

Overview - Specific Projects

This introduction is an overview of the projects to guide readers toward specific elements of the English Language Arts curriculum on which each is focused. It is important to stress that the four competencies, -- reading, writing, media literacy, and oral language -- form an integrated program, and certainly, the projects in this volume illustrate how these aspects of literacy interact and are mutually dependent. However, each project highlights particular aspects of the program without losing sight of its integrated nature. For example, while reading and writing are overlapping and interdependent activities, and it is impossible to do either without talking, some articles in this volume will concentrate on only one of these aspects of literacy.

The articles include all cycles between kindergarten and grade eight, but have been grouped according to their themes. Readers should not restrict themselves to those projects done in the cycles in which they teach. Each project has something different to say about the fundamental principles underlying the English Language Arts program and can certainly be adapted to any cycle level.

Reading and Producing Media and Visual Texts

Three articles deal with the newest aspect of the English Language Arts program, media literacy. Josie Salvatore takes her readers through the processes and excitement which she and her grade-two students shared when they investigated the marketing of cereal. By considering the cereal box as a text, her students not only analyzed the structures and features that contributed to the meanings the children found in these texts, but they also explored their understanding of target audiences. Finally, they put this knowledge into action by designing and producing their own cereal boxes. Collaboration and exploratory talk played essential roles in this and all projects in Josie's classroom, and she has found ways to capture and present this often ephemeral and difficult to describe part of the learning process using a multi-genre approach in her own writing.

Elizabeth Ford Makarow combines her passions for art and English Language Arts in the project she did with her grade three class on the artist Vincent van Gogh. Together, she and her students created sketch journals which enabled her to examine the impact of visual literacy on print literacy and the parallels between producing visual and written texts. Her students learned to read and to create visual texts, and through their writing, to reflect on their new understanding. As they sought ways to express their new discoveries about art as a mode of expression, their understanding of how visual texts work informed, inspired, and enriched their writing.

Karen Rye tells the story of how she and her grade-six students produced and edited video productions of their own versions of their favourite plays by Shakespeare. This inquiry-based, media-literacy project on Shakespeare in

contrast to the two previous projects which were done on paper, was a “high-tech” undertaking. Karen’s students worked in groups, each of which chose a Shakespearean play to work on. After reading a modern version of the plays, her students wrote their own dramatic versions and performed them. Their performances, complete with elaborate costumes and sets, were videotaped, and the students then edited the tapes of their group’s production. While this use of technology might seem to be beyond the reach of most teachers, Karen’s step-by-step description of how she and her students planned and carried out this endeavour makes such an undertaking seem feasible. While media literacy was their focus, Karen’s students were reading, writing, talking, collaborating, drawing, researching, reflecting, and self-evaluating. A stunning example of an integrated literacy project!

Cross-Disciplinary and Beyond

Dorothy Shaw demonstrates that literacy is developed in all subjects across the curriculum. Through her analysis of the role that talk plays in her math class, Dorothy shows that language is a way to get things done, to explore new concepts, and to express both the process of coming to know and of grasping an idea. Her lucid and engaging writing style enables Dorothy’s readers to get inside her head and follow her thought processes as she runs a class discussion in math with her grade one students, many of whom had serious learning problems. This ephemeral, but vital, part of all teaching is rarely captured on paper; however, Dorothy describes the decisions she makes “on the hop” that allow her to tease out her students’ understandings of math and build on their prior and developing knowledge. In addition to highlighting the crucial role of talk in her students’ learning, Dorothy also incorporates reading and writing stories in her math class. This integrated language arts project demonstrates the truly cross-disciplinary nature of language, and why proficiency in all aspects of using language is part of all learning.

Two cycle-three teachers developed very different cross-disciplinary projects as ways of extending their students’ literacy. Trudy Williams connects language arts to science in an environmental project she did with her grade-five students. Working with her own and her students’ enthusiasm for the topic, the project became cross-disciplinary in the truest sense, going far beyond a thematic unit that integrates a variety of subjects across the curriculum. She and her students learned how to define, plan, carry out, and evaluate a project in which they researched a variety of environmental problems. Her students’ learning was firmly situated in their everyday lives within their classroom, their school, their communities, and in more distant communities with whom her classes corresponded.

In contrast to Trudy’s environmental project, Joan Crossley and her grade-six class explored the geography of the imagination and extended its boundaries through developing their passion for the Middle Ages. She tells how their enthusiasm became a passion for learning itself and a rich rooting system for

developing the literacy of a group of reluctant readers and writers. Through this project, a seemingly unpromising group of students formed a genuine learning community in which they supported each others' growth, particularly in writing. Again, the project was much more than a journey across the curriculum but, an experience in how to learn and in how to develop academic and life skills that can be transferred to other situations and contexts.

Connecting Reading, Writing, Drawing, and Talking

Tanya Paradis and Myrna Hynes focus on integrated aspects of the English Language Arts program by investigating the connections between reading, writing, drawing, and talking. Tanya shares her experiences with her kindergarten students and their parents in establishing a home-supported reading and writing program. Although most of her kindergarten students are second-language learners, she has created a meaning-based program in which reading and writing are integrated and firmly rooted in the conversation and experiences of the children. She believes in developing literacy right from the start of school and that reading and writing and speaking in a second language are acquired in the same ways as mother-tongue literacy.

Myrna Hynes demonstrates that developing a response process is central to the development of proficient readers and also the key feature that connects all the other aspects of the reading competency, as well as the other competencies in the new English Language Arts program. Through her work with students in grades two and seven, she shows that when the emphasis of a reading program is the construction of multiple meanings, one approach is appropriate for readers of all ages and stages and requires only minor modifications from cycle to cycle.

When Students are the Curriculum

Two Middle School teachers show what can happen when students become the curriculum. Jennifer Goodall describes the challenges and successes of creating a differentiated language arts program with her grade seven and eight classes through several case studies of students with a wide range of passions, problems, and learning styles. She describes how these students developed in different ways under the wide umbrella of a literacy -- rather than a literature -- program.

Stephanie Vucko's article is about the inclusive nature of a portfolio approach to language arts in her grade seven and eight classes. The portfolio is often considered a form of assessment that records each student's "personal bests;" however, in Stephanie's classes the portfolio is a way of living and learning. An essential element of keeping portfolios is reflection, which Stephanie believes is developmental. She shows how she built a classroom environment in which her students developed processes and strategies for learning how to learn by becoming reflective.

Success for All

These stories are about different subjects, different approaches, different passions, and are told in different voices. However, they have much in common; they are all student-centred, literacy-based, focused on the construction of meaning, and, above all, include *all* students. Not one of these teachers was working in the ideal classroom; most of the classes described in these projects had a very high number of “special needs” students. As is widely acknowledged, the clientele of the public schools is changing, and teachers must find ways to differentiate their approaches to all their students. Indeed, one of the major inspirations for the Québec Education Program was the need to address the high drop-out rate from Québec’s high schools. Since there is also a high correlation between failure in elementary school and dropping out in high school, inclusive approaches in the early years of schooling are badly needed. The teachers who wrote this volume have worked hard to adapt their programs and strategies in order to find ways for all their students to be successful. They are most eager to share their experiences with you, their readers.