

*Literacy at the Crossroads, pp. 120-130.*

## **8. Motivating Learners Through Literacy Work Stations**

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*This paper discusses the development and use of independent literacy centers, or work stations, in the primary classroom. The implementation of work stations encourages student choice, cooperation and the development of oral language. Types of stations, activities and materials for each, and how to manage them effectively, are included.*

In the United States in recent years, there has been a shift in how the language arts are taught, due to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. This legislation promotes five areas as the keys to good literacy, or, more specifically, successful teaching: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. These areas are said to be 'research based' and, as a result, other very important areas that assist learners in literacy development are no longer emphasised in many U.S. classrooms. These include oral language development, literary experiences, and connections between reading and writing (Stewart, 2004).

In talking to teachers since the passage of the NCLB Act, I have noticed the increasing stress they are under to be 'accountable' through 'research based' practices and high-stakes testing. This has led to teachers feeling pressured to teach only what is prescribed in the reading programme purchased by their school districts (R. Martinez, personal communication, Sept. 2003, J. Gold, personal communication, Jan. 2004; L. Bonales, personal communication, April, 2006). As a result,

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traditional classroom learning centres are often under-utilised, or even abandoned. This does not need to be the case, as the use of such centres is rooted in research.

### **LITERACY STATIONS REFLECTING RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICE**

Developmentally appropriate practices for the teaching of reading that are research based are articulated in the joint position statement adopted in May, 1998 by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Practices that include whole group instruction and drill focusing on isolated skills (often found in pre-packaged language arts curricula) are “not particularly effective for primary-grade children, (and) are even less suitable and effective with preschool and kindergarten children.”

As a result of the standards movement in the U.S., teachers now need to make sure they cover mandated curriculum without narrowing their teaching focus to the areas on standardised, high-stakes tests. One way is to use literacy stations that can provide reinforcement of skills taught and a choice of activities, and can enable the teacher to work with small groups for direct, differentiated teaching.

Using centres, or literacy work stations (Diller, 2003) in the language classroom can be very beneficial in motivating students to practice a rich variety of literacy skills, including, but not limited to, the five areas emphasised by the NCLB legislation. Students are motivated by being given a variety of interesting, developmentally appropriate literacy activities to choose from at several stations set up throughout the classroom.

### **LITERACY STATIONS MAKE SENSE**

Literacy stations can be used at nearly any level, not just the early primary grades. Stations can provide extra language arts support for students for whom English is a second or additional language. Children work with their peers in the stations, and have the opportunity to use more oral language than they often do in a regular classroom setting as they

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interact with each other. They also have the chance to choose from a variety of tasks, and to work independently with a partner or in a small group.

During language arts instruction, the teacher instructs a small group of students, while the other students go to one or more stations instead of doing more traditional 'seat work' activities in isolation at their desks. The difference with stations as opposed to traditional centres is that each station contains a variety of activities that focus on one specific area of the language arts. Developing the initial stations takes more planning time than using a worksheet-driven curriculum, but once a literacy station is in place, it is easy to keep fresh by using common classroom activities and materials.

### **TEACHING INDEPENDENCE AND ENCOURAGING CHOICE**

One of the benefits of using stations with your regular language arts curriculum is an increase in independence and giving children choice, which is useful for differentiating instruction. If there are a variety of activities in a station, children at all levels of achievement can participate (Morrow, 2005).

Both teachers and students can sometimes have trouble using literacy stations effectively. In my experiences, both as an elementary teacher implementing stations in my own classroom, and as a teacher educator observing in classrooms, challenges teachers face in implementing stations is to keep them fresh and give up teacher control. Students who are used to being directed in all learning activities may have trouble making choices and working independently. By using the Top Ten List below, you can avoid these problems. It is especially important to introduce each activity before putting it in a station, remind students of station rules frequently, use known activities so that students do not keep coming to you for help, and follow the 'one strike and you are out' rule.

## TOP-TEN LIST FOR DEVELOPING LITERACY STATIONS

1. Use activities that have been practised with the whole class several times.
2. Introduce each activity to the whole class before putting it in a station.
3. Have a few clear rules that you reinforce *every* time you demonstrate an activity for a station.
4. Use the ‘one strike and you are out’ rule (Diller, 2003) in which students know that, if they break a rule, they will have to return to their seat and work alone.
5. The activities should be active, *thinking* activities, not worksheets.
6. Have a variety of activities and materials available at each station, but do not put out more than one new activity at a time. Try including 3-6 different activities per station, depending on space constraints and student abilities. Include activities at different learning levels and include a mix of individual and pair work.
7. Rotate activities in and out of a station (one or two a week) to keep things interesting, or add different props, pens, stamp pads etc.
8. The number of children at each station should be between 4 and 6.
9. Have a monitoring system in place. You do not want to have to get up from the small group you are instructing to check that kids are on task. Some advocate using specific, regulated time blocks (King-Sears, 2005), while others find a simple in-box for finished work at each station is sufficient. Just make sure that children are accountable in some way for the work they do during station time.
10. Stations are for all students, at all levels, not just for kindergarteners or children who finish early. They are an integral part of the regular curriculum.

## **ACTIVITY VARIETY KEEPS STATIONS EASY TO MANAGE**

An obstacle for some teachers when developing stations is designing activities and gathering materials. Often, teachers will place one activity in each station, and expect all students to do that activity. This can be problematic for several reasons. First, children in a typical classroom are at different learning levels, so a single activity in a station will not reach all the learning levels in a class. The second problem is the teacher is burdened with figuring out a new idea every week, or even every few days, as students rotate through the stations.

It is important when developing literacy stations to avoid making your stations teacher-intensive. If you have used single-activity centres in the past, you had to come up with a new activity idea every few days. Having a choice of activities available in each station takes care of this problem. And making sure you first introduce activities to the whole group (and have students work on them a few times together with your guidance) prevents the students from interrupting your small group for clarification. Include clear, simple written directions for each activity in a station as a reminder, and go over them as you introduce each activity. Be sure all students can see the directions, and write them at the lowest reading level possible.

## **CLASSROOM SPACE**

Keeping in mind the Top Ten, and the idea of keeping things simple, you don't need to dedicate a section of your classroom for the stations area. The bookshelves where you keep free-choice books can form the basis of your reading station, and the word-wall should be part of your writing station. Which station should your classroom computer(s) go in? If you have several, designate some for the writing station and one for the reading station. A good station for lower primary classrooms uses Big Books, where children practice a variety of literacy work ranging from letter identification to alphabetising. Try looking at your classroom with a fresh eye, asking yourself: "Where can I set up a set of directions and materials?" or "What areas of my classroom can I easily use in multiple ways?"

## ACTIVITY IDEAS

The following are suggestions for multiple-activity literacy stations. Some teachers might wish to include a math and a science station as a way to encourage writing across the curriculum. Many of the ideas that follow can be adapted for different ability and grade levels.

### Reading station

Students generally read more when they can choose what they want to read, yet little time is spent in free choice reading in most schools. Keep a variety of trade books, comics, magazines and newspapers available in your reading area. Consider administering interest surveys to each student so you know what they are interested in, and put reading materials with these topics in your reading station.

- ❑ Accountability should not be cumbersome. The main goal of this station is to have students *read*, not write reviews or summaries. A simple reading log, with date, book title and pages read, can suffice.
- ❑ Include a list of activities on a wall in the station such as: *read with a friend*, *write questions/words you don't know as you read*, *read something on a new topic*, *read a book by an author you've read before etc.*
- ❑ Make this station as comfortable as possible with rugs, soft furniture and floor pillows. Think of where you read for pleasure: very few of us sit in a hard, straight chair at a desk to read.
- ❑ Display a book of the day and/or read aloud a portion of an interesting book as school starts to stimulate interest.
- ❑ For poor readers, visually impaired, English Language Learners or any child interested in exploring reading in a different medium, try the *International Children's Digital Library*. This free website has a variety of books from all over the world. Readers can review a book, then download it for reading on a computer or print it for a paper copy. This is a good resource for locating children's books ranging from rare books in the U.S. Library of

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Congress' collection to those published around the world and in languages other than English. (<http://www.childrenslibrary.org>)

### Big book station

This idea came from Debbie Diller's excellent book *Literacy Work Stations: Making Centers Work* (2003). Diller separates big books from the reading station for Kindergarten to Grade 3 and uses them for specific task such as:

- ❑ Reading aloud using a pointer
- ❑ Reading to a friend
- ❑ Finding known words in a text, writing them on a list, framing them with a cut-out shape, or underlining them with post-it tape
- ❑ Listing unknown words and asking a friend what they mean, trying to figure out what they mean, alphabetising them etc.
- ❑ Using big books for dramatic play, such as Reader's Theatre or a felt board.

### Listening station

This station is a little different from the others in that all students will be working with the same materials (unless you have personal listening devices). Remember to keep activities *active* and not just have your students listen to a story. What do you want them to *do* as they listen? A variety of activities before, during and after reading should be included.

- ❑ Before reading, students can write one prediction on a card along with their name, then turn it over. After reading, students then compare their predictions with each other and the book.
- ❑ Have students set a timer for 5 minutes. When it goes off, students can pick question cards to answer some of the following, either orally or in written form: Who is the main character? Where is the story taking place? What is the problem the main character has? etc.
- ❑ At the end of the story, listeners can do such activities as develop a character portrait of their favourite (or least favourite!)

character, write an alternative ending, or compare the story with another one written by the same author. Post-reading activities can offer choice, even when students listen to the same story.

- ❑ Teachers tend to use the listening station for younger children, but audio books should be available for higher grade students as well. This can be particularly helpful for older students who struggle with grade level reading.
- ❑ If you are having trouble finding the books on tape or CDs that you want, you can build up your listening library by having volunteers make recordings of books.
- ❑ A variation of the listening station is to have students tape-record and listen to their own recordings, with activities geared to developing prosody, or reading with expression.

### **Reading plus listening**

For struggling readers, or to provide variety for other students, consider using a computer and investing in some *Living Books* so the computer can read to students. As with other listening activities, keep children mentally active as they listen. Think about what you want the students to focus on as they listen/read.

### **Writing station**

As with all stations, activities can be short, focusing on specific skills, or longer, for extended writing projects. For older students, include some activities that are on-going, such as a longer story or research project. Other ideas include:

- ❑ Letter writing: to classmates, or for a class project such as writing to a city's Chamber of Commerce or Tourist Office for information. An interesting mailbox, and a weekly, or daily, delivery of classroom mail by a designated student is a motivator.
- ❑ Connect writing to reading:
  - ❑ The traditional book review, character comparison or plot outline.

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- Write a book review and post on Amazon.com
- Do an author study
- Practice different short forms of poetry, such as haiku and cinquains.
- Write short stories in different genres. Try using story starter cards, which give minimal plot, setting and character details.
- Make a book. (Bookmaking can be a station on its own, as there are a variety of interesting, easy ways to make classroom books.)
- Use the computer: A problem with using the computer for writing in the elementary classroom is that children often do not know how to type. With all the advances in computer and informational technologies, children should begin learning to type around ages 8 or 9, once their physical writing skills are in place. There are a number of typing tutors available, so if you are fortunate enough to have several computers available, you should consider a separate typing station for students if you teach students of 8 years and older.

### **ABC/Word study station**

With very young children, you can cover a lot of phonics-related skills at this station. Much of the appeal of an ABC station is the rich variety of hands-on materials. Students can write the alphabet, alphabetise, or spell high frequency words or those with the same rime using different materials such as:

- Magnetic and felt letters
- Small chalk or dry-erase boards
- Letter stamps (with different colored stamp pads)
- Writing on different types of paper, sentence strips or the class board
- Magna-doodle boards

Older students can use this station for vocabulary building activities such as:

- ❑ Word sorts
- ❑ Word maps
- ❑ Working with synonyms, homophones, etymologies etc.
- ❑ Analogies
- ❑ Glossaries for cross-curricular projects
- ❑ Illustrating figurative (idiomatic) expressions and making a book.
- ❑ Word games such as *Madlibs* or cross-word puzzles.

### **Readers' Theatre/Drama station**

The multiple readings used in Reader's Theatre and drama increase fluency (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999) and as well as provide support for struggling readers as they share texts with more capable peers. In this station, students can engage in Reader's Theatre and dramatic interpretations of literature in a variety of ways. You might consider having students sign up to present their creations once a week. Some teachers have success organising productions that travel to other classes, or are presented more formally to larger audiences.

Younger children can enjoy dramatising a book or their own story using:

- ❑ Puppets: both those they make and pre-made varieties
- ❑ Small plastic animals, buildings or figures, such as those you can find in a set of farm animals
- ❑ A felt board with simple cut-outs to represent story characters, and letters for forming titles
- ❑ Masks and costumes
- ❑ Older students can use some of the same materials listed above, but their focus could also be on re-writing prose into a play format, then practising and presenting their productions.

## CONCLUSION

Literacy stations are a good way to not only cover ‘the basics’ in the language arts in a fun way; their use enables teachers to have time to directly work with small groups while the rest of the class is actively engaged in literacy work. By using common classroom materials, stations need not be difficult to start or maintain. By bringing choice into your classroom, students of all age and ability levels become motivated to do more reading, writing, listening and speaking as they work independently or with their peers.

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