

From No to Yes!—A CTE Teacher’s Journey into Literacy Instruction

By Susan Ziemba and Peter Gagnon



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Pre-game Jitters: Why Aren’t Students Ready?

Gagnon’s journal, written about his experiences during the mentor training, began with the frustration often expressed by CTE teachers whose students arrive without requisite literacy skills:

I have taught automotive technology for 13 years, feeling frustrated with students struggling with basic skills. Why are they taking my class? Shouldn’t they already be able to read and write? You have to be able to read to fix cars. There is no way around it.

How, he wondered, will they pass stringent national certification tests or be employed in competitive workplaces? Who will teach them these skills?

Warming Up: If Not Me, Then Who?

Gagnon wondered if providing literacy support could or should be part of his job:

Reading and writing are not a priority to my students. Most have been unsuccessful in learning for some time. I wanted to learn how to use my “vehicle,” automotive technology, to help students learn how to learn. So off I went to see what the gurus knew about this literacy thing. I wore my boots, but I kept an open mind.

I first met Gagnon as he and other CTE mentors-in-training arrived for my first workshop, wary about what the training would entail. I began, “21st century technical jobs require high literacy levels, yet most students don’t arrive with these essential skills to your CTE courses, right?” Heads nodded. “So whose job is

it to teach reading, writing and critical thinking to them?” The silence was defiant. They knew I’d say it was their job. Why else were they here? Gagnon recalled this moment:

I readily admit I thought literacy was the high school’s job. I already had enough to do. If I had to teach kids to read, then the high school needed to teach them how an engine works. Fair is fair, right?

The new mentors relaxed when I shared my story of teaching high school English in the 1970s and then quitting, as no one had taught me how to teach secondary students how to read. Fast forward 30 years and our schools and universities still knew little about supporting adolescent readers. “The good news,” I said, “is that recent research identifies many literacy strategies that work effectively for adolescents.” The day passed quickly as the mentors learned strategies and instructional practices that support literacy learning:

- Build on student strengths—their interest in CTE topics—while helping them manage their weaknesses as readers and writers.
- Explicitly teach. Model. Show students what a good reader does.
- Use “gradual release of responsibility instruction” to transfer strategy use to students.
- Be patient. Literacy learning takes practice.
- Give feedback. Recognize successes.
- Show students you, too, are a lifelong learner.

The Game Begins as the Mentors Step up to the Literacy Plate

Gagnon noted in his journal that literacy strategies were easy to learn. Then why didn’t students use them?

It seemed my students had never been taught, or had forgotten, how to learn material. They had been told to read and remember things for the test, but they lacked academic “learning” skills. Yet they can learn about things they want to. They demonstrate that every day in the shop. They want to and can learn about the automobile and how to repair it. They adapt very well to CTE instruction. It is relevant to them. They see direct results and feel immediate gratification from the skills they learn.

The strategy toolbox: anticipation/reaction guides to stimulate inquiry; problematic situations to set reading purpose; text structures to support comprehension; think-pair-shares and think alouds to develop thinking. As the mentors caught on, implementation ideas spilled forth: “Give students choice in what they read while they try strategies.” “Use authentic audiences like other students or employers to engage them in writing.” “I’m going to apply strategies to equipment on the shop floor.”

Everyone laughed over a parable of a rabbit, removed from his favorite running class to take remedial swimming which he disliked and couldn’t pass. But the message was serious. They knew their students often feel like caged rabbits in school. As the mentors selected strategies to try in their classrooms, one joked that having choice of which strategies to try made him feel less like a rabbit already! Gagnon agreed:

The strategies we were given would enhance what we do, but wouldn’t tell us what to do. Some were hits, some were misses. We went back to the mentor group and gained feedback from people in “our” type of education. No learning was force-fed. Buy-in came because

mentors saw the strategies working for our students. Students bought in because they saw the strategies working for them.

The Batter Hits a Double!

Gradually, other mentors’ attitudes toward literacy instruction shifted as they moved through the change process of forming, storming, norming, and performing. In the forming stage they listened with an undercurrent of “prove it.” During storming, they protested: “These strategies don’t work in my program area.” “I didn’t have time.” “Students want hands-on learning and resent having to read, write, think.”

In the norming phase, several were enthusiastic: “I can’t believe it, students enjoy this.” “They asked if we could use the strategy again.” In the final workshop, everyone shared classroom successes in the “performing” stage: “I was asked, ‘Why did it take 12 years for a teacher to help me understand that I’m able to learn?’”

Rounding Third Base and Heading to Home—Scoring a Run!

Conversations were intense and collaborative at the follow-up summer literacy institute as mentors presented the literacy strategies to peer groups. They shared their experiences and successes with coding, discussion webs, visual organizers, Bloom’s thinking prompts, quick writes, group summarizing, and triple-entry vocabulary journals.

Learning to be a literacy mentor has shown me a new paradigm. I can use my automotive area, not to teach kids the basics of reading or writing, but to enhance what they already know. I won’t say that the whole fog bank disappeared, but the lighthouse was sure turned on. Once we, as instructors, became more comfortable with implementing the strategies, we were able to get more from them for the student. We learned that a little work up front getting ready for the strategy paid off in big dividends afterward.

Institute participants queried, argued and responded: “How did you find time?” “What strategies worked best for boys?” “What books can I buy to learn this stuff?” “How’d you get to be a mentor—I might like doing what you’ve done.” In September, mentors found starting the year with literacy support strategies increased student buy-in. Literacy in the shop was no longer an add-on, but became an automatic habit for students throughout the course. Strategies began to make more sense. Lesson planning was easier. Learning was faster. Less time was spent on review.

Your students can soar with their strengths in CTE programs while learning to develop the literacy skills to improve as readers, writers and thinkers. Join the literacy journey and help the rabbits run! **T**

Resources for Literacy Integration

- Bottoms, G., & Sharpe, D. (1996). *Teaching for Understanding: Integration of Academic and Technical Education.*
- Hammerman, E., & Musial, D. (2007). *Integrating Science, Mathematics and Literacy.*
- Meltzer, J., & Ziemba, S. (September 2006). “Getting School-wide Literacy Up and Running.” *Principal Leadership.*
- Phillips, M. (2005). *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals.* National Association of Secondary School Principals.
- Public Consulting Group’s Center for Resource Management. *CTE Literacy Works! Program.*

Susan Ziemba
is an adolescent literacy specialist with Public Consulting Group’s Center for Resource Management in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. She can be contacted at sziemba@pcgus.com.

Peter Gagnon
is an automotive technology instructor at the Bath Regional Vocational Center in Bath, Maine. He can be contacted at pgagnon@bathpublicschools.com.