Helping Struggling Readers Track Their Own Learning Growth

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Abstract

This is a classroom strategy that helps the student become responsible for their own learning.

Have you ever been in a classroom where your struggling readers say, "This is stupid" or "I don't know anything anyway, I'm dumb?" These statements, made by struggling students validate that the affective side of learning is a powerful determiner on how struggling students' approach learning and show just how discouraged they are with the reading/learning process when they are asked to work at a frustrational level.

However, effective teachers have long recognized that attitudes, activating prior knowledge, peer discussion and summarizing are activities that support struggling readers as they learn to read (Alderman, 2003; Bandura, 1997; Bandura, Schunk, 1981; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997/2007; Rosenblatt, 1969, 1978; Wang, 2000). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to share an old strategy, the KWL, which was modified and used in a new way (see Appendix A). This new way provided a means for students to track their own learning growth, which in turn changed their attitudes toward learning. This is an important step, as the common core standards state that students are to work toward meeting expectations so they are prepared to enter college and/or the workforce (Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association, 2010).

Common Core

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA) created the Common Core Standards (CCS) to help insure that all students were college and/or career ready no later than the end of high school. According to CCSSO and NGA, the Standards are: "(1) research and evidence based, (2) aligned with college and work expectations, (3) rigorous, and (4) internationally benchmarked" (p. 3). The Standards state that those students who are ready for college and/or career have mastered the following literacy skills:

They demonstrate independence.
They build strong content knowledge.
They respond to the varying demands of audience, task purpose and discipline.
They comprehend as well as critique.
They value evidence.

They use technology and digital media strategically and capably.
They come to understand other perspectives and cultures (p. 7)."

In addition, the Standards support having good oral and written communication skills and reading both widely and deeply.

Struggling Readers

Reading matters. As Stonovich (1986) explained more than two decades ago, when he developed the idea of the Matthew Effect, reading begets reading. Being able to read well supports cognitive growth (Vygotsky, 1986), which in turn impacts a readers' self-esteem and motivation to learn (Stanovich, 1986).

Thus, instruction for struggling readers needs to combine multiple strategies. They should promote both positive attitudes and meaningful learning while

developing the needed skills to become independent learners. Thus, programs should contain multiple features that not only focus on meaning, but also allow for learning through peer interaction because as students work together and discuss their ideas, they construct new meaning and at the same time improve their literacy skills (Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Walker, 2003).

Instructional Strategies for Struggling Readers
Teachers look for instructional strategies for struggling readers who appear to be "turned off" or "tuned out" to help motivate and to improve their literacy skills (Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003; Headley & Dunston, 2000; Ruddell, 1999). This was my motivation as well. Reflecting on how to help these students, various strategies were revisited that I felt promoted content learning as well as had a focus on building student's self-esteem. Because I was working in a reading room, I had flexibility in how I taught. I decided that I would teach reading and writing skills through content area material and developed lessons around content topics that were being taught by the various content teachers my reading students had.

In the beginning, the K-W-L was used in a literature circle format using both interactive read-alouds and silent readings. The K-W-L is a before, during, after comprehension strategy (Ogle, 1989). It encourages students to not just answer questions but to develop their own question, thus showing struggling readers that they must do both while reading in order to become effective readers (Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003). The literature circle activities provided time for discussion of the reading material (Daniels, 2002; Taylor, Pressley & Pearson, 2002), as well as encouraging oral language development while students were sharing, reflecting, and summarizing their understanding of the text. The interactive read-aloud allows teachers to model how they think while reading the text. These three strategies were chosen because they not only helped to build a positive attitude toward learning but provide for more active participation while focusing on making meaning from the text.

Promoting Positive Attitudes and Meaningful Learning
First, I had to borrow a social studies' textbook from the content teachers, so I could explore topics that were being taught to the students. Even though the social studies textbook was chosen to teach reading, this could be done with any content textbook. Next, a list of topics was created by examining the textbook's table-of-content.

The lessons began with several topics the students had already covered as I had hoped to make the learning process go more smoothly. However, that did not happen as the students had not learned the content and were actually making a D or F in their content subjects. I worked with the students on several topics they had already done while learning the process and later moved to topics the students were currently studying in their content so they would be exposed to the topic at least twice in the hopes that this strategy would help them with their social studies grades. In addition, the students studied the people associated with each topic (e.g. Slavery, Civil War) in the hope that finding out what people did would help to motivate the students to learn about something they thought was boring. Thus, the topic might be slavery but some of the people the students read about included Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown as well as subtopics like the Underground Railroad, the Missouri Compromise, and the 13th Admendment.

As the daily lesson plans are read below, it must be remembered that these procedures were done in a reading class which contained roughly 65 minutes per class session and 10-15 students. In addition, it must be noted that when the K-W-L procedure was first introduced, it took several class sessions to complete, as the students were not familiar with the strategy. The basic procedure is as follows:

Step 1: Day 1 Lesson
1. First, each student received a blank KWL chart (8 ½ x 11). As seen in the appendix, the "K" column was divided into half for the students to write both facts and important people, the "W" column was divided into half for before questions and during questions, while the "L" column remained the size of the paper. In addition, several large chart papers were prepared which contained the same KWL chart. These large charts were used for modeling purposes, but this could be done on a SMART board today. It was explained to the students that each column represented something that good readers do but the focus would be on the "K" column to determine what they already knew about the subject that was being discussed. It was further explained that this step required them to brainstorm or think about what they already knew about the topic from other grade-level classes, books they had read, or something they had heard. In addition, the students were informed that it did not matter how much or how little they wrote, but they were encouraged to think about the topic and to write for 3 minutes.

Student Reactions: This met with limited success. There were some students who stared into space or out the window or just sat there. While the students were writing, I modeled the procedure by writing

several facts and an important person into the "K" column on the chart.

Next, the written ideas were shared using a whole group discussion format. During this phase, the students were asked to put down their pencils and to just listen to what other students knew about the topic that they did not. As each student shared the information written in their "K" column, the statements were summarized and written on the chart paper and followed by the student's name that submitted the information.

Students Reactions: The students appeared to be amazed at the different knowledge each one possessed on the same topic. Thus, the assignment was stopped and we discussed how our experiences shape our understanding. The students were also asked whose knowledge was more important. It took several sessions for the students to figure out that they all had good information; it was just different but still a part of the whole.

2. To address the "W" column, I returned to the whole group instruction format and explained that good readers both answer and ask questions, as the questions set a purpose for reading. Therefore, as a group before reading began, several questions were created. First, a discussion occurred about how ideas are formed for questions. We then decided that the best two places to look were at the class "K" column and to scan the chapter in their social studies text that dealt with the topic looking at pictures and bolded print. Continuing as a group, we took some time and developed three-four questions. (It should be noted that I helped the students form one question that could not be answered by reading this text.) As I wrote the questions on the KWL chart paper, the students wrote our developed questions into the top-half of the "W" column. The students were told that they had to develop at least two questions on their own as they were listening to the text. These questions were to be written in the bottom-half of the "W" column.

3. I read the text to the students while they followed along in their books the first several times as I wanted the students to listen to the text and concentrate on answering the before reading questions or the developing of during reading questions. I stopped reading at the end of each subheading and as a whole group we discussed and summarized the reading. Next, the students determined if they could answer any of our questions and if they needed to develop any new questions. As the class found the answers to their questions, the students wrote the answers in the "L" column and numbered the response using the question number in the "W" column. They also put the page number to verify where they heard (seen) the answer. This continued until the end of the section being read (normally 3-5 pages).

Student Reactions: All the questions were answered but one. A great discussion followed but it was the consensus of the students that we needed to read more in order to find out the answer. Of course, there were many moans and groans. This was the end of the first day.

Step 2: Day 2 Lesson

1. The second day the students within the class started the process over again with the same topic. The students received another blank KWL sheet. They were encouraged to think about what was learned yesterday about the topic and then they were given 3-minutes to write what they wanted to about the topic in the "K" column.

Student Reactions: Today, I noticed that most of the students started writing right away. After the three minutes of writing, I asked the students to count how many different pieces of knowledge they wrote and put the number by the "K" and circle it. The students were then directed to go back to the "K" column on their first KWL, which was done yesterday and count the information in the "K" column. The students were then asked, "So did your knowledge grow"? For those students who wrote nothing the first day, their knowledge growth was larger than those students who had written something, but everyone had knowledge growth. Thus, I was able to congratulate everyone on learning something new, as they had all written one to four statements in today's "K" column more than yesterdays.

2. Once again, the students were asked to put down their pencils and share their written statements. This time, however, when the students shared their statements, I had them tell me where they learned the information – the text or someone else. This was also modeled for them, as I continued to fill-in the big KWL chart during class sharing.

3. Next, the class designed questions and again I helped them develop one question that I knew could not be answered by today's readings. Once these were developed, they wrote them in the top-half of the "W" column of their second KWL.

4. I read aloud another section of the textbook, stopping at each subtitle for class discussion, summarizing, answering questions and creating new questions if need be. New information as well as answers to the questions were written in the "L" column and if need be on the back of the page.

This process was continued, using various social studies topics for three months – one topic per week. Each day, the students received a new KWL chart handout and each day they compared what they had written in the "K" column with yesterday's response in the "K" column. On Friday, they compared their final "L" column to their Monday's "K" column. Comparing gave the students a chance to see their growth and grow their background knowledge (Erwin, 1991).

Changes over Time

As the students became familiar with the process, more text exploration was added. As the topic each week stayed the same and the social studies textbook had a limited section on the topic, we started reading old sets of encyclopedias of various years to compare the information, children's literature books, and conducted various internet searches. As a result, the students were growing their understanding from various texts and view-points, which is supported by the common core standards. This helped them to go into their social studies classrooms and actually participate in class discussions and do better on tests which helped to build the students' self-esteem and motivation for learning. In addition, many of the students on the third semester report card received a B or C instead of the D or F they had received at the end of the first semester.

Conclusions

This was a powerful and motivating experience for most of the students. This was the first time that most of the students had visually seen the growth of their knowledge. They could no longer say they were dumb, or that they did not understand because they "saw" through their number count that they had indeed learned about the topic and not only from the text and informational readings but from each other.

This activity not only built students' self-efficacy, it built their understanding of literacy skills and their social studies knowledge. They became more engaged, retained more information and actually enjoyed the learning process, even though there was a slow start. At the end of the semester these students were not only scanning the text to create before questions but they were reading the text with the understanding that it was okay to ask questions while they read. This activity supports the Standards, as they state "all readers should read informational text independently and proficiently" (p. 10). However, this activity also shows that reading well independently cannot be done until students/readers believe in their own abilities. One's self-efficacy in their ability to read and to comprehend what they are reading is important in the learning process. This idea is supported by Rosenblatt (1969) when she talked about the important of connecting cognitive (efferent) learning and affective (aesthetic) factors such as self-efficacy and motivation. It is doubly important to combine the two for struggling readers.

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Appendix A
Modified KWL
Szabo, 2012

Write the Topic: _____
Circle the Day: M T W Th F

K	W	L
What do you already know about the topic?	**What do you want to know?** This gives you a purpose for reading.	**What did you learn?** These are the answers to your questions, and where you found them, as well as anything else you have learned. You may not find the answers to your questions in order, thus put the question number by the answer
Count your knowledge phrases. _____		
Facts you know:	Before Questions 1. 2. 3. During Reading Questions: 1.	3. answer & put page were found; put a * on information learned but did not answer a question 1. answer & page found 2. answer & page found
People you know that are involved with the topic	2. 3.	* new information