
- Self-assessment
- Rubrics
- Standardized testing
- Reading Assessments: IRI, Running records, retellings
- Journals
- Dramatizations
- Reading logs
- Writing samples
- Literature conversations
- Guided reading activities
- Oral reading

Utilizing Portfolios in Your Classroom

Portfolios are an excellent way to gather authentic information about student achievement in your classrooms. According to Routman, the definition of portfolio is this: "a reflective selection of artifacts, work samples, and records that demonstrate who we are as literate beings (readers, writers, thinkers and learners) and how we have developed over time" (Routman, 562). This one simple tool has to ability to provide teachers with a wealth of information about student growth over time.

What is a Portfolio?
- A showcase of student work and growth
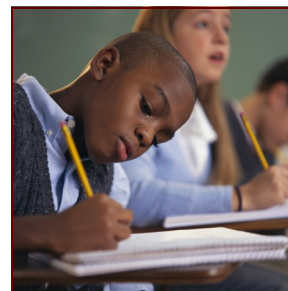- A collection of student work over a wide range of contexts.

Who is it for?
- For students to view and take pride in their work
- For teachers to view and assess growth.
- For parents to view to see what their child has done throughout the year

What goes in it?
- A good balance of all subjects, including both strengths and weaknesses.
- Student suggestions should be valued.

"What is essential is that portfolios bring together a wide range of work over diverse contexts that represents the journey of a student's learning and thinking" (Routman, 566).