Enhancing Reading Achievement Through Readers’ Theater and Art

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Gardner (2004) powerfully demonstrated the need for involving as many modes of intelligence as can be integrated into the learning environment. Gardner persuasively challenged the long held contention that “intelligence is a single entity and people are born with a certain amount of intelligence.” (p. 29)

Readers’ theater, in light of Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, especially encourages linguistic intelligence, “facility in the use of spoken and written language” (p. 31).

Spatial intelligence and the personal intelligences, intrapersonal and interpersonal, described by Gardner are also engagingly facilitated through strategies involved in readers’ theater. In addition, Gardner described “naturalist intelligence” (p. 36) as intrinsic and intuitive ability to discern what is in nature, literature, and art, which, is encouraged by production of stick puppets and scenery as an integral part of performance reading. Gardner determined that the different intelligences interact and overlap.

Learning to read is enhanced by contributions from all of the areas of intelligence including, for example, “bodily-kinesthetic intelligence” (Gardner p. 35). Although not referred to as a separate area of intelligence, research is visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile approaches to learning (VAKT) through the foundational research of Fernald (1947) and the subsequent research of many others, including Tierney, Readence, and Dishner (1995), appears to be strongly connected with reading achievement for some students.

Parkay and Stanford (2001), based primarily on the work of Swiss biologist and social scientist Jean Piaget, determined that children learn most effectively and efficiently by engaging in physical, social, and academic activity within their environments. Parkay and Stanford further determined that Piaget’s work provided substantial evidence that activity is not only physical manipulation but, in addition, fosters mental action that transforms into creating new, exciting, and permanent learning. Readers’ theater combined with artistic endeavors is a vehicle for positive interventions such as those proposed by Parkay and Stanford.

Vacca, Vacca, Gove, Buskey, Leenhart, and McKeen (2006) determined that art could play a very important part in the reading instruction program. These researchers determined that art experiences heighten children’s awareness of their physical environment while fostering visual and sensory capacities. This awareness, discussed below, apparently has a physiological as well as emotional impact on learning dispositions.

Neurologist turned classroom teacher, Willis (2008), determined that children learn best when they are actively and creatively involved in their learning. This researcher concluded that active/affectively oriented learning increases dopamine, a brain chemical, which enhances learning through a sense of well-being. Further, in this light, Hruby (2009) concluded that while neurophysiologists “envision the brain as an evolved and developing biological system for actively negotiating actual environments” (p. 193) and “cognitive psychologists envision the mind/brain as an information processing system” (p. 193) both neurophysiologists and cognitive psychologists agree that learning...
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Gardner further contended that it is essential that educators/leaders, through engaging positive intervention, actually enhance intelligence. Readers' theater, in light of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, especially encourages linguistic intelligence, "facility in the use of spoken and written language" (p. 31).

Spatial intelligence and the personal intelligences, intrapersonal and interpersonal, described by Gardner are also engagingly facilitated through strategies involved in readers' theater. In addition, Gardner described "naturalist intelligence" (p. 36) as intrinsic and intuitive ability to discern what is in nature, literature, and art, which, is encouraged by production of stick puppets and scenery as an integral part of performance reading. Gardner determined that the different intelligences interact and overlap.

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Fields, Groth, and Spangler (2004) determined that art activities foster the fine-muscle and eye-hand coordination skills that are essential for gaining competence in reading and writing. They also proposed that art activities related to reading accompanied by dramatic interpretation strongly "supports children’s literacy learning, aiding in comprehension and recall of a story" (p. 105). On the other hand, these researchers cautioned that authentic integration of art and reading demands that art and reading activities be complementary in fostering their understanding of the learning task.

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environments must be developed which encourage productive, creative, and positive involvement within a world full of information. Hruby concluded that there is much to be learned about both physiologically oriented and cognitively oriented brainpower. Hruby and Willis (2009) strongly agree that engaging activities enhance cognitive functions and impact positively on the brain. Consequently, these activities encourage a sense of well-being that contributes to learning effectively and efficiently.

Social scientists and educational psychologists have demonstrated the importance of involving learners physically and emotionally, as well as academically, in their learning (Parkay & Stanford, 2001; Bandura, 1997, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). More specifically related to learning to read, McGee and Richgels (2003) determined that young readers must have substantial and enjoyable experiences learning about, experiencing, and testing the match between written words and sounds associated with letters. Learning to associate sounds with letters and groups of letters, the alphabetic principle, is the framework for learning to read. McGee and Richgels described learning to associate sounds with letters and letters with sounds as the “Experimenting Reading and Writing” phase of literacy development. (pg. 21) McGee and Richgels emphasized that this phase is not a stage that either begins or ends at a noticeable time but is gradual. They determined that substantial support from more competent readers and teachers within an interesting and enjoyable environment if reading achievement is to progress satisfactorily.

Rasinski (2003) comprehensively described such support as scaffolding wherein the learner is guided from near or total dependence on the person in the role of leader/teacher to independent reading. Scaffolding starts before reading in order to “activate students’ background knowledge, teaching vocabulary, and making predictions” (Raphael, George, Weber, & Nies, 2009, p. 455). A natural outcome of scaffolding is enhancing the learning of key onsets and rimes which Adams (1990) concluded is essential for developing fluency and comprehension. In addition, Rasinski, Rupley, and Nichols (2008) presented convincing evidence that guided repeated readings of enjoyable text in choral reading settings are natural and very pleasant vehicles for learning rimes and onsets effectively and efficiently.

During the course of a week, for example, the students read the *The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash* (Noble, 1980) several times. The first reading is completed by the teacher with the children following along. The second and third readings might involve choral reading. Choral reading of this story with second graders takes about seven minutes but is occasionally stopped to discuss the story, especially during the first two readings.

Noble’s story is humorous and very entertaining but is also a great resource for teaching young readers about expressive language and conventions of print such as commas, question marks, and apostrophes. The marvelous illustrations by Steven Kellogg provide opportunities to discuss life on the farm and encourage visual literacy. A goal is that each child be able to read The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash independently and fluently. Frequently encourage the children to turn a story such as *The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash* into a readers’ theater production. This occurs after considerable practice. In this context, consider readers’ theater an oral interpretation of a piece of literature read in a dramatic style. In addition, readers’ theater fosters intrinsic motivation, energizes both students and teachers, and stimulates learning (Millin & Rinehart, 1999). Readers’ theater generally follows these steps:

1. Re-read the story aloud in a choral format
2. Convert the story into a script designating parts in play format
3. Assign roles: Everyone in the group must have a speaking part
4. Design costumes, scenery, and props
5. Practice
6. Create a poster advertising the show
7. Perform the readers’ theater for an audience, usually of fellow students, parents, and other school personnel.

Fables, being very short stories and nursery rhymes work especially well with struggling and beginning readers. Other favorite stories are *Pigs* (Munch, 1996); *Thomas’ Snowsuit* (Munch, 1995); *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type* (Cronin, 2000); *My Lucky Day* (Kasza, 2003); *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1996) and any of the *Clifford* books by Norman Bridwell published by Scholastic.

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(Stuart, 1954, 1982) and Old Ben (Stuart, 1970, 1991) set in the southern Appalachian region, are wonderfully appealing stories that are easily adapted to a readers’ theater format. Another short appealing novel is Not My Dog (Rodowsky, 1999).

Extensive but enjoyable practice coupled with scaffolding, almost invariably leads to fluency. In the readers’ theater context, fluency is achieved when the reader demonstrates “accuracy in decoding, automaticity in word recognition, and the appropriate use of prosodic features such as stress, pitch, and appropriate text phrasing” (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003, p. 5).

Through readers’ theater, the production of stick puppets along with other activities for fostering reading fluency and speaking to an audience can enhance achievement in the reading/language classroom in both academic and affective dimensions.

Although potential resources are boundless, teachers may choose to present the activities as used with fairy tales, children’s literature in general, and Aesop’s fables. In this context, fables, as described by Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown (2002), are simple stories “that incorporate characters, typically animals, whose actions teach a moral lesson or universal truth.” (105)

Reading coach, Mr. Matthew, rehearses a puppet play with third graders.

Fables are presented to the students on 110 lb. cardstock in 14 pt. type using the child friendly Century Gothic font on Microsoft Word. The text is placed in a box that is no more than six inches wide so it will fit on the front of a lunch bag. Cover the printed fable with clear plastic adhesive such as ConTact. This is not essential but contributes substantially to durability and keeping the puppets clean. Covering the puppets is especially important if producing a set of puppets for extensive classroom use.

A young puppet maker working on the hare and the tortoise.

Production of Stick Puppets

Characters for the puppets can be found in a variety of online clip-art locations, coloring books, magazines, greeting cards, and children’s literature. Crayons tend to work much better than markers for coloring the figures unless the figure is very small or specific detail is necessary. Production guidelines are presented below:

1. Use white 110 lb cover weight paper to photocopy the puppet outlines. Regular copy weight paper is too flimsy. You can get by with 67 lb. paper, but it is not as durable. If students are drawing their own puppets, use regular white drawing or copy paper and then transfer the drawing for the puppet using a glue stick to the 110 lb. paper or file folders. This is advisable because students tend to make several attempts before settling on a drawing with which they are satisfied.

2. Invite the students to color the figures that will become the puppets.

3. Cover the figures with clear plastic adhesive such as ConTact. This is not essential but contributes substantially to durability and keeping the puppets clean. Covering the puppets is especially important if producing a set of puppets for extensive classroom use.

4. Cut out the puppets. Some students leave space around the edges. For example, it might be difficult to cut around the paws on an animal.
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Leaving spaces does not detract from the overall quality of the stick puppets. A light color can be added around the white space to provide texture to the setting.

5. Using a glue stick, attach the figure to a large craft stick (6 x .75”). The smaller popsicle size sticks are usually inadequate for holding the puppets unless the puppets are very small. Reinforce the placement of the craft stick by placing a piece of tape over the stick and onto the puppet.

Even though there might be several stick puppets for a short production, make it possible for each child to eventually have a copy of the story and all the puppets. Having one set to share does not work well since just about all of the children want the full set of puppets that go with a story. The students frequently report retelling and/or rereading the story at home with the puppets for their parents, siblings, and friends. This rereading is great practice and can be especially helpful for encouraging younger children in the home to appreciate the joys of reading.

Production of the Puppet Stage

All great puppets must have an excellent puppet stage! A durable, convenient, and easily stored puppet stage can be made out of a tri-fold display board. These multi-purpose display boards are typically used for science fair presentations. A good size for placing on a table is 40 inches x 28 inches overall. Boards this size will usually have a 20 inch x 28 inch front panel. Production guidelines are presented below:

1. On the center section of the display board, measure a centered square about 12 inches x 9 inches. The square can be larger or smaller depending on the size of the display board. Use a template made out of mat board to facilitate designating the area to cut out the window of each puppet stage.

2. A knife with a retractable blade works well for cutting the square out of the display board and makes smooth cut lines. A knife with a serrated edge or sturdy scissors will also do the job. Do not be concerned about making precise cuts because you can cover the edges and make them smooth.

3. Cover the board with plastic adhesive such as ConTact. It is much easier for two people to cover the board with the adhesive than for one person to attempt to do it. Cut two full pieces of ConTact 31 inches long and one piece 31 inches by 9 inches. This will be enough to cover the board. The 9-inch wide piece is half the width of the ConTact roll and can be used for part of the covering for another stage.

4. Cover the board with ConTact leaving some over the edges. Turn over the board. Draw a line from the upper right corner of the window to the lower left corner and from the upper left corner to the lower right corner. This makes lines in the form of an X with four triangles. Cut along the lines and then fold over the triangles. This will make very neat and secure window.

5. Fold over the ConTact on the outside edges. It is helpful to trim the edges to avoid excessive overlap of ConTact on the corners. There is a variety of eye-appealing patterns typically found in the shelf liner section of stores. On the other hand, some teachers simply get a plain colored display board, cut out an opening, and are ready to go on with the show.

6. Cut a plain piece of cloth to use as a backdrop so that the puppeteer(s) is not visible. The cloth can be clipped onto the edges of the stage with large paper clips, clothespins, or paper holding clamps. It is very helpful, but not essential, if the cloth is translucent so the puppeteer can make out the outline of the opening but not be visible to the audience.

7. Open the sides to stand up the puppet stage. You might need to place objects such as tape dispensers at the lower inside edges to keep the ends from folding in toward the center. The stage is now ready for your puppet performance!

Performance Reading and Puppet Manipulation

Students are invited to read the scripts with partners. Occasionally, have the students, especially struggling readers, retell the story without the script (Kroskinen, Gambrell, & Kapinus, 1993). The partner(s) might be a fellow classmate, a lead reader such as the teacher, the whole class as in choral reading, or with an older more competent reader (Leland & Fitzpatrick, 1994).

For example, fourth graders might read and make puppets with second graders. Sometimes use all of the strategies
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mentioned above with a group of children. The students then make the puppets as described above. The puppet production, as one can easily imagine, is a delightful undertaking for the students. Backdrops can be drawn by students to complement the story. The students can clip the background drawings to the curtain with large plastic paper clips.

Once the puppets have been completed, the students are invited to work in pairs: one student manipulates the puppets while the partner reads the fable in a readers’ theater format. Practice during the week and have more formal puppet presentations on Friday afternoons. Guests are invited to the presentations, such as the principal, the school librarian, parents, the school nurse, and community members.

Students enjoy taking their show on the road by visiting other classrooms. This is an advantage in having an easily portable puppet stage. Students switch places so everyone gets to be a reader and a puppeteer. The earlier practice encourages reading fluency. In addition, the students are very motivated to “sound good” when reading the script to their classmates. It is not a drawback that the class hears the same story several times. The activity of the puppeteer and the engaging voice of the reader hold the attention of the audience.

Highly talented students enjoy the opportunity to shine. For example, capable students can turn a story into a readers’ theater script and perform for an audience. In addition, they might write their own version of a story for presentation in a six-o’clock evening news format. They usually would have an anchor, reporter in the field, and characters to interview. The flexibility of readers’ theater formats provides opportunities for the weakest of readers but also for the strongest of readers.

In this light, Turner (2009) reported that provisions for gifted students have been greatly curtailed primarily due to economic conditions in many school districts. Readers’ theater, as described herein, provides an opportunity to compensate for special programs for talented students that have been curtailed.

Another highly feasible option is to have more than one reader so that the students can present the fable or other story with different voices. The Fox and the Goat, for example, might have a narrator who would be the main reader and a different student for the fox and another for the goat. In addition, there is a puppeteer who would manipulate the puppets but not have a speaking part. However, the puppeteer would have speaking parts on other occasions.

The strategies involved in using puppets with fables also work very well when students present poems and nursery rhymes. For example, as previously suggested, kindergarten and first grade students might not be ready for reading fables or stories but are ready to make stick puppets of nursery rhyme characters and present nursery rhyme readers’ theater puppet presentations.

Conclusions

Readers’ theater activities described herein present learners with highly positive opportunities for both affective and academic experiences in enhancing literacy competencies. Activities were successfully completed with hundreds of students and Csikszentmihaly (1998) described as flow, wherein, intrinsic motivation is fostered through a state of harmony within the learning environment. The art activities are, as Fields, Groth, and Spangler (2004) proposed, authentically related to enhancing reading comprehension and fluency.

In addition, students have a product they have played a major part in producing. Tangible products and active engagement are especially important in this, the digital age. In this light, Jackson (2008) determined that there is less and less permanence in the lives of individuals in this, the digital era. Building puppet stages, creation of puppets and scenery for puppet shows, and performance of puppet readers’ theater provides a sense of anchoring and community within the classroom. Fostering positive classroom climates through activities such as those described above in a readers’ theater framework contribute enormously to both academic learning and social development while encouraging the building of a community of learners.

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Once the puppets have been completed, the students are invited to work in pairs: one student manipulates the puppets while the partner reads the fable in a readers’ theater format. Practice during the week and have more formal puppet presentations on Friday afternoons. Guests are invited to the presentations, such as the principal, the school librarian, parents, the school nurse, and community members.

Students enjoy taking their show on the road by visiting other classrooms. This is an advantage in having an easily portable puppet stage. Students switch places so everyone gets to be a reader and a puppeteer. The earlier practice encourages reading fluency. In addition, the students are very motivated to “sound good” when reading the script to their classmates. It is not a drawback that the class hears the same story several times. The activity of the puppeteer and the engaging voice of the reader hold the attention of the audience.

Highly talented students enjoy the opportunity to shine. For example, capable students can turn a story into a readers’ theater script and perform for an audience. In addition, they might write their own version of a story for presentation in a six-o’clock evening news format. They usually would have an anchor, reporter in the field, and characters to interview. The flexibility of readers’ theater formats provides opportunities for the weakest of readers but also for the strongest of readers.

In this light, Turner (2009) reported that provisions for gifted students have been greatly curtailed primarily due to economic conditions in many school districts. Readers’ theater, as described herein, provides an opportunity to compensate for special programs for talented students that have been curtailed.

Another highly feasible option is to have more than one reader so that the students can present the fable or other story with different voices. The Fox and the Goat, for example, might have a narrator who would be the main reader and a different student for the fox and another for the goat. In addition, there is a puppeteer who would manipulate the puppets but not have a speaking part. However, the puppeteer would have speaking parts on other occasions.

The strategies involved in using puppets with fables also work very well when students present poems and nursery rhymes. For example, as previously suggested, kindergarten and first grade students might not be ready for reading fables or stories but are ready to make stick puppets of nursery rhyme characters and present nursery rhyme readers’ theater puppet presentations.

Conclusions

Readers’ theater activities described herein present learners with highly positive opportunities for both affective and academic experiences in enhancing literacy competencies. Activities were successfully completed with hundreds of students and Csikszentmihalyi (1998) described as flow, wherein, intrinsic motivation is fostered through a state of harmony within the learning environment. The art activities are, as Fields, Groth, and Spangler (2004) proposed, authentically related to enhancing reading comprehension and fluency.

In addition, students have a product they have played a major part in producing. Tangible products and active engagement are especially important in this, the digital age. In this light, Jackson (2008) determined that there is less and less permanence in the lives of individuals in this, the digital era. Building puppet stages, creation of puppets and scenery for puppet shows, and performance of puppet readers’ theater provides a sense of anchoring and community within the classroom. Fostering positive classroom climates through activities such as those described above in a readers’ theater framework contribute enormously to both academic learning and social development while encouraging the building of a community of learners.

References


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The IRIS Center's Reading Instruction Resources

By Zina A. Yzquierdo and Jason P. Miller

Abstract

The IRIS Center, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), is a technical assistance and dissemination project whose goal is to create and disseminate free, high-quality online resources about struggling learners and students with disabilities. These materials are primarily intended for college and university faculty who prepare pre-service school personnel, and professional development providers who conduct in-service training for practicing educators, though they are also available for anyone who would like to access them. The Center's most widely used products, its STAR Legacy Modules, are interactive training enhancements that translate research about effective instruction—including reading techniques and interventions—into practice. The content that makes up these modules is arranged in small informational chunks so that users can more easily come to an understanding of fundamental principles. Interactive activities are likewise used to help reinforce the content. This article summarizes the many materials on reading instruction available through the IRIS Web site (http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu) as well as a description of the theoretical framework upon which the IRIS STAR Legacy modules are built.

The IRIS Center's Reading Instruction

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the IRIS Center for Training Enhancements produces free, online resources on evidence-based practices for use with struggling learners and students with disabilities in K–12 inclusive settings.

Resources

The IRIS Center is most recognized for its STAR Legacy Modules, resources that present information in a technology-driven format (i.e., the STAR Legacy cycle). This paper will introduce the Center's resources related to reading instruction—including STAR Legacy Modules and case studies related to reading instruction—all of which...