

Using Online Resources to Improve Literacy

The definition of literacy varies from individual to individual: my 14-year-old son said it was “the ability to write”; my engineer husband said “the ability to read”; and the American government offers at least two different definitions:

In the Reading First section of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, reading is considered to mean “a complex system of deriving meaning from print that requires all of the following: (a) The skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes, or speech sounds, are connected to print; (b) The ability to decode unfamiliar words; (c) The ability to read fluently; (d) Sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension; (e) The development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print; and (f) The development and maintenance of a motivation to read.”

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and the National Literacy Act of 1991 define literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society.” This is a broader view of literacy than just an individual’s ability to read, which seems to be the more traditional concept of literacy. (From The National Institute For Literacy http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/facts/reading_facts.html)

The definition may be specific to the area in which you work, your local governing board, or your current legislation. For the organizing principles of this article, I used the five components of literacy as described by the 2000 National Reading Panel.

- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Fluency
- Vocabulary Development
- Comprehension

You will find multiple resources, activities, or tools for each component. As with most tools, *how* Web resources are used makes the difference between powerful learning experiences and busy work. As you examine resources, pause and think about your students, your classroom, and your areas of need. Determine if the resources are best used as a teaching prop that could demonstrate, illustrate, or motivate a lesson or concept. Other resources may lend themselves to the student learning center use and are sufficiently well-designed to encourage independent use, focused enough not to distract from the “work to be done,” and appropriate in their reinforcement of responses.

You’ll find that some resources work well as suggestions for “homework,” while other resources may be great for fostering group thinking and problem solving. Some of these group work settings may include a “knowledgeable leader” (such as a teacher, buddy reader, or peer coach), while others may be motivations for reading that prompt action away from the computer.

Phonemic Awareness

According to the **Partnership for Reading** http://www.nifl.gov/partnership_forreading/index.html, phonemic awareness is the ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in spoken words. Teaching students phonemic awareness includes working with students

to hear, identify, and manipulate the sounds and their letters. These are extremely auditory and participatory learning experiences. Because the sounds are key to phonemic awareness, it is important to find Web sites with clear sound; such Web sites are becoming more common, but this area is still developing.

Even with today’s limitations, there are a couple of really focused sites where students can practice phonemic awareness. The BBC’s **Crankophone** <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/wordsandpictures/cvc/crank/index.shtml> is an example of an online activity where students practice listening and distinguishing the sounds of vowels in the medial position in three letter words. This “game” provides students with a listening experience that can be repeated over and over, even while the teacher is busy. The sound is clear, although there is some British accent to it. There are many other games and activities on the BBC Words and Pictures site, so be sure to explore further.

From Cognitive Concepts, **GameGoo** <http://www.cogcon.com/gamegoo/goeyhome.html> has many excellent online activities for several literacy components. For phonemic awareness, try Paw Park (the Sassy Seals episode) and Alien Scavenger Hunt (especially the Space Trash episode). PBS’s **Between the Lions** <http://pbskids.org/lions/> is a literacy gold mine that has great resources and games including Fuzzy Ears and Pounce. If you aren’t yet using this terrific video series, check it out!

More Phonemic Awareness Resources

Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS)

<http://pals.edschool.virginia.edu/activities/index.cfm>

TeachersPlanet

<http://www.teachersplanet.com/subjects/pa.shtml>

AlphaBites

<http://www.alphabet-soup.net/alphabite.html>

ProTeacher

<http://www.proteacher.com/070000.shtml>

Phonics

According to the National Institute For Literacy, phonics includes the relationships between the letters (graphemes) of written language and the individual sounds (phonemes) of spoken language. There is an abundance of online printable worksheets for phonics. These are easy to find and almost too numerous to list. But keep in mind that the best online activities allow teachers to select the sounds or letters for students to practice. And watch for activities that do not distract from the task with extreme graphics.

One recommended Web site that is focused on printable tools and resources is **Reading A-Z** <http://www.readinga-z.com>. It offers a wide variety of leveled readers, decodable books, alphabet resources, and other resources. Some of these resources are available through a paid subscription only; however, many are available for free, and all are worthy of your attention. There are in-depth lesson plans with letter cards, picture cards, decodable printable books (as many as you need of each), and more. Some books even have running record forms ready to use. As students progress into reading, there are hundreds of books here to

print for students, and they are correlated to Reading Recovery, Fountas & Pinnell, and DRA levels. You'll also find great teacher support beginning with the phonemic awareness level.

Another terrific phonics resource that offers interactive, well designed books is **Starfall** www.starfall.com. This Web site offers lots of support for beginner readers, and copies of the books, worksheets, and student certificates can be ordered free of charge. Students can read the words by themselves, or click on any word and the computer will "sound out" the word phoneme by phoneme, highlighting the graphemes as it goes along. This Web site is really a precious gift for emergent readers and their teachers!

Additional Phonics Resources

Clifford's Sound Match (beginning sound match)
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/clifford1/flash/phonics/index.htm>

BBC's Digby Mole (beginning sounds, end sounds, rhymes)
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/iaac/words/dgi.shtml>

Marvin Morrison's Word Puzzles (for older readers)
<http://www.soundpuzzle.com/index.html>

Fluency

Fluency is the ability to read accurately and quickly, recognize words, and comprehend what is read, all simultaneously. We often teach fluency by providing models of fluent reading and through repeated reading with guidance. The Internet does not yet provide feedback on oral reading skills or give assistance with fluency through games, drills, or activities. But, the Internet does offer a wide variety of things to read, in a variety of formats and genres.

Reading Material Online

MysteryNet's Kids Mysteries
<http://kids.mysterynet.com/>

Poetry4Kids
<http://www.poetry4kids.com/>

C.J. Heck's Poetry for Children
<http://www.barkingspiderspoetry.com/>

iEARN: Folk Tales from Around the World
<http://www.nsc.ru/folk/folktale.htm>

Sports Illustrated for Kids
<http://www.sikids.com/>

A Girl's World
<http://www.agirlsworld.com/>

A great way to work on reading fluency is with Readers Theatre, where students read with expression, inflection, and feeling. The repeated reading of the written work to improve performance brings gains in fluency and comprehension.

The Electronic Classroom's Readers Theatre
http://www.readingonline.org/electronic/elec_index.asp?HREF=carrick/index.html

Aaron Shepard's Reader's Theatre
<http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/index.html>

Lyric Sites

Students can improve their reading fluency by using lyrics. When I first started teaching, I used closed captioning on the television (with the sound off) to encourage older students to read. The speed of the dialogue was sometimes fast and furious and, if they were interested in the program, they would work hard to follow along. This is still a good technique. You can also use song lyrics. You want to choose the songs and lyrics carefully, but it can be fun to do a sing-along with written lyrics.

KIDiddles Classic Children's Songs and Folk Songs
<http://www.kididdles.com/museum/index.html>

Flying Pigs Campfire Songbook, Volume 3
http://www.argonet.co.uk/users/flying_pigs/frames.html

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences: Sing-Along Lyrics
<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/music.htm>

Student News Sites

To practice fluency, students can use kid-friendly news sites to gather information and then take turns "delivering the news." They can practice for a "week in review" news program, which provides more opportunities for practice. **CAUTION!** These sites have appropriate resources for students but, as with all Web sites, they should be pre-screened by the teacher.

Student News Net
<http://www.studentnewsnet.com/>

CNN Student News
<http://fyi.cnn.com/fyi/>

The New York Times Learning Network
<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/>

Scholastic News for Kids (elementary ages)
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/>

Time for Kids
<http://www.timeforkids.com/TFK/index.html>

Online Audio Books and Stories

Online books and stories can provide excellent models of fluent reading. Look for clear narration and interesting content or storyline. Everyone enjoys being read to, especially a book that is well-read and well-felt. The one advantage of an online audio book is that students can listen to them from any Internet-connected computer at any time...even from home!

Web-Pop (offers online books and audio stories)
<http://www.web-pop.com/bookpopchooser.html>

Light Up Your Brain
<http://www.lightupyourbrain.com/stories.html>

Classic Fairy Tales (and some new ones)
<http://www.classicfairytales.com/en/>

Alice in Wonderland Online Audio Book
<http://wiredforbooks.org/alice/>

Vocabulary Development

Both oral vocabulary (the words we use in speaking or understand when listening) and reading vocabulary (the words we understand in print) are important in reading. Without sufficient vocabulary advancement, reading is tedious. Research shows that reading aloud to students, no matter what grade level, is a good way to encourage vocabulary development. In addition, students who read extensively on their own are more likely to develop rich vocabularies.

It is important to teach both individual words as well as word-learning strategies. Vocabulary development is more than lists of words to memorize. Playing with words (such as puzzles and word games) will encourage vocabulary growth. Reading aloud books that have vocabulary and reading levels that challenge your students can give them words in context and provide intrinsic motivation.

Vocabulary Development Resources

Education Place: Fake Out
<http://www.eduplace.com/fakeout/>

Education Place: Wacky Web Tales
<http://www.eduplace.com/tales/index.html>

Kid Crosswords and Other Puzzles
<http://www.kidcrosswords.com>

Scholastic: Annie's Rhyme Time

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/annie/index.asp>

Merriam Webster's Word Central (grades 4-8 and up)

<http://www.wordcentral.com/>

Vocabulary University

<http://www.vocabulary.com>

Word Play: Fun with Words

<http://www.wolinskyweb.com/word.htm>

Comprehension

Comprehension is the real reason for reading; without it, we have decoded a message that is meaningless. Unfortunately, few Web sites offer us access to content with a range of reading levels. One site that provides information with a range of reading and content levels is **Windows to the Universe: Mythology** <http://www.windows.ucar.edu/tour/link=/mythology/mythology.html&edu=elem>, which offers beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. This is a spectacular feature, as all students can start at the beginner level and get familiar with the content and vocabulary. Then they can use the other levels (this can be a reading or content adjustment) by simply clicking the button on the top of the first screen. Hopefully, we will see more online resources with such a range of adaptation to a wide variety of levels.

Specific strategies for encouraging and teaching comprehension include using graphic organizers, questions (both asking/writing questions and answering questions), and summarizing. Graphic organizers can help students focus on details, isolate events and sequences, compare and contrast, and more. There is a wide variety of electronic or printable graphic organizers available online.

Graphic Organizers

Learning Resources

<http://www.eduscapes.com/tap/topic73.htm>

GO Index

<http://www.graphic.org/goindex.html>

SCORE

<http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/actbank/torganiz.htm>

NCREL

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr1grorg.htm>

Write Design Online

<http://www.writedesignonline.com/organizers/>

Printable PDF Graphic Organizers

Education Place (English and Spanish)

<http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/>

Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/edis771/notes/graphicorganizers/graphic/>

TeacherVision

<http://www.teachervision.com/lesson-plans/lesson-6293.html?s2&detoured=1>

Region 15 Curriculum Resources (English and Spanish)

<http://www.region15.org/curriculum/graphicorg.html>

4 Blocks Literacy Framework

http://www.k111.k12.il.us/lafayette/fourblocks/graphic_organizers.htm

Illinois District 97

<http://www.op97.k12.il.us/instruct/IArts/Civil%20War/forms.html>

Electronic Graphic Organizer Makers

Teachology

http://teachers.teach-nology.com/web_tools/graphic_org/

Software

Inspiration: Free Trial Download

www.Inspiration.com

WebQuests

These are special inquiry-oriented activities where students draw from the Internet for most of the needed information. **WebQuests** <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/> are designed to help move students to the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels of thinking about what they read. At the site, explore the matrix of examples, as well as the training materials section that provides everything from templates to complete workshops about WebQuests.

A Closing Note to All Teachers

Environment, student motivation, engagement, discussion, and a desire to read are significant factors in encouraging literacy. Creating lifelong readers is essential. This is not just about passing a test, it is about being capable and eager to keep reading to learn and grow. Someone said recently, "An 'at-risk' student is any student who leaves school before or after graduation with little possibility of continuing learning." Being literate and striving to learn are keys to the future. And literacy and the love of learning seem to be closely linked.

All teachers are teachers of reading or literacy coaches. We are role models and examples; we may be the only literate adults some students know. When we share with our students our love of reading, our decision to spend "free time" reading, our discovery of new vocabulary, and our zest for continuing to learn, we encourage our students to do the same.

My students once saw me start to cry when reading *Charlotte's Web* aloud in class. For many students this was the first time they had ever even considered that a book could move them emotionally. Sharing the engagement I had with books and reading has made a difference with my students, and it can positively affect your students, too.

Teaching today is a journey with the latest information, new research, and new tools and resources. The Internet provides access to so much without enrolling in courses or going to after-school professional development. Access to research, online tools, and ideas (lesson plans and more) are not far from any teacher with online access. I hope you will continue to explore more about literacy by visiting these Web sites.

Put Reading First: Research and Practice

http://www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/reading_first1.html

International Reading Association:

National Reading Panel Report

<http://www.reading.org/advocacy/nrp/background.html>

International Reading Association: ReadingOnline

<http://www.readingonline.org/>

Learning to Read

<http://toread.com/>

Reading Rockets

<http://www.readingrockets.org/>

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