Reading (and writing) to learn
in the middle years of schooling

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This PEN describes an approach to literacy learning that closes the gap for learners considered 'at risk' in years 5-9, while at the same time accelerating the learning of all students regardless of their starting point. The approach, known as Reading to Learn, has been implemented over three years in the Middle Years Literacy Project of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM). Data has been collected on the progress of over 1000 students in this program and results include average literacy gains that are consistently twice to four times expected rates of development.

The middle years of schooling is recognised as a critical phase in students' lives (ACSA, 1996, Barratt, 1998, DET, 2001). It is a period of rapid physical, emotional and intellectual development when students must juggle the demands of schooling while establishing their own identity and place in the world. While responding to these new challenges, students' engagement in learning and satisfaction with schooling may suffer. Transition problems (primary to secondary) are most severe for low achieving students and there is a significant underachievement problem among young adolescent boys. Students with low levels of literacy achievement have been shown to be most 'at risk' of not completing schooling (Hill et al.,1993).

Intervention for students in the middle years

Literacy intervention programs offered to underachieving adolescents often fail to articulate to mainstream curriculum and assessment practices, or to scaffold students adequately in meeting the literacy demands of an increasingly abstract and specialised curriculum. Literacy failure is frequently attributed to individual deficit and intervention programs, albeit well-intentioned, tend to produce a differentiated curriculum which can compound educational disadvantage and maintain stratified outcomes.

The *Beyond the Middle* national report into literacy and numeracy in the middle years of schooling calls for the development of literacy pedagogy responsive to the specific needs of middle years' learners and emphasises the importance of 'mainstreaming' approaches to literacy in Years 5-9 (Luke, et al., 2003).

To address this issue the CEOM has taken up the *Reading to Learn* professional learning program, and established a successful approach to intervention for adolescent learners as part of its broader Middle Years Literacy Project. The *Reading to Learn* program is an intensive approach to scaffolding student literacy using high quality, age appropriate, mainstream curriculum texts. It redesigns classroom teaching patterns to enable success for all learners. The approach can be used in mainstream or withdrawal contexts, with whole classes or small groups, and it models literate language features in both fiction and factual texts. Furthermore it is capable of extending the learning of the most competent students in the class or group.

Principles of *Reading to Learn*

Reading to Learn is a literacy methodology and professional learning program that has developed over the past decade in Australia, with Indigenous students (Carbines, Wyatt & Robb, 2005, Rose, 2006a) and mainstream classes (Rose & Acevedo, 2006), and internationally (Rose, 2005). The program is based on three core principles:

1. Reading is a fundamental mode of learning in primary and secondary school. Therefore explicit teaching of reading needs to be integrated with teaching the curriculum at all levels, and all teachers need skills to teach reading and writing in their subject areas.

2. All students can and should be taught the same level of skills in reading and writing across the school curriculum so that the gap between more and less successful students narrows, instead of widening over the school years (Rose, 2006b).

3. Learning takes place when teachers support students to do learning tasks that are beyond their independent assessed abilities, thereby allowing for learning activities to be designed to support all students to succeed at the same high level.

Tasks in reading and writing

In order to prepare students for success in learning, we first need to understand the nature of the task we are asking of them. So our starting point for teaching literacy is with the tasks involved in it. Reading and writing are hugely complex activities that involve recognising and using patterns of language at three levels:

- At the level of the **text**, readers must recognise what a text is about and how it is organised, for example, as sequences of events in stories or as chunks of information in factual texts.
- At the level of the **sentence**, we must recognise how words are arranged in groups of words or phrases, and what each word group means, such as who the sentence is about (e.g. Molly and Gracie), what they are doing (went for a walk), where (along the river) and when (after breakfast).
- At the level of the **word**, we must recognise what each word means, and how letters are arranged into patterns that spell the word. That is, we recognise words from both above (their meaning in the sentence and text) and below (their patterns of letters).

To read with understanding, all these patterns must be recognised and interpreted simultaneously. Likewise, to write successfully we must have all these language patterns at our disposal:

- At the level of the **text**, writers must be able to select all the elements of a story or factual text and organise them into coherent sequences.
- At the level of the **sentence**, we must select words that are appropriate to the topic and arrange them in meaningful word groups.
- At the level of the **word**, we must have a variety of appropriate words to choose from and know how to spell them.

Furthermore, the complexity of language patterns in written texts varies between types of texts and subjects in the school curriculum. For example, the language patterns of factual texts in science or society and environment are very different from those in literary fiction, and both are different from the language patterns in arguments and text responses which evaluate issues or literacy texts.

Teaching the whole reading and writing task from the top down

To teach reading and writing, language tasks must be broken down into manageable components so that students can learn them one step at a time. The *Reading to Learn* approach teaches all the components of the reading and writing tasks systematically, from the top down. A text only makes sense if we know something about its topic and how it is organised. This is how we

recognise what is happening at each step of a text, and what to expect as we read it, as well as where we are going as we write.

Likewise a sentence only makes sense in relation to the sentences that come before and after it in a text. If we understand the text, we will have a good idea what each sentence is about. A word only makes sense in relation to the other words in a sentence and a text, so if we understand the text and the sentence, we will have a good idea what each word means.

So to teach reading we start by telling students what a text is about as it unfolds at each step. Then we tell them what each sentence is about, and support them to read and understand each one for themselves by telling them what the words mean. Then we may show them how to recognise and write the spelling patterns in some words, which they know from sentences in the text.

To teach writing we can then build back up, from the words they can now spell automatically, to writing sentences and paragraphs fluently, to creating whole new texts. At the same time, the process involves continual listening and speaking, developing skills in fluency and comprehension. This is achieved by carefully planning classroom interactions so that all students are continually successful and communication never breaks down.


The *Reading to Learn* lesson cycle

The principle of systematically supporting students to succeed with each component of the reading and writing tasks, one step at a time, from the top down, can be applied across the curriculum at all levels. *Reading to Learn* is carefully designed to give all students this support in a six stage teaching cycle.

1. *Preparing for reading* orients students to the topic as it unfolds through the text.
2. *Detailed reading*: the teacher supports all students to read each sentence in a short passage.
3. *Preparing for writing*: students plan exactly what they are going to write, based closely on the passage they have studied in *Detailed reading*.
4. *Joint rewriting*: the teacher supports the class to write

a new text that is patterned on the reading text.

5. *Individual rewriting*: students practise writing a new text using the same patterns as the *Detailed reading* and *Joint rewriting* texts.

6. *Independent writing*: students use what they have learnt from the preceding stages to write an independent text.

1. Prepare for Reading
2. Detailed Reading
3. Prepare for Writing
4. Joint Rewriting
5. Individual Rewriting
6. Independent Writing
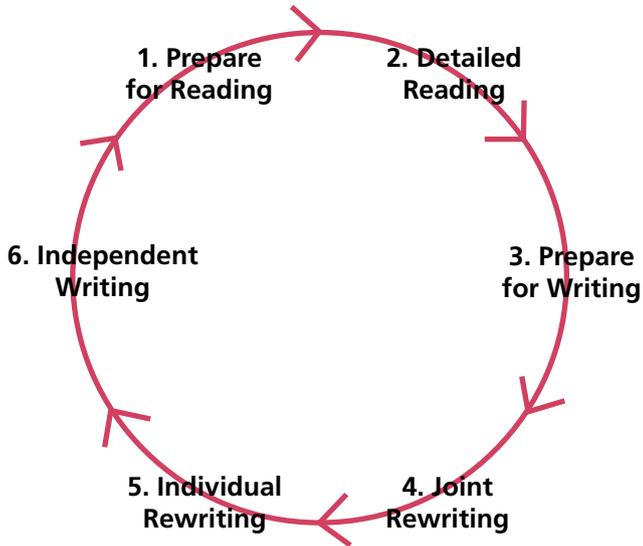
Preparing for reading

Preparing for reading supports all students to follow a text with general understanding as it is read to them. This is done by:

- providing the background knowledge students need to understand the text
- briefly explaining what it is about
- summarising what happens in terms that all students can understand.

This can be done in a few minutes before reading, or it may involve activities that introduce students to a topic in the curriculum. It includes what teachers often already do to prepare students for texts, but it gives more intensive support by telling them how the text unfolds so that all students can recognise what is happening at each step when it is read.

Importantly, *Preparing for reading* means teachers must look closely at the texts we choose to work out what background knowledge the students need, and how the text unfolds.

Detailed reading

Once we have prepared and read the text to the class, a short passage is selected. Students are supported to read each sentence themselves, by telling what each word or group of words means. (We refer to words or groups of words as 'wordings'.)

Students are prepared to read each wording by means of three preparation cues:

- a summary of the meaning of the whole sentence in commonsense terms, which the teacher then reads aloud

- a position cue that tells learners where to look for the wording
- the meaning of the wording in general or commonsense terms.

Students then have to reason from the meaning cue to the actual wording on the page. Students are always affirmed for identifying the wording, which they then mark by highlighting or underlining. For example, the following sentence is from the novel *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*, in the passage in the novel where the three Aboriginal girls are taken from their family. Here the policeman has just appeared at the family's camp: *Fear and anxiety swept over them when they realised that the fateful day they had been dreading had come at last*. This sentence is difficult because it includes two unfamiliar abstract concepts: *Fear and anxiety swept over them*, and *the fateful day*. First the teacher tells the class what the sentence means and reads it. Then she prepares the students to identify the first wording in it, as follows:

Teacher: In the next sentence the family reacts to seeing the policeman. They are so frightened it's like a flood of fear sweeping over them, because they have been expecting this terrible day to come, and they realise the girls will be taken from them. [Teacher reads the sentence] 'Now that sentence starts with the two feelings they had. Can you see what those two feelings are?

Students: *Fear and anxiety.*

Teacher: Exactly right. Highlight *Fear and anxiety*. They were afraid of the policeman and anxious about what will happen to their girls.

The teacher explains the unfamiliar abstract concepts, *Fear and anxiety swept over them*, and *the fateful day*, before reading the sentence. Then the students are prepared to identify *Fear and anxiety* by giving them a general meaning 'two feelings', and their attention is directed to the start of the sentence. This preparation will enable every student to recognise these words and understand what they mean.

Engaging all students in detailed reading

Crucially the teacher starts by giving information to the students, not asking them a question. This is very important for less successful students who

often experience teacher questions as tests that they continually fail. As a result these students can suffer stress that leads to behaviours such as withdrawing from classroom interaction or disruptive behaviour. The problem is overcome by the teacher who first tells the students what the words mean, 'two feelings', and then asks them to find the words in the sentence. This question is not a test of their knowledge but a challenge, to find the words, that every student can succeed at.

Because the students have done the mental work themselves - reading the words from the teacher's meaning cue - they can now read the words with understanding, and can transfer this understanding to similar reading contexts. The teacher is then careful to praise them for their successful answer: 'Exactly right'.

As the preparation enables all students in a class to find the words, it can be directed to specific students in turn, thus ensuring that all students get a chance to answer successfully and be praised. This approach engages all students in a class by giving them continual success and praise. It can rapidly overcome behaviour problems such as withdrawal and disruption by using positive reinforcement rather than behaviour sanctions.

Elaborating

Once the students have successfully identified a wording they are ready to take on higher level understanding. At this point its meaning may be elaborated, by:
- defining technical or literary wordings
- explaining new concepts or metaphors
- discussing students' relevant experience.

For example, in the transcript above, as the students highlight the words *Fear and anxiety*, the teacher explains why they were afraid and anxious. The same cycle of *Prepare, Identify, Affirm* and *Elaborate* is repeated for each wording. These carefully planned interactions between teacher and students are known as scaffolding interaction cycles.

These strategies for *Detailed reading* enable all students in a class to read a passage with complete understanding, and to understand how the author has constructed it, no matter how difficult the text or what the students' starting levels were. Twenty or thirty minutes can be spent on *Detailed reading* in a lesson. Crucially it takes careful preparation by the teacher to plan exactly what wordings to discuss with the students, and how to prepare and elaborate each wording.

Preparing for writing

Once all students can read a passage with fluency and comprehension, they prepare to write a new text that is patterned closely on the passage. There are two approaches to *Preparing for writing*, depending on the type of text:
- Factual texts: students write up the wordings they have highlighted in *Detailed reading*, as dot point notes on the board.

- Stories, arguments and text responses: the class brainstorms new content for a text that will use the same literary or persuasive language patterns of the text they have read. The teacher writes all ideas on the board or on butchers paper.

Joint rewriting

The notes that have been written on the board then provide a framework for students to jointly write a new text on the board, guided by the teacher.

With factual texts, the content of the reading text in the notes is rewritten in wordings that are closer to what students would write themselves, with the teacher providing whatever language resources they need and guiding the construction. While the field of the new text is the same as the original, its language patterns may be less formally written.

With stories, arguments or text responses, the reading text is followed very closely, as the grammatical patterns of each sentence are used with new lexical items (ie., words that carry content meaning). In these cases the field is completely different but the language patterns will be very similar. This provides an extremely powerful scaffold for all students to acquire the sophisticated language resources of accomplished authors.

Individual rewriting

Before students are expected to write independently, a further stage of preparation is provided in which they individually practise rewriting the same text they have rewritten jointly.

For factual texts this may involve erasing the joint text from the board but leaving the notes, which students use for their own text. For stories, arguments or text responses, students now have two models - the original reading and the joint text - to practise using the same language patterns with their own content, which may be partly derived from the earlier brainstorming activity. In both cases more experienced students are able to practise independently, allowing the teacher to provide more scaffolding support for weaker students.

Independent writing

All these stages of preparation enable all students to successfully write new texts using what they have learnt in the preceding stages. This is the task on which students are assessed, whether it is a research task in society and environment, a report in science or an essay in English. The independent task may be in a new field or about a new literary text but it will be the same type of text, using many of the same language patterns that have been practised in the preceding stages. Crucially the teacher can be confident that all students have been adequately prepared to complete the task successfully. Assessments will then provide a clear measure of how successful the teaching activities have been.

Student writing achievement

The following two samples of student writing illustrate the kinds of literacy gains that have been made in the project. They are from a Year 5 student, assessed in the lower band of the class.

The first (see sample below) was written before the program, at the beginning of Term 1. The task was to write an information report about a topic the class had been studying: 'Interschool Sports'. The writing is highly personal and very spoken ('We are there to have fun and there to encourage one another. You should give it your best shot'), with little information about the topic other than a list of sports, so it is not a successful information report.

The second report (see sample below) by the same student was written four months later in Term 2. The task was to independently research and write a scientific explanation of 'Global Warming'. This is a highly accomplished text for an upper primary student, although it includes some minor errors. It is organised in four distinct phases by paragraphs, contains a high level of technical information, and demonstrates a clear and detailed understanding of the topic. It is all the more remarkable as the student has independently read the source texts, identified key information, and used it to construct an original text.

These quantitative and qualitative outcomes are consistent with other evaluations of the *Reading to Learn* program (McRae et al 2000, Carbines, Wyatt & Robb, 2005).

Global Warming

The atmosphere contains many gases which keep the Earth's temperature just right. The suns energy heats up the surface of the Earth. Some heats gets pushed back into the atmosphere but, because of the gases in the atmosphere, some of the heat gets trapped. This causes the Green house effect and Global Warming.

To make electricity you need to burn coal and all the energy goes to make hot water, and other electronic power things in your house. Burning coal realises carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Other pollution happens when people drive (carbon monoxide), cut down trees and run factories.

The further effects of increasing temperatures are likely to increase in storms.(tropical storms depend on the weather).the storms will get worse and then that means, more hurricanes and cyclones will come if we do nothing to try and stop Global Warming. Global Warming also causes the ice caps to melt and oceans to rise.

One possible solution to Global Warming is to plant trees and plants to help suck in the fumes from cars. So that means if we plant more plants and trees and try to stop driving everywhere then that helps Global warming from accruing.

Literacy outcomes

In the CEOM project, students' literacy improvements are rigorously tracked using nationally recognised assessments, such as DART (Developmental Assessment Resource for Teachers) tests, and analyses of pre and post writing samples. Data from the research phase of the project in 2003-2004 demonstrated striking improvements in literacy outcomes for all students, and particularly the 'at risk' groups targeted by the *Reading to Learn* approach.

Analysis of pre and post DART scores, and corresponding Victorian CSF-rated scores, showed that average literacy gains across all schools and classes, and among students from all backgrounds and ability ranges, was consistently more than a CSF level in improvement within approximately three school terms, or approximately double the expected rate of literacy development. Furthermore, 20% of students made gains of two or more CSF levels, or four times the expected rate of literacy development (Culican 2006: 6).

Following the success of the research phase, *Reading to Learn* has become the recommended approach to accelerate the literacy development of 'at risk' learners in the middle years at the CEOM.

Conclusion

In the context of the CEOM Middle Years Literacy Project, the *Reading to Learn* methodology and professional learning program has achieved outstanding results. This has been possible with a combination of highly effective teaching strategies, knowledge about the language demands of reading and writing across the school curriculum, and a professional learning program that gives teachers sufficient support to implement it consistently in their classrooms (See box page 7).

Teachers involved in the project are inspired by their students' high levels of engagement and renewed enthusiasm for learning. All are keen to continue to develop their skills and knowledge in the *Reading to Learn* methodology, and to share it with their colleagues so that all middle years' learners will thrive.

As teachers become highly skilled in implementing the approach in mainstream classrooms using challenging curriculum materials, schools that initially embraced this approach to accelerate the literacy development of their 'at risk' learners have also seen the benefits it brings to even the most capable students.

Until now there has been little evidence of widespread success in 'closing the gap' for students in the middle years of schooling but the results of this initiative attest to the robustness of the approach for students in the crucial middle years of schooling, placing it at the forefront of literacy pedagogy.

Teacher professional learning

To provide teachers with the skills to teach language across the curriculum, *Reading to Learn* focuses on language patterns of texts in each subject area. It draws on two decades of research in the language demands of school, in genre-based approaches and functional linguistics (Martin & Rose 2003, 2007). But it applies this research in innovative practical ways that teachers can use directly for teaching reading and writing in their classrooms.

As part of its Middle Years Literacy Project, the CEOM has designed a system-wide model of ongoing teacher professional learning to develop the capacity to adequately meet the needs of middle years' learners. The program is predominantly off-site and is supported by school visits from a project officer. The program contributes to the learning of all teachers via Professional Action Learning Teams which operate in each school and in local area clusters. These layered professional learning communities interact to initiate, guide and critically evaluate professional practice and research in middle years' literacy teaching and learning.

The project also relies on ongoing teacher data collection and analysis (See *Literacy outcomes* on the previous page).

What the teachers have to say about the impact of *Reading to Learn* on their professional knowledge and practice...

…it has given me a clearer and more tangible way of understanding how language works [and] tools/strategies to reach all students in a way which empowers them and gives them confidence.

…general and detailed preparation of text enables students to identify language features; this assists both fluency and comprehension. Scaffolding also improves student writing and gives a good context for teaching linguistic structures and features.

…it has challenged the way I ask questions in class and opened my mind to the idea that it is okay to give answers at the beginning, rather than have students guess what's in the teacher's head… [it has] increased my confidence in literacy teaching.

…it has shown me the importance of preparation - explaining and exploring the field in detail and being able to give clear elaborations of main concepts.

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Dr David Rose is an Associate of the Faculty of Education and Social Work, and of the Department of Linguistics, and Principal Research Fellow with the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney. He coordinates a large scale action research program in language and literacy, entitled *Reading to Learn*, which trains teachers from junior primary, through secondary to university levels in scaffolding literacy methodology. *Reading to Learn* conducts training programs with state and independent school systems in NSW and Victoria, and in universities in Australia, South Africa and Latin America. David's work has been particularly concerned with Indigenous Australian communities, languages and education programs, with whom he has worked for 25 years, in remote areas in northern and central Australia, as well as in NSW, Victoria and South Australia. He is a speaker of Pitjantjatjara and is a member of the Western Desert Indigenous ceremonial Law.