

**Building Advanced Reading Skills through Reading Workshops and  
Accelerated Programming**

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### **Problem Statement**

By the end of their high school education, most American students are not able to read and comprehend the advanced texts that they are expected to. Despite the fact that efforts to combat this trend have received primary focus from the education community, less than 40% of American students leave high school achieving what the NAEP recognizes as a proficient reading level, and only 6% achieve an advanced level (NCES, 2020). There are two areas of particular concern. One is the ability to comprehend informational texts, as this is not only the type of reading that sees the most concentrated levels of struggle, but also the ability that has been deemed of primary importance for future academic and professional success (Hooley et al., 2013). The other primary concern is the ability to read fluently, meaning at a good pace for an extended period, as this is the sort of base ability that allows students to engage with long and/or complicated texts without lapsing into frustration (Rasinski et al., 2005). While teachers in all content areas have been increasingly involved in this reading struggle, matters of literacy still inevitably receive the center stage most in ELA classes, and, unfortunately, the current popular strategy within this domain, namely the increased proportion of informational reading, will more than likely not be sufficient in achieving the advanced levels of literacy expected of those finishing their secondary education (Stotsky, 2016).

### **Rationale**

The increased importance placed on informational literacy is directly tied with the recognition of the need for disciplinary literacy. Disciplinary literacy is the ability to successfully engage with the sort of domain-specific texts which are by nature relatively advanced, and has come to light as a determinant factor for success in any given subject area (Spire et al., 2018).

For any subject that is not English, disciplinary literacy will inevitably be a matter of reading informational texts, so the goal of disciplinary literacy ultimately coincides with the need to be able to do such reading. In regards to reading fluency, the most recognized and addressed underlying factor is stamina, the need for which is easy to understand. As students reach advanced levels of study, the page count of their expected readings becomes larger and larger. Therefore, the ability to simply decode meaning in written words is not sufficient without the ability to stay engaged in that process for extended periods of time, and the latter ability is typically lacking in that wide range of students who can read but will not if they do not have to (Gulla, 2012). Considering most university programs require large amounts of informational reading, as do the jobs that result from such programs, it is a significant problem that most American students do not have strong reading stamina and are not skilled at reading informational texts. This problem is compounded by the fact that the strategies used to focus on these abilities in immediate and straight-forward ways can actually deprioritize the processes through which general advanced reading abilities are reliably developed.

### **Background**

Because informational texts cause students the most trouble, it is understandable why curriculum changes have been made to significantly increase the amount of time in English classrooms spent studying informational texts, a common shift being from 80% fiction, 20% informational, to a 50-50 balance (Loveless, 2020). However, there is no actual evidence connecting this practice to improved reading ability, and it certainly has not reversed the negative trend in student reading tests (Stotsky, 2016). On closer examination, this alteration to the standard English curriculum actually appears rather harmful. The informational articles now in

regular use in English classrooms are usually arbitrary in content, feature a high concentration of new vocab words and complex concepts in their short length. These articles are also unlikely to connect to any overarching theme or deeper enquiry topic in the curriculum, which means a lot of external support becomes necessary to help students comprehend a short piece of writing, only for that knowledge to fall to the wayside once they have completed whatever assignment was attached to that article (Stotsky, 2016). Therefore, the result of such practices is that students do not read a significant length of material, do not develop internal systems of comprehending difficult readings, do not make deeper connections to the content they are reading, and do not apply that content knowledge in any subsequent learning activities, which are the sorts of practices that build the reading stamina and interpretive literacy skills that enable one to successfully engage with a broad range of texts (Deane, 2020).

Another issue with reading practices in the American education system can be seen in the disparity between the difficulty of the informational and narrative texts students are likely to read. While the most regularly read informational texts increase with difficulty throughout each grade level, the relative difficulty of the novels students read peaks in the fourth grade and drops dramatically after that, with the average difficulty of a novel being read by a senior student falling somewhere between the 5th and 6th grade level (Farr, 2013). This decrease in the reading of grade-level novels after elementary school correlates with decreases in programming directed towards building independent reading habits and increases in negative attitudes towards reading, both of which are common attributes of secondary school environments (Deane, 2020; Lai, et al., 2014). Secondary students are likely to completely disengage from any lengthy or challenging reading endeavors; it is very common that they do not read any books on their own or read the novels assigned to them in English class, and instead cobble together whatever key information

they need to complete assignments by using online summaries, asking peers, or simply waiting for the teacher to conduct review sessions (Wineland, 2016). This suggests both a failure to provide programming that engages students in reading and a failure to provide programming that develops active interpretation of texts, since students can succeed while only passively receiving information someone else has indicated is important. The proliferation of these conditions at the secondary level indicates why the average reading level fails to advance after elementary school, as advanced literacy development requires both a large volume of reading and the regular practice of independently interpreting what one has read, and without engaging in these processes, it is very unlikely one will succeed at any tasks that require interpreting difficult texts (Deane, 2020). This problem is entrenched by the resultant reduced expectations for what novels are read in the classroom, because when faced with an overwhelming amount of secondary students who do not read any novels, efforts became more focused on getting students to simply read anything, and many of the classical works that had been mainstays in the English curriculum fell out of favor as being too difficult or too unrelatable to sufficiently appeal to students (Allred & Cena, 2020).

This brings us to our root problem: students are not reading and analyzing appropriately difficult literary texts and efforts to get them to do so have been deprioritized. This deprioritization is detrimental because reading advanced literature is likely the most reliable means through which advanced literacy is developed. Unlike the now-prioritized short informational texts, novels provide the time, space, motivation, and deeper connection necessary to familiarize oneself with the advanced concepts, vocabulary, and sentence structure they might contain, and develop the internal comprehension skills necessary to independently navigate difficult texts in general (Stotsky, 2016). Furthermore, novels that are regarded as more literary

or advanced are largely categorized as such because they lend themselves to more sophisticated levels of interpretation, which means that by reading these novels, one develops their interpretive literacy skills to a much greater degree and becomes more capable of reading and comprehending any text they encounter (Deane, 2020). It should be noted that many of the texts that were traditionally prioritized in English curriculums are uniquely suited to develop advanced literacy; these are novels written typically before World War II, by authors like Dickens, Austen, Melville, and Faulkner, which, most importantly, feature complex prose, detailed presentation of academic concepts, and unfamiliar vocabulary (Stotsky, 2016). Efforts need to be made that will put students on track to being able to read such novels, because if schools want to achieve advanced literacy, they should prioritize advanced literature.

### **Solutions**

Strategies for addressing below-grade-level reading ability center around two goals: building foundational literacy abilities, like stamina, surface-level comprehension, and simple interpretation, and achieving advanced literacy ability, like the complex analysis of difficult texts. Both goals need to be met to ensure ideal outcomes of reading ability, so we will look at the proven methods of meeting each goal. Foundational literacy skills have been achieved through reading workshops, while advanced literacy has been achieved through accelerated learning programs. It should be noted that while both solutions were developed to meet the needs of students not achieving grade-level expectations under more conventional instruction, their programming is still designed to include and benefit the range of more advanced students as well.

## Reading Workshops

Reading workshops are like book clubs with more oversight but the same primary objective of establishing communities and routines that enhance reading enjoyment and motivation. The basic practice of reading workshops is to introduce students to high interest novels, let them choose what to read, provide regular class time for silent reading, establish interest-based discussion groups, have students share and promote the books they enjoyed, and have them keep logs of what they read and what they would like to read next (Falter Thomas, 2016; Gratz Cockerille, 2016). The common instructional activities in learning workshops are mini-lessons on comprehension strategies like rereading, checking understanding, and making connections to previous or outside knowledge (Falter Thomas, 2016; Gratz Cockerille, 2016). Required writing activities in a reading workshop are designed to maintain the low-stakes, interest-based atmosphere and typically take the form of reflective journal responses to readings, supported by a selection of prompts like, “Who was your favourite character and why?” or “How does the story remind you of any of your own experiences?” (Falter Thomas, 2016). The principle behind these activities is that they should support and strengthen basic literacy abilities while not stigmatizing various ability levels or inciting work-related anxiety, so major assignments like essays should be kept conceptually separate from the participation in a reading workshop (Atwell, 2007). While these activities might not be very demanding, they are still particularly beneficial towards building advanced analytic skills because they always focus on having the student recognize and develop their own perspectives regarding what they are reading (Meyer, 2010). This is very important, as this process of applying perspective is precisely the sort of active interpretation that needs to be engaged in in order for any sort of genuine literary analysis to be realized (Deane, 2020).



The underlying goal and benefit of this practice is simply that students read more and regular reading habits are established where there might not have been any. This is very important because the volume of reading one does correlates strongly and positively with the advancement of their literacy skills, particularly in that a high volume builds the necessary reading stamina for advanced literacy activities, and more generally in that it offers more practice for reading comprehension (Fisher & Frey, 2020).

The philosophy behind the reading workshop is very sensible because it seeks to create regular readers and increase regular reading by modelling the practices and experiences of regular readers, that is those who read for pleasure (Atwell, 2007). People who read for pleasure typically like to talk about their reading with others with similar interests, but would probably not want to write an essay after every book they read, which is why activities in reading workshops tend to be discussion-based (Atwell, 2007). However, without a reading workshop built into the curriculum, having to write an essay after every book they read, or are at least expected to read, is the common experience of those who don't independently read for pleasure. This reinforces the negative feelings such students have towards reading and thus makes it unlikely they will develop any positive reading habits (Kepe, 2019). Furthermore, regular readers have developed systems for identifying and evaluating the books they might like to read, which includes a recognition of how appropriately challenging that book is likely to be. Regular readers tend to take this inquiry process for granted, but it is typically not one possessed by non-regular readers, which is why one of the valuable aspects of reading workshops is that they explicitly teach this process (Beard & Antrim, 2010).

Reading workshops, and, in general, activities based on developing reading ability rather than requiring reading ability, tend to be clustered around lower grade level, despite the fact that

they have shown to be beneficial for all students in the K-12 range (Lai, et al., 2014). Studies on the effects of reading workshops have found that their practice leads to overall increased reading enjoyment, time spent reading, and reading comprehension, regardless of whether the studied population was at elementary (Beard & Antrim, 2010), middle (Falter Thomas, 2016), or high school level (Lause, 2004)). This is why the practice needs to be established throughout middle and high school curriculums, in order to ensure that more students build and maintain the ideal reading habits that are a crucial factor in achieving advanced literacy (Lai, et al., 2014; Lause, 2004). This could also help explain the drop in independent reading habits and grade-level reading ability that occur after elementary school, as it coincides with the decrease in programming directly aimed at promoting positive and habitual reading experiences.

Reading workshops do not necessarily require students to engage with advanced grade-level texts, but they can still lead to such outcomes, especially if it is made an intentional part of the programming, as the most successful reading workshops are the ones that encourage students to seek out increasingly advanced novels (Lause, 2004). Teachers should include a range of more challenging options in the novels that they promote to the class. Not only does this provide developmentally appropriate options for those already at the higher end of reading ability, as they read and promote these novels, it establishes a communal value that encourages others to take on such challenges as they improve in their reading ability (Atwell, 2007; Lause, 2004). This natural positive effect should then be enhanced with a curriculum that establishes reading cycles, in which after a period of time students spend reading novels at the difficulty level they are currently comfortable with, they are geared towards a selection at a slightly higher level (Atwell, 2007; Lause, 2004). This allows an advancement of content and rigour to occur without upsetting the low stakes, choice-driven atmosphere.

The limitation of reading workshops is that, because improvements are made at a gradual pace and students begin their journeys from various ability levels, they are unlikely to bring all participants to an advanced reading level (Stotsky, 2016). If additional, text-specific literature instruction is not done on top of the choice-driven programming of a reading workshop, it leads to the problem mentioned above of not including difficult, academic literature in the curriculum (Stotsky, 2016). Furthermore, reading workshops do not focus on the thorough analytical processes that are a definitive expectation of achieving advanced literacy (Deane, 2020). However, advanced literacy abilities, like analysis, cannot be reliably possessed without basic literacy abilities, like stamina and surface-level understanding (Deane, 2020). Because reading workshops are the best way to enhance basic literacy within an English curriculum, they cannot be ignored as part of the solution to achieving advanced literacy.

### **Accelerated Learning Programming**

Deficiencies in advanced literacy become most apparent and problematic upon entry into post-secondary institutions, where such ability level is mandatory for success, but frequently not possessed by American students (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020; Martin, 2012). Roughly half of those entering both community colleges and four-year institutions require some sort of remedial, non-credit program before they can go on to regular credits courses, with literacy (along with math) being one of the primary areas of need, and roughly half of those students never advance to achieve college credit (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020). This lack of preparedness has led to the realization that high school instruction that better reflects the expectations of college-level instruction-- which is by nature, advanced learning-- is necessary (Martin, 2012). Such learning opportunities have typically been the domain of gifted or advanced placement (AP) classes, and

have thus been limited to students who have already demonstrated a high level of academic readiness (Donaldson, et al., 2017). Accelerated programming seeks to provide this level of advanced instruction to students who do not already possess the ability to succeed in advanced learning spaces by providing a high degree of supplemental instruction and establishing appropriate learning communities (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020; Shanahan, 2020). In terms of recognizing the need for supported communal learning, accelerated programming is similar to reading workshops. But, unlike reading workshops, there is no disguising the fact that they require a lot of hard work.

Accelerated learning programs were originally developed in English department of The Community College of Baltimore County, in an effort to get more students entering without the necessary advanced literacy skills to pass college-level credit courses that required complex analysis of difficult texts, namely English I (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020). Instead of being made to pass a developmental, non-credit English class courses before moving on to English I, students were allowed to take the college-level course concurrently with supplemental, non-credit instruction that targeted their specific areas of struggle (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020). Not only did this provide the immediate financial benefit of eliminating time spent in college without earning credit, the rate of students who participated in this initial programming that earned first-year English credits was 75%, a considerable success compared to the 40% pass rate for students who followed the typical routine of taking first-year English after a remedial class (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020).

Broadly speaking, an accelerated learning program can be considered as any program that has students simultaneously participate in advanced and developmental classes. However, there are certain provisions that are required to maximize successful outcomes, which were in place in

the initial model and shown to be important factors for success in its expanded use in different educational settings and content areas (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020; Shanahan, 2020). The college-level class should be made up of half (or close as possible) college-ready students and half not-yet-college-ready students, as this allows students of lower ability levels to participate in learning communities that actively practice the skills they need to acquire (Shanahan, 2020), (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020; Shanahan, 2020). The supplemental class, attended only by the not-yet-college-ready students, should be taught by the same instructor as the college-level class, as this allows them to understand and provide the specific levels of support the students need, and, as a more general benefit, establishes stronger student-teacher relationships (Shanahan, 2020). Finally, class sizes should be small, ideally in the 16-20 student range for the college-level portion of the class, which, due to the 50:50 ratio in ability level, means supplemental class sizes of only 8-10 students. This maximizes the level of support the instructor can provide to their students and creates a close-knit learning community (Shanahan, 2020).

The success of this programming led to it being introduced at the high school level, so that deficiencies in college-level academic ability could be remedied before students attend college (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020; Shanahan, 2020). The difference is that in high school settings ALPs do not necessarily involve learning opportunities advanced enough to earn college credit, and may instead set the benchmark of success at providing learning opportunities advanced enough to make students ready for college-level instruction without need of remedial classes (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020). Otherwise, ALPs in high school settings follow the same practice of providing instruction beyond students' currently recognized ability level and supplementing it with instruction geared directly towards their ability-level needs. When implemented with the ideal provisions previously discussed, these high school programs have

had the same significant levels of success as their college-level counterparts (Harrington & Rogalski, 2020). This strongly suggests that it would be very beneficial to expand such programming in high school settings.

### **Conclusions**

Being able to read and analyze advanced literature needs to remain a central priority in our education systems, as it is the most reliable process through which literacy skills necessary in every field are developed and realized. The combined and extensive use of both reading workshops and accelerated learning programs presents an ideal method to ensure that a maximum percentage of students can achieve this goal of advanced literacy by the time they make the transition to post-secondary learning environments and such skill level become mandatory. Reading workshops build and maintain the reading habits and basic interpretive processes necessary for literacy skills to develop in a natural, gradual progression. It seems quite likely that if reading workshops were made a more prominent and ongoing part of English curriculums, far fewer students would end up needing ALPs to overcome struggles engaging in learning environments that require advanced literacy, as they would have already developed those skills through a progression of independent reading. However, because of the large variety of learning profiles attributable to both environmental factors and inherent differences in individuals, there will still be a wide range of student progression and ability level, and this means that many students will still not be able to achieve expected levels of literacy without additional support. ALPs should therefore be made a widely available option to provide this level of support, as they are shown to provide the community learning structures and necessary time for extra attention from instructors that enable significant struggles with literacy to be overcome

in a time-sensitive manner, that is, in time for students to meet the demands of the professional world.

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