*A District Perspective*

**Scaffolding Text Complexity for At-Risk Readers**

*by Tara Boyer*

We all know that the Common Core for English Language Arts will increase the rigor of academic expectations for our students. We have students, however, who are not achieving at the expectations of the current Ohio Academic Content Standards for English Language Arts. Consequently, questions about the common core exist for teachers. How can we ensure that our at-risk readers are getting what they need so that they can continue to grow as readers, by necessity at more than one grade level per year, resulting in their ability to catch up with their grade- level peers? How do we integrate the common core into the curriculum for our at-risk readers, especially those who read many grade levels below the required text complexity, without frustrating them or hindering their reading growth? How can we give our at-risk readers access to more complex texts?

Perhaps the increased rigor of the common core will help us to eradicate the gap between those students who are reading at grade level and those who are not. Even so, the process will not be immediate. And while I support the common core, I also realize that not all students will be able to read independently at the lowest level of the text bands without scaffolding, let alone at the high end of the text bands.

**Scaffolding Reading Growth for At-Risk Readers**

At Newark High School, we implemented a program for our at-risk readers in ninth and tenth grades. This pro- gram is an essential part of scaffolding for students, scaffolding their reading growth.

Using reading data, the high school places students, some with identified disabilities, into a two-period class that includes direct, or guided, reading instruction. Two teachers, a regular language arts teacher and an inclusion specialist, are in the classroom.

In the first period, students are flexibly grouped by their instructional reading levels and meet several times a week with one of the two teachers for small-group reading instruction. While the small groups are meeting with

the teachers, the other students work independently on writing or reading skills. The groups are flexible, and as soon as a student is ready to move up in a reading level, he or she is moved. The student does not wait for the entire group to move forward.

The second period of the class is a more traditional language arts class. In this period, students work on whole- group novels, poetry, and nonfiction pieces and writing. This program has been in place for 21⁄2 years at our high school, and we have seen very positive results on the state reading test for students who have participated in the program.

In addition to direct reading instruction in language arts classes, the ability of all teachers to teach and facilitate cross-curricular reading strategies in their classrooms will benefit students who struggle with reading. Facilitating literacy strategies in other content areas will also assist in the implementation of the Common Core Literacy Standards for Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.

Finally, a research-based reading intervention program for students identified through response to intervention or another reliable process will provide support outside the student’s language arts class.

**Scaffolding the Common Core for At-Risk Readers**

When implementing the common core, many districts will want teachers to teach whole-class novels that the district, using the text complexity model, has determined are at grade level. At Newark City Schools, we have al- ready begun the task of determining grade levels based on text complexity. For example, using the text complexity model, our district determined that *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins would work best at grade 7. While the text was at a 5.3 reading level according to scholastic.com, the content, genre, and writing task assigned raised it to grade 7 readability. We know that some seventh grade students will be able to read this text easily, but others will not. Our task is to make those texts that are at grade level (and above) accessible to all our students, and we can do that by using scaffolding.

The place to begin is with the student’s reading level. At different points during the year, we need to determine at what grade level each student reads. This can be done with whatever reading test your district uses. By under- standing student reading levels, we have a better sense of which students may struggle with a text.

The text is the next place to focus. Prior to teaching a whole-class novel, we need to determine which chapters are independently accessible, which are accessible with scaffolding, and which are too difficult without extreme support for the at-risk readers. For independently accessible chapters, all students, including the at-risk readers, should be expected to read these chapters on their own.

To facilitate our at-risk readers’ access to parts of the text that will frustrate them, various scaffolding techniques can be employed. The challenging parts of the text fall into two categories:

1. If a chapter (or reading piece) is deemed too challenging for the at-risk reader without some scaffolding, we can support the student in various ways:

* Use small-group direct instruction (guided reading) to help the struggling student access the whole-class novel.
* Make sure that the struggling student is introduced to challenging vocabulary before he or she reads the chapter.
* Create an anticipation guide for that specific chapter to help build a struggling student’s back- ground knowledge prior to reading the chapter.
* Create a graphic organizer to access the information in the chapter.
* Do a class or small-group reading of a short piece (poetry, nonfiction) that will help the struggling student access background knowledge needed for the chapter.
* Work with note-taking strategies to help students access the content.
* Create a short summary for the student to read before he or she accesses the chapter.

2. If a chapter is deemed too difficult without extreme support for the at-risk reader, then we can implement these strategies:

* Allow the student to listen to the chapter on CD as he or she reads along in the text.
* Have the at-risk reader do a shared reading with a peer who is able to access the text, with teacher-highlighted sections so that the accessible parts of the chapter are read by the at-risk student and the more difficult parts are read by the student who is able to access the text.
* If the student has academic assist time (study skills) established through an Individual Education Plan, then determine if the academic assist teacher can give the student direct instruction for the chapter.  **Complex Texts for At-Risk Readers**  To make sure that students who are not reading at grade level have access to complex texts, we have several options. Again, we need to understand the reading abilities and levels of the students. If we know the students’ reading levels, then we can make sure that we stretch the students through differentiating some of the pieces chosen. For example, if the student is in eighth grade and reads at a fifth grade level, then we can try to choose some complex fifth or sixth grade pieces for him or her to read independently when not doing whole-class pieces. Finding texts that are complex, while still at a level where the student can work independently and not get over- ly frustrated and quit, takes time and effort. Hopefully, more resources will become available to assist teachers in making the common core accessible to at-risk readers.  Another way to use complex texts for at-risk readers is to choose short pieces that reach the text complexity level at which the students should be reading. These pieces can be taught as a whole-class activity where we model close reading skills for the students. This will allow at-risk readers to be exposed to texts that are at their grade- level band in complexity, but since they are taught using whole-group instruction, there is less opportunity for the students to reach their frustration level. The instruction can also be differentiated so that those students who need more support receive it, while those who can work independently move forward on their own.

**Raising the Bar**

The Common Core English Language Arts Standards will raise the bar so that, in theory, our students will be more ready for college and the world of work. It is good that we are moving ahead with our expectations for our students—and it’s all the more reason that we keep making opportunities for our struggling readers to achieve.

**Reference**

Common Core State Standards Initiative. *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects,* Appendix A, accessed at http://www.corestandards.org/ assets/Appendix\_A.pdf.



*Tara Boyer was a high school English and history teacher for 17 years at Newark City Schools in Ohio. For the last six years, she has held the position of literacy curriculum coach for the three middle schools and one high school at NCS. Tara has a Ph.D. from Ohio University in curriculum and instruction.*