

*Please share with our teachers a summary of your background.*

This is Doug Fisher. I am a teacher at Health Sciences High and Middle College as well as a professor of language and literacy education at San Diego State University. In addition, I serve as the co-director for the Center for the Advancement of Reading at the California State University Chancellor's office. I was a recipient of an international reading association Celebrate Literacy Award as well as the Farmer Award for excellence in writing from the National Council of Teachers of English. At San Diego State, I taught a number of courses including English Language Development and Content Literacy Methods. I also teach doctoral courses and research methods. As a high school teacher, I teach English language arts and statistics.

*Over the years, you have published many books and articles including Creating Literacy-Rich Schools for Adolescents with Gay Ivy and Improving Adolescent Literacy: Strategies at Work with Nancy Fry. Why is adolescent literacy such an important topic for your research? What are some differences between the needs of adolescent learners and their younger counterparts?*

As a high school teacher, I have students in my classes every year who are under-prepared for the academic tasks in front of them. Some of these students simply lack background knowledge, while others do not have the labels or words for the ideas they have. Some are learning English, and some have experienced a number of years of school failure. Still others are simply not motivated to read and write. While we all have students who struggle with school related reading tasks, adolescent literacy is more than addressing the needs of poor readers. Adolescent literacy requires that we apprentice learners into academic language and academic thinking. It's a need for all students. The topics we study in middle school and high school are complex. The words we use across academic disciplines are difficult. Adolescent literacy is about engaging students in pursuits of knowledge and showing them that reading and writing are powerful ways of learning and thinking. In other words, it's about creating habits that students will take with them as they leave us and enter the world of work and college.

*You note in your book, Creating Literacy-Rich Schools for Adolescents that we must not perpetuate the notion that all teachers are reading teachers. Why is this important for educators to embrace?*

Simply said, it's not true. All teachers are not teachers of reading. However, all teachers use language for learning. There is a conceptual difference; it's not just a semantic one. Reading teachers understand deeply the processes related to reading. They understand the role of vocabulary, and comprehension, and fluency and phonics and phonemic awareness and

background knowledge and oral language. They understand how reading develops in the brain. How learners learn to read. There is a difference there. In academic subject areas, students read to find out things. They read for information. They read widely based on the questions they have. Math teachers and science teachers and physical educators and art specialists are not reading teachers, yet they use language, the reading, the writing, the speaking, the listening and the viewing for learning. All teachers do that, in fact all humans do that. Everything we learn, we learn through reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

This conceptual change invites teachers to try out strategies; instructional routines that encourage reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing in the classroom.

I'm reminded of a question I was asked by a math teacher at our school. In a staff development session, she asked if all teachers were teachers of Algebra. Perplexed I said no, no we're not all algebra teachers. Her point was well taken though. Yes, I do use algebra, and algebraic thinking, but I don't teach it. Likewise, there are some teachers who have a deep knowledge base around language and others who use language in their learning environments. We know that in too many classrooms, students spend most of their time listening or pretending to listen. What would change if teachers understood that learning is based in language? Might they try out new instructional routines that require students to read, write, speak, listen and view? If they did, they'd quickly realize that students learn more content when they use numerous and diverse literacy processes.

*What are some strategies that content area teachers can use to facilitate reading, learning and thinking?*

First, we have to get students reading a lot, and reading widely. I cannot imagine a scientist or historian who reads from a single source. Experts read from a variety of sources. If we want our students to develop expertise, they need to do a lot of reading. However, reading hard texts isn't the answer. We learn from things we can read. Here is a case in point. This semester I took a neuro-anatomy class. I'm a very motivated student and I really wanted to know more about the human brain. But the assigned text was way too difficult for me. I wasn't learning what I was expected to know from the assigned reading. I didn't have the background or vocabulary knowledge to be successful with that particular text. So I bought myself several easier to read books, including The Idiot's guide to the Human Brain which I loved. I read widely from a number of different books and was able to pass this very difficult class.

I tell that story to remind us that even good readers experience difficulty when the texts are not accessible. And by the way, resorting to a bunch of strategies such as visualizing, predicting,

putting sticky notes all over the pages or inferring, wasn't going to help me read that difficult book. Thankfully we know what to do about it. We have to find related readings that are accessible.

Second, teachers need to model their own thinking. I'd like to see content teachers who model their thinking about text daily. What I mean by this is that teachers should select a piece of text related to the content they are teaching, and then read it aloud while talking through their own procedures for making sense of the text. What I don't mean is that teachers read something aloud, and then interrogate students about the text or the student's comprehension strategies. Students need to experience a lot of examples of modeling if they are going to try on these procedures. And they need to experience the type of thinking an expert does while reading science or history or a fitness magazine or whatever. It's another reason why English teachers can't do all this. Students need to experience content experts' thinking.

Third, I think we should see a lot more writing in secondary schools. Writing is thinking. And student writing is an excellent source of informative assessment data. Students should be asked to write whether it be a summary or based on a prompt, daily in every class. And teachers should use those products to determine student understanding and next steps for instruction.

Of course there are a number of ways that teachers can facilitate students reading, learning and thinking. These are just three. The key is to keep in mind that adolescents need to read, write, speak, listen and view on a daily basis in all their content area classes.

*You offer an entire chapter in Creating Literacy -Rich Schools for Adolescents on the importance of just letting young adults read. Why is independent reading so important?*

The quick answer to this question is that practice makes permanent. Practice may or may not make perfect, but what is practiced does become permanent. And I think we all share the goal of having permanent readers; readers who develop habits and read for pleasure and information. In addition to developing reading habits, independent reading facilitates content learning. I'm thinking about Amanda, who was intrigued by parasites after a biology class. She found several books on the subject and read widely. She knows a lot more about his topic as a result. She can tell you for example, about a parasitic worm that lives in the human skin. It's pretty gross, but you can't argue with the fact that reading changed Amanda's content knowledge. And that's the point of independent reading. It builds background knowledge and vocabulary. I'm not suggesting that we abandon instruction. But I am suggesting that we encourage students to read text that they can read related to the content we are studying.

*Is there any particular message about reading that you would like to share with our teachers?*

Teachers matter, and what they do matter most. Teachers are the critical variable in the student's success formula. It's the teacher, and how the teacher engages the learner that results in learning and thus achievement. As teachers, our job is to apprentice adolescents into the world of academic language and academic thinking. And literacy is key to this apprenticeship.