Strategies for Promoting Literacy in YouthBuild

Broadly, there are three ways that schools, programs, youth workforce services and others can promote literacy:

1. **Directly teach skills and strategies** for literacy

2. **Integrate literacy** in all content areas, programs, projects, out-of-school activities (such as the YouthBuild work experiences)

3. **Involve all adults who work with youth** in proactively encouraging literacy

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**STRATEGY #1: Directly teach literacy skills**

*For youth who are far behind their peers, targeted and intensive instruction, tutoring, and practice, often in basic literacy or numeracy skills, are needed.*

A student who is substantially behind may also have a learning disability and may have an Individual Education Plans (IEPs) from their previous school; the IEP often specifies the types of reading or writing or math instruction and support the young person needs. In any case, a student who is far behind should receive a more thorough assessment, as possible.

Here are a few suggestions for both schools and non-formal settings on working with youth who are substantially behind their peers in reading and writing.

**Strategy 1.1. Work with students on word recognition**

- If a new word follows standard rules of phonics, help students “sound out” the word. Make connections to other words that use the same rules of phonics.
- If a new word does not follow the standards rules of phonics (and many do not), help students learn the word by sight. These “sight words” include many of the most common (e.g. the, of, are, etc.) as well as many others. (In fact, over half of our words do not conform to the ‘rules’ of phonics.) Sight words have to be learned by repetition, so: use flash cards for practice; have the student use the word in writing; and find other reading selections where the word is used.

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1 These materials are selected by the workshop facilitator who is solely responsible for the relevance and appropriateness of the content. DOL ETA has not reviewed the materials and does not necessarily endorse the content.
• Model for and coach the student in how to use the context in which an unfamiliar word occurs to figure out what the word is. (Often, students know a word in their spoken language that they don’t recognize in print.)
• Break down (and have the student break down) words that use prefixes and roots. Identify the definition of the word part. Make connections to other words that use the same part.

**Strategy 1.2** Encourage lots of reading in materials that are of high-interest but written at appropriately low reading levels (see list below).

**Strategy 1.3** Emphasize and reward personal effort. These students have had many years of failure in literacy; any effort and all progress should be praised and rewarded.

**Strategy 1.4** Use good instructional practices, especially ones geared towards struggling students. These include:
• Pre-teach what you think will be difficult – specific words, concepts, etc.
• Stress “similarities and differences” whenever you can
• Use graphic organizers
• Try to give multiple examples or exposures to any new idea or skill
• Help the student focus on mastery – the correct and fluent use of a strategy or new concept; this success will build confidence and motivation
• Emphasize strategies that effective learners use
• Help students move from specific examples to generalizations
• Include social skills development in your activities

**Strategy 1.5** Model and coach students on strategies and habits used by good readers

Another way to help students become more proficient in literacy is by modeling and coaching students on strategies and habits used by good readers and writers. This approach, which comes out of recent research about learning, is increasingly being used in secondary and alternative schools. Referred to as collaborative coaching or cognitive apprenticeship, this approach includes: WestEd’s Reading Apprenticeship²; Boston’s Collaborative Coaching and Learning; Readers / Writers Workshops; National Center on Education and the Economy’s Ramp Up, and others. In this approach, teachers:
• model effective literacy strategies (see below);
• think-aloud / articulate the strategies to students;
• provide instruction in strategies;
• coach students while they practice strategies;
• lead students through reflection and modification of strategies; and
• have students independently use the strategies.

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² See, for example, WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative (directed by Cynthia Greenleaf and Ruth Schoenbach: [http://www.wested.org/cs/sli/print/docs/sli/home.htm](http://www.wested.org/cs/sli/print/docs/sli/home.htm))
The instructional strategy, then, is one of showing students strategies, coaching them, and *gradually releasing* them to do the strategies on their own. An easy way of describing it is³:

- I do – you watch
- I do – you help
- You do together – I help
- You do independently – I watch

Or, from the students’ perspectives: Show me – Help me – Let me

There are several different lists of effective literacy strategies that can be used in this approach. One of the first was developed by P. David Pearson and colleagues from an extensive review of research. Here are Pearson’s “Seven Strategies Used by Skilled Readers”⁴:

“Seven Strategies Used by Skilled Readers”-What does a good reader do?
1. Uses existing knowledge to make sense of new information
2. Asks questions about the text before, during, and after reading
3. Draws inferences from the text
4. Monitors comprehension
5. Uses “fix-up” strategies when meaning breaks down
6. Determines what is important
7. Synthesizes information to create new understanding

There are a number of good resources for this approach; we especially recommend:

- Schoenbach, Ruth, Greenleaf, Cynthia, Cziko, Christine, and Hurwitz, Lori. Published in partnership with WestEd: *Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

**Strategy 1.6 Provide LOTS of opportunities for reading, writing, speaking, and listening**

Immersion in spoken and written language is critical for our youth. This immersion includes setting up literacy-rich environments. It also includes: engaging youth with high interest and culturally appropriate literacy materials; using authentic literacy tasks to engage and motivate; rewarding efforts by youth at improving their literacy; including time for sustained reading.

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³ adapted from *Understanding Reading Comprehension with Jeff Wilhelm*; Scholastic Teachers, 2005 [http://teacher.scholastic.com/reading/bestpractices/comprehension/understand.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/reading/bestpractices/comprehension/understand.htm)

writing, speaking and listening; involvement by all adults as literacy-role models and mentors; and the infusion of literacy in all activities.

The reason this immersion is so important is because children and youth who use language relatively well tend to use it more, and in doing so, get even better at it. The “Matthew Effect” – where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer (from the Book of Matthew) – certainly applies to learning both spoken and written language.

In YouthBuild, we can provide engaging literacy activities in several ways:
1. Drawing on the interests, hobbies, and backgrounds of our youth, we can provide literacy experiences that build on background knowledge and motivate our students to read and write; this can be especially important for learners who have been turned-off to literacy
2. We can encourage recreational reading and other activities that help youth build fluency and lifelong literacy habits
3. We can expand our students’ horizons by using literacy to expose them to new ideas, materials, and activities
4. We can model how literacy is used in ‘real life’ and can encourage and cultivate those literacy skills our youth need for lifelong learning
5. We can encourage reflection, through writing or speaking, with all activities
Good sources for lists of high-interest (and often low reading level) books

**The American Library Association** provides many booklists of great books. [http://www.ala.org/](http://www.ala.org/) For example:

- Award – winning books (in many categories, including Best Books for Teens, Selected Audio books, Newbery Award winners, and many others): [http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/YALSA/Booklists_and_Book_Awards/Booklists_and_Book_Awards.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/YALSA/Booklists_and_Book_Awards/Booklists_and_Book_Awards.htm)
- Outstanding books for the College Bound: [http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/outstandingbooks/outstandingbooks.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/outstandingbooks/outstandingbooks.htm)
- Coretta Scott King Award – for books promoting understanding and diversity - [http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Our_Association/Round_Tables/SRRT/Coretta_Scott_King_Book_Awards/Coretta_Scott_King_Book_Awards.htm](http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Our_Association/Round_Tables/SRRT/Coretta_Scott_King_Book_Awards/Coretta_Scott_King_Book_Awards.htm)
- Best Picks for Reluctant Readers - [http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/quickpicks/](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/quickpicks/)

Local libraries also often have suggested lists.

**Boston Public Library booklists** (a range of lists, and includes Spanish version) [HTTP://WWW.BPL.ORG/TEENS/BOOKLISTS/INDEX.HTM](HTTP://WWW.BPL.ORG/TEENS/BOOKLISTS/INDEX.HTM)

**Teen Link with the New York Public Library**: [http://teenlink.nypl.org/](http://teenlink.nypl.org/)

**Multicultural**

- Celebrating Hispanic experience, PreK-12 [http://www.ferglib.org/ferg/youth_link/kidol/booklists/hispanicbooklist.htm](http://www.ferglib.org/ferg/youth_link/kidol/booklists/hispanicbooklist.htm)
- Leads to 50 great books, plus advice from top educators, writers, and illustrators on how to spot literature that transcends stereotypes. [http://teacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/lessonplans/instructor/multicultural.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/lessonplans/instructor/multicultural.htm)

**SOME PUBLISHERS OF HIGH-INTEREST, LOW-LEVEL BOOKS:**

- Capstone (esp. for grades 3-9) - [http://www.capstone-press.com/capstone.cfm](http://www.capstone-press.com/capstone.cfm)
- CompassLearning (esp. software) [http://www.compasslearning.com/](http://www.compasslearning.com/)
- American Guidance Service (has high interest, low level textbooks) - [http://www.agsnet.com/](http://www.agsnet.com/)
STRATEGY #2: Integrate literacy in all content areas, programs, projects, work experiences

Literacy is necessary in almost any activity — including career development, work experiences, leadership activities, mentoring, and other youth development activities.

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**Five Things All Programs and Service Providers Can Do Within the Key Service Elements**

1. In all activities, use the “teachable moments” when a youth naturally uses literacy to demonstrate, instruct, discuss, or reflect — on the skill used and on its application in ‘real life’

2. In all activities, use different types and levels of questions to build comprehension and thinking skills.

3. Have students reflect regularly (both verbally and in writing in journals).

4. As part of every new activity, incorporate a “proven strategy” (e.g., do a “compare-contrast” exercise — verbally and/or in writing).

5. Have all staff, mentors, and adult volunteers set goals for themselves about how they will be a role model, cheerleader, or advocate for literacy (more in the last section).

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**Strategy 2.1 Using Teachable Moments.**

A lengthy description of this strategy, especially applied to workforce development-youth services, is in the manual “Literacy and Numeracy Gains in WIA Youth Programs”, available on the DOL website. We’ll discuss in the YouthBuild workshop.

**Strategy 2.2 Using Questions to Build Learning**

Questions are probably the most important tool in an educator’s tool kit. Questions are often used to assess student understanding, but they are equally important in helping to shape literacy, comprehension, and thinking skills.

To develop stronger thinking skills in literacy, it is important for all staff to incorporate the use of different levels of questions to encourage higher order thinking.

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Once you have learned to ask questions — relevant and appropriate and substantial questions — you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know.  

— Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner
Levels of Questions

Questions are of many types, from simple yes-no questions that focus on facts to complex questions that require analysis and application. By varying the types of questions we ask — with any activity — we help young people build different types of thinking skills.

One of the most frequently used systems for organizing questions and thinking skills is Bloom's Taxonomy. This is a hierarchical system of ordering thinking skills from lower to higher, with the higher levels building on cognitive skills from the lower levels. Levels are, from lower to higher:

1. Remember (Knowledge) — Remembering previously learned material, e.g., definitions, concepts, principles, formulas.
2. Understand (Comprehension) — Understanding the meaning of remembered material, usually demonstrated by explaining in one's own words or citing examples.
3. Apply — Using information in a new context to solve a problem, to answer a question, or to perform another task. The information used may be rules, principles, formulas, theories, concepts, or procedures.
4. Analyze — Breaking a piece of material into its parts and explaining the relationship between the parts.
5. Evaluate — Using a set of criteria, established by the student or specified by the instructor, to arrive at a reasoned judgment.
6. Create — construct something new from the information / learning

The following “Pyramid of Thinking” gives question cues for each level. In working with youth, use questions every day and always vary the level of questions you ask.

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Pyramid of Thinking

**CREATE**
*Question Cues:* create, combine, modify, rearrange, produce, plan, design, invent, what if?, compose, make....

**EVALUATE**
*Question Cues:* evaluate, judge, criticize, defend, assess, decide, rank, grade, test, measure, recommend, convince, conclude...

**ANALYZE**
*Question Cues:* analyze, separate, order, explain, connect, classify, arrange, compare, infer, categorize, survey, pick apart, break into parts...

**APPLY**
*Question Cues:* Apply, complete, show, solve, change, experiment, choose, dramatize, prepare, sketch, utilize, employ, use, make use of...

**UNDERSTAND**
*Question Cues:* summarize, describe, interpret, contrast, predict, explain, estimate, discuss, extend, demonstrate, illustrate, paraphrase, restate...

**REMEMBER**
*Question Cues:* list, define, tell, describe, identify, show, label, collect, examine, tabulate, quote, name, who, when, where, locate, select, state...
**Strategy 2.3: Using Reflection and Journals**

**Reflection**
Reflection refers to any process that a person uses to think critically about their experiences. Writing, reading, speaking, listening, discussing, and presenting are all possible tools for reflection. And reflection can be used with ANY class, activity, club, or experience.

It is in the act of reflecting that a person processes the experience, forms understanding and knowledge from the experience, extends that understanding to other situations, and comes to own the experience and the learning. For example, we are bombarded with experiences and bits of information every day, most of which we ignore or attend to in a cursory way. It is those experiences that “draw our attention,” cause us to “sit up and take notice,” or make us “step back and think” that we learn the most from.

Reflection can be used to:
- help young people think critically about their experiences
- help them make personal connections to their experiences and to their learning
- guide the learning process and deepen or extend the learning that takes place
- integrate activities with academic content and learning standards
- cause youth to think about and internalize the skills they use (such as interpersonal skills, planning skills, work readiness skills, etc.)
- provide a tool for youth to use to self-assess (e.g., what they are learning, what they find difficult, how their group is functioning, etc.)
- help teachers and staff assess student engagement, learning, or group process

Reflection activities and strategies have always been used in education. Students can reflect silently, verbally, or in writing. We recommend that youth programs use journals for reflection as an integral part of the activities. Youth can discuss their reflections and then write ideas in their journals.

**Journals**
Personal reflection involves young people making personal connections with their experiences. This does not require any type of writing or presenting (since personal reflections are meant for the student only) but writing or discussing should be encouraged since it forces students to further process their thinking about experiences.

Keeping a personal journal in which youth are asked to write regularly is one way to structure this type of reflection (and a way used often in after-school and community service–learning programs). These personal journals are a place for students to simply capture their experiences and responses to those experiences, without regard for mechanics or specific learning outcomes.

Another type of journal is a learning journal. This is a place for youth to reflect on their experiences (e.g., work experiences, recreation, a specific class, etc.) and articulate how those experiences help them learn, expand, reinforce, or apply specific learning standards and/or life skills. Learning journals can include:
- Descriptions of the experiences, research, or other tasks done
  What happened?
- Reflection on what was learned from the experiences
  What did I learn?
- Reflection on how that learning relates to formal learning in school
  How does this relate to what I learned in school?
- Reflection on where else in life the youth sees an application of this learning
  How does this relate to my life?

As part of the learning journal, students can also assess themselves, their learning, and their group participation. (Reflect on working habits, group participation, progress on tasks, improvements to be made, places where teacher help is needed, questions that need answering or clarification, etc.)

A third type of journal, which can be kept by individual students or by a group, is a project journal. This journal is used to document the progress of a project or activity, capture and describe learning that takes place, pose questions and concerns that arise, and reflect on the group process.

**One important note:** Youth need to be informed from the outset about whether their journals and other reflections will be seen by other youth and/or staff. Even when youth know their entries may be reviewed by others, they should have the choice to not share (especially entries in personal journals). One way to do this is to have them fold back any page they do not want someone else to read (and then it is very important that the staff or other youth honor that request). This is a crucial point because a climate of trust needs to exist for youth to take part in serious and extensive reflection.
Two Reflection Activities for any Occasion

One: The Three-Minute Pause

The Three-Minute Pause is used as a break in long activities or large sections of content. The Three-Minute Pause provides a chance for students to stop; reflect on the activities, concepts and ideas that have just been introduced; make connections to prior knowledge or experience; and seek clarification. Working in groups, the students have three minutes to do the following three tasks:

1. Summarize Key Ideas Thus Far. Focus in on the key points or major activities.
2. Add Your Own Thoughts. Consider prior knowledge connections they can make. Suggested questions: What does this remind you of? What would round out your understanding of this? What can you add?
3. Pose Clarifying Questions. Are there things that are still not clear? Are there confusing parts? Are you having trouble making connections? Can you anticipate where we're headed?

Two: 3-2-1

This gives students a chance to summarize some key ideas, make personal connections, and then pose a question that reflects where their understanding is still uncertain. In school, teachers sometimes use this strategy in place of the usual worksheet questions on a chapter reading. 3-2-1 can be used later to construct an organized outline, to plot on a Venn diagram, to identify sequence, or isolate cause-and-effect.

Students write down answers to a 3-2-1 (you can also have them discuss answers):
- 3 Things You Found Out
- 2 Interesting Things
- 1 Question You Still Have

Note: You can do different 3-2-1s, depending on the topic and your purpose. For example, if you’re focusing on similarities and differences, you could use:
- 3 Differences
- 2 Similarities
- 1 Question You Still Have

Adopted from Raymond C. Jones’ descriptions:
Strategy 2.4: Using Strategies That Improve Student Achievement

Researchers at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) conducted meta-analyses using research that looked at instructional strategies that could be used in grades K–12. These analyses showed that certain types (or categories) of strategies had a demonstrably positive effect on student achievement.

The researchers — led by Robert Marzano — identified nine such strategies. They translated effect size into percentile gain to show the power of these strategies. For example, the effect size (on average) for a cooperative learning strategy is 0.73. That represents a percentile gain of about 27 points. So, a student with good instruction in cooperative learning would, on average, score 27 percentile points above a student with no instruction in cooperative learning.

It is important to note that the results listed below are averages of a number of studies (only studies in which the variables were independent were used in these calculations). Some studies (and specific interventions) had greater and some had lesser effects.

The nine top strategies — and the percentile gain — are as follows:

1. Identifying similarities and differences 45 %
2. Summarizing and note taking 34 %
3. Reinforcing effort and providing recognition 29 %
4. Homework and practice 28 %
5. Nonlinguistic representations 27 %
6. Cooperative learning 27 %
7. Setting objectives and providing feedback 23 %
8. Generating and testing hypotheses 23 %
9. Activating Prior Knowledge 22 %

Recommended for your library:
Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock, 2001) AND
Example: Identifying Similarities and Differences

One of the chief ways we understand new ideas, procedures, concepts, etc., is by identifying how those things are the same as and different from other things we already know.

Because this is a critical part of building new knowledge, and especially in developing literacy, it makes sense that instructional strategies that help people identify similarities and differences would have the highest impact of all strategies.

Things we can do in our programs include:

- As a teacher/staff person, you can model this strategy by talking about how a new activity is the same as and different from other activities.
  - “Here’s how this new game — 43-Man Squamish — is the same as soccer. Here’s how it’s different.”

- With ALL new activities, procedures, trips, etc., do a comparison (with the previous activity, or with something from school, or with something from the media, etc.). Students could make lists, could discuss, could write about this in their journals, etc.
  - “Now that you’ve heard the rules, make a list in your journals of three ways that 43-Man Squamish is the same as soccer and three ways that it’s different.”

- Give tasks that require students to talk about similarities and differences. This could include:
  - talking about metaphors
  - doing analogies
  - “We’ve talked about how 43-Man Squamish and soccer are related. What other sports have a similar relationship? How would we complete this analogy: Soccer is to 43-Man Squamish as _______ is to demolition derby.”

- Use visual tools to illustrate similarities and differences. Appendix 3 contains blank compare/contrast forms for use in your program or activity.
  - Venn diagram (see next page)
  - “Use a Venn diagram to show visually ways that 43-Man Squamish is the same as soccer and ways that it’s different.”
In all activities:

1. Encourage students to compare and contrast new information with information they already know.

2. Use diagrams to summarize what they have learned or are about to learn.

3. Provide young people with lots of opportunities for practice and processes for measuring the impact of that practice on their performance.

4. Give young people reading materials AND the time to read them.
STRATEGY #3: Involve all adults who work with youth in proactively encouraging literacy

Five Things ALL Teachers, School Staff, Volunteers, Mentors, other Adults Can Do

1. Be a role model
   - Read, write, speak, listen, use computers in the presence of young people.
   - Use literacy to solve problems and complete tasks in the presence of youth.

2. Be a mentor - coach
   - Talk about (show) how you use literacy to solve problems, to get information, and for your enjoyment and personal growth.
   - Think of yourself as the expert in literacy and youth as the apprentices; they are learning a great deal through their “cognitive apprenticeship.”

3. Be a cheerleader for literacy
   - Talk about specific things you’ve read and what you’ve liked, or what you’ve learned, or how it’s influenced you.
   - Be enthusiastic about anything the young person has read, written, done using a computer, or solved mathematically.

4. Be a conduit for materials and ideas
   - Share your reading and technical materials after you’re done.
   - Find time to talk about what you’ve both read.
   - Talk about ideas, inspiration, or learning you’ve gotten from reading, writing, speaking, or listening

5. Be a literacy developer
   - Try to include reading, writing, computers, and math in all the activities you do with young people — contextualize learning
   - Incorporate specific strategies to increase achievement (see earlier discussions).

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6 For example, see the Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI), a program of WestEd focused that uses the Reading Apprenticeship framework: [http://www.wested.org/stratlit/welcome.shtml](http://www.wested.org/stratlit/welcome.shtml); This approach is covered in Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz, *Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms*. Jossey-Bass, 1999