PREPARING FOR READING AND WRITING

READING TO LEARN
Accelerating learning and closing the gap
ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book introduces the Reading to Learn program, including 1) the R2L model of learning, 2) Strategies for teaching your students to read and write whole texts, 3) Knowledge about pedagogy and language that underpins the program, and 4) Strategies for managing learning.

If you read each section in sequence, and do each of the activities provided, this will give you the foundations to start practising these strategies with your students.
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SECTION 1: WHAT IS READING TO LEARN?

Reading to Learn or R2L is a set of strategies that enable teachers to support all the students in their classes to read and write at the levels they need to succeed. The strategies vary according to the needs of students, their year levels, the subject area, and the kinds of texts they are expected to read and write. But the aim is for all students to be reading and writing at the levels they need to succeed in their grade and subject areas.

Early years
In the first year of school, the strategies support all children to become independent readers and to write successful texts. They use the illustrated story books that teachers read with their classes, to teach all the skills involved in reading and writing, such as comprehension, word recognition, spelling, letter formation, sentence construction and story writing. Because these skills are learnt in the meaningful, engaging context of shared reading books, children can acquire them much faster than through traditional early years activities such as alphabet, phonics and sight word drills. Early years strategies are described in Book 6.

Primary school
In the primary school, the strategies support all children to engage in reading and writing stories for pleasure, to learn from reading and writing factual texts, and to evaluate texts, issues and points of view in their reading and writing. They use texts in the subject areas that the class is studying, to teach skills in reading and writing, at the same time as learning the content of each subject area. They support all students to read and write texts at the same high level, rather than giving them texts at different ‘ability levels.’ In this way they ensure that all students are ready to succeed in secondary school.

Secondary school
In the secondary school, the strategies support all students to learn the content of each curriculum area through reading and writing. They use the texts that students are expected to read in each subject area, to guide them to learn through reading, and to demonstrate what they learnt through writing. They enable teachers to balance the curriculum demands for ‘covering the content,’ with teaching the skills that students need to independently learn the curriculum from reading and writing. They are designed to ensure that all students are well prepared for further education after school. Primary and secondary school strategies are described in Books 1, 2, 5 and 9.

Further education
In further education, including university and vocational education, the strategies are designed to embed skills in reading and writing in teaching and learning the curriculum content. They enable tertiary teachers to support all students in their classes to read academic texts with comprehension, and to use the information they learn from reading to write successful texts for assessment. Strategies for academic reading and writing are described in articles under Further Reading below, and can be downloaded from www.readingtolearn.com.au.

Knowledge about language is discussed in Books 3, 4, 7 and 8.
TRACKING STUDENTS’ LITERACY GROWTH

In the R2L program, teachers track their students’ literacy growth by assessing their writing each term.

The charts below show the results of these assessments. The first chart shows the scores before R2L teaching for the low, middle and high groups in each school stage. The second chart shows the scores for each student group and school stage, after 3 terms of R2L teaching. (The R2L writing assessment is out of a total 42)

At the start of Kindergarten (or Prep), all children’s literacy is near zero, and the gap between low and high achieving students is small. By the start of Yr1/2, the high group are now reading and writing independently but the low group is still near zero. The gap has tripled. This gap then continues throughout the years. The high group stays in the high average range, the middle group in a low average range, and the low group in the failing range, near zero. These are typical patterns across year levels, as experienced teachers all know.

After 3 terms of R2L teaching, average scores in Kindergarten/Prep have risen by 70%, and the gap between low and high achieving groups has halved. In the other year levels, growth is 30-40% (which is double the standard growth rate), and the gap is reduced to 20-30%.

In addition, 80% of students accelerate at 2-4 times average growth rates, and 80% of teachers achieve this growth with their whole classes (Report for Western NSW Region 2010). These are typical results for R2L programs (see Further Reading below).

The R2L Writing Assessment is set out in Book 3.
The model of learning in R2L is central to the power of the program. The R2L learning model is neither “teacher-centred” nor “learner-centred”. It is focused on how teachers and learners interact to build knowledge.

Learning happens through activities that involve a sequence of steps. We call these sequences learning cycles. The main steps in each cycle are Prepare, Task and Elaborate. This model is used throughout the R2L program to analyse and design learning activities.

Learning tasks
The central step in each cycle is the learning task. All learning happens through tasks of some kind. Only learners can do the task, a teacher cannot do the learning for them.

This understanding underlies most teaching practices and theories, whether it is made explicit or not. There is no difference on this point between “teacher-centred” and “learner-centred” theories. The disagreement is about where the knowledge comes from. Learner-centred theories believe that knowledge comes from inside the learner, while teacher-centred theories believe the knowledge comes from outside. In R2L, we believe that knowledge comes through teacher-learner interactions.

Preparing for learning tasks
By definition, a learning task is a task that learners have not done before, at least not successfully. Learning happens when a task is done successfully, and learners are more likely to succeed with a task if they are supported by a teacher. As teachers cannot do the task, they must give the support first, and then hand control to the learners to do the task themselves. We call this first supporting step preparing.

This gives us two roles in the teacher-learner relationship. The learning task is the role of learners; preparing for the task is the role of teachers.

Often in school, preparing and learning tasks are not distinguished. For example, new knowledge may be presented by the teacher demonstrating and explaining. The learners’ task is to watch and listen, which some students may be more able to do than others. Or learners may be expected to “construct” knowledge for themselves without teachers preparing. If the tasks of learners are not understood, or the preparing roles of teachers are not recognised, learners may not be able do tasks successfully.

In R2L, we carefully analyse each learning task, and design our preparations to ensure that all learners can do each task successfully.
Evaluating success

Following each learning task, learners are almost always evaluated on their success. Evaluations in school continually rank students as more or less successful. Evaluations are central to the organisation of the school. A major task of teachers and schools is to continually record and report on students’ evaluations.

Differences in evaluations are often conceived as differences in “learning ability.” More able students are expected to be more successful than less able students. Again there is no difference on this point between teacher-centred and learner-centred theories. In both practices, more successful students may be given higher level tasks, and less successful students may be given lower level tasks. The fashionable word for this is “differentiation,” but this has always been the practice of schools. The result of differentiating learning tasks in the primary school is that children finish primary with different abilities to cope with the secondary school curriculum. The result of differentiated learning in the secondary school is that students finish school with different opportunities for work and further education. As differences in evaluations are conceived as “ability levels,” they are believed to be innate to the child. These beliefs justify the school’s inequality of outcomes.

Evaluation also has a powerful effect on learners’ feelings and identities. Positive evaluations make learners feel good, while negative evaluations make us feel bad. Because they feel good, positive evaluations increase learners’ capacity and motivation for further learning, while negative evaluations decrease learning capacity and motivation. If learners are continually successful and affirmed their learning builds steadily, but if they are unsuccessful and not affirmed, their capacity and motivation is limited, and the gap is maintained. Over time, continual positive evaluations build identities as successful learners, while negative evaluations build identities as failing learners. This is one reason why learning tasks are differentiated, so that weaker students can be successful at their own levels. But this does not help their outcomes in primary and secondary school.

Elaborating learning tasks

Because success with a learning task increases capacity and motivation, the next step in a learning sequence is often a higher level of understanding. We call this step elaborating.

Elaborations contain the goal of each learning activity. They may involve teachers giving new knowledge, or a discussion of learners’ knowledge, or practice applying new knowledge. So elaborations may be the role of teachers or learners or both. If learners have been successful with the learning task, they will be ready for the elaboration, and gain maximum benefit. If they have been less successful they will gain less benefit.

Often in school, elaborations and evaluations are not distinguished. For example, learners may have activities to practise what they have learnt, and at the same are evaluated on their practice. This further ensures that less successful students will gain less benefit from the practice.

In R2L, we aim to prepare learning tasks so that all learners are continually successful and affirmed. As a result, all learners gain maximum benefit from elaborations, so that their knowledge builds steadily. For more information, see Further Reading at the end of this book.
CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS

When we understand learning in terms of tasks, it is easier to analyse what we do as teachers. For example, in school we try to avoid teaching by lecturing, because the tasks of listening, understanding and remembering a long lecture are too hard for most school students. Instead we break up the task of learning by interacting with our classes.

Ask yourself the following questions about your own practice.

- How do you interact with your students?
- What is the students’ task when you ask a question?
- What is the very first thing you do when you get the answer you want?
- Do you just stop with affirming the answer, or do you use students’ responses to elaborate with more information?
- What do you do when you get an answer you don’t want, or no answer?

All teachers all over the world interact with their classes by asking questions. We do not ask questions randomly, but plan our questions to get student responses that we can elaborate with new knowledge. The elaboration contains our teaching goal, the kernel of knowledge we want the whole class to understand. We use students’ responses as stepping stones towards new knowledge. If we don’t get the response we need, we often take a step back and rephrase our questions to get the needed response.

Isn’t this an extraordinary skill? To be continually thinking how to phrase your questions, to get the answers you need to elaborate with new knowledge, moment-by-moment, in every lesson, every day. Where did you learn to do this?

Unequal participation, unequal learning

Now how many students in your classes consistently respond with the answers you need?

Most teachers say 2-3 students, sometimes 4-5. These students have understood our question, are able to infer the answer we want, get our affirmation, and are well prepared for our elaboration. These few students get the maximum benefit from our teaching.

So what’s happening with the other students? We all hope that some are benefitting passively by listening to the exchange, but we know that others are not engaged enough and get little benefit.

We consider this hierarchy of engagement in classroom learning to be a fundamental problem of school education. In R2L we carefully prepare our classroom interactions, so every student can always give the response we want, get affirmed, and be ready for the elaboration. This gives a powerful boost to learning for all students and makes classroom management much easier.