

Non-Stop Literacy Instruction: A Social Justice Issue

By Dianne Stevens

Issues of social justice demand that a strong and consistent literacy focus be a priority at the Richmond Hill Adult Learning Center where students are either language learners or people who left high school without graduating. Literacy strategies have two immediate functions: to enable on-the-spot learning in class; and to provide academic currency, such as essay writing skills, for future success. An action research project, undertaken by the teacher of grade ten English in partnership with a consultant, focused on strategies to enhance both comprehension of text and transfer of understanding into written essay format. Strategies include diagnostic assessment to enable differentiated instruction and ongoing scaffolding of learning. The success of this small project bodes well for students' ongoing success in other venues.

The Setting, the Characters, the Situation

The Richmond Hill Adult Learning Centre is a prime location for any teacher who is a life-long learner. Opportunities abound and rewards are great because of the unique, diverse nature of the student body, which includes, among others, the following groups:

- adult immigrant students who have one or more university degrees or college qualifications from their home country;
- adult immigrant students who have no post-secondary education;
- adult students who have previously attended secondary school in Ontario, but may not have completed all of their credits;
- adult students who completed their secondary schooling in Ontario and may even have post-secondary qualifications, but who have decided to change careers and now need to get new credits to qualify for post-secondary programs.

The first two groups mentioned were predominant in the classes involved in the special project; the third group formed a smaller component. These students desperately want and need to improve their English literacy skills in order to be successful in their lives in Canada and to make a contribution to Canadian society. They require an opportunity to quickly gain comfort and confidence with a variety of reading skills, writing forms, and oral language structures

appropriate for the workplace. All students come to the Centre with new ambitions and are anxious to meet the academic requirements of institutes of higher learning where they hope to retrain and gain marketable skills. Many students have children to care for and jobs they need to support themselves. I am the teacher in a grade 10 English class comprised of thirty applied and academic level students. My job is helping my students to move successfully through the mandated grade 10 curriculum as a stepping stone to fulfilling their dreams of a better life. As they learn, so do I. Personally, I am privileged to hear their stories of life in other countries; these living history lessons enrich my global understanding. Professionally, I am challenged as never before to constantly assess diagnostically (Black, P. & Wiliam, D. 1998), scaffold learning and engage in differentiated instruction. The teacher is learner.

Instruction at the Richmond Hill Adult Learning Center is organized into quadesters; full-time students gain two high school course credits in ten weeks by taking the time equivalent of two periods per day in each of two subjects. The challenge is to ensure that students experience meaningful improvement in English literacy skills during a ten-week, subject-specific course. Reading for understanding remains tenuous because of vocabulary barriers and a lack of contextual understanding of resources. I felt confident teaching subject content, but wanted to improve my ability to move students forward with their literacy skills.

Baseline Data

Anecdotal Data

At week eight of ten in Quadmester Three (the 2010 Winter Term), mindful observation revealed that approximately half the students had improved their willingness to speak and discuss in class, and another quarter of the class were making headway in developing written English skills. However, some students lacked confidence in their literacy skills. Writing an essay is fundamental to ENG 2P/D1 and to future academic success; yet, students report that the tight structure of the five paragraph essay, ubiquitous in the Canadian school system, is not a part of education in their home countries.

Statistical Data

Students' first attempts to write a formal, five-paragraph essay had limited success. (See Table 1.1.) Students worked hard, but six of the thirty attempts did not come close to being an essay, and no student excelled. I knew I must seek new strategies; hence, I proposed an action research project, wherein a teacher enhances practice by systematically addressing an issue s/he would like to improve in the classroom (Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. 1988; Sagor, R., 1992).

Table 1.1: Students' marks on the first essay attempt

	90% plus	80% plus	70% plus	60% plus	50% plus	Less than 50%
Baseline Data	0	2	3	12	7	6

The Proposal

With the approval of my administrators, Wally Stankov and Otilia Olteanu, and advice from Cathy Costello, formerly a literacy coordinator with the York Region District School Board, I drafted a research proposal to Curriculum and Instructional Services on behalf of the Adult Day School. We requested funding to enlist six days of assistance from a literacy consultant during Quadmester Four (April to June) for the purpose of engaging in an action research project. The goal was to understand how best to help adult students become literate in terms of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The consultant would assist me by sharing and modeling current literacy approaches, resources, and classroom strategies. Other teachers at the Center who wished to be part of the project were invited to share the consultant's time and expertise.

Three teacher-members of the Literacy Committee indicated a desire to participate. Their stories can be found in the *Report on Special Project: Improving Literacy Skills of Learners at the Richmond Hill Center for Community Learning Adult Day School (Costello and Stevens, Fall 2010, YRDSB)*. Time and space limit this article to the grade 10 English class.

The Action Research Question

How can the use of literacy strategies increase student engagement and support higher achievement among academic and applied students in the grade 10 English class at the Adult Day School during Quadmester Four, 2010?

Implementation

In the second half of Quadmester Four, Dianne Stevens and Cathy Costello co-planned and co-taught Dianne's Grade 10 Applied/ Academic class of thirty-one adult students on six consecutive days, one hour per day, with the goal of ensuring that students were capable of writing five paragraph essays. Dianne planned to use the same checklist assessment tool for this second essay as the first essay. The criteria of success would be an upward shift in assessment marks.

It was important to give students the opportunity to take the stance of critically literate people (Morris, Paul J., and Tchudi, Stephen, 1996). The overall goal was to encourage students to layer speaking, listening, reading and writing as often as possible so that students gained rich practice with literacy skills every day. Cathy and Dianne developed the following approaches to scaffold essay writing skills regarding character development in the play, *Inherit the Wind*.

Teacher Learning

- modeled teaching by the consultant

Graphic Organizers and Exemplars

- character development mind map
- essay map with fill-in-the-blanks topic sentences to help students plan their introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion
- fill-in-the-blanks paragraph scaffolds
- exemplar introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions

Feedback to Students

- daily personal conferencing with students
- the teacher's daily written feedback, paragraph by paragraph, as students wrote their essay
- paired peer editing strategies including praise and question, and an editing checklist (*Think Literacy*, 2003).

The Outcome: Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative Data

The researchers used student and teacher surveys to document the qualitative success of the action research project. Responses to specific questions are reported below.

Summary of Student Survey Responses:

Question # 1: Students were asked to indicate whether or not a variety of strategies directed to improving their reading and writing skills were helpful. The majority responded positively.

Table 1.2: Number of responses indicating instructional strategies were helpful

Strategies employed with 30 students	1a reading discussion groups	1b graphic organizers	1c teacher writing models	1d sentence starters, fill in blanks	1e peer editing: praise/question	1e peer editing: edit checklist
Number of affirmative answers	28	26	29	28	25	26

Question # 2: When asked to respond, YES or NO, to indicate whether they experienced increased engagement, commitment and understanding as a result of the teaching strategies employed, students overwhelmingly indicated that this was so.

Table 1.3: Responses indicating level of engagement, commitment and understanding

Attitude and understanding of 30 students	2a more engaged and attentive YES NO	2b felt committed to assignment YES NO YES NO	2c examples improved understanding YES NO	2d enjoyed editing partners YES NO	2e peer editing improved writing YES NO	2f understand paragraph structure YES NO	2g grammar and spelling improved YES NO
	28 2	28 2	29 1	24 4 2 sometimes	26 2 2 sometimes	28 2	27 3

Question # 3: When asked the open-ended question, “What did you find most helpful during the action research project?”, student responses were personal and, therefore, varied.

- reading discussion groups/ brainstorming (4 students);
- sentence starters and fill-in-the-blanks (3);
- peer editing (2);
- understanding how to structure my essay paragraphs (2);
- the step-by-step process about essay writing (2);
- teacher models (2);
- the sociograms (1);
- the paragraph examples illustrating how to begin each essay paragraph (1);
- how to document and support opinions (1);
- understanding TOWER (1);
- The persistence of my teachers and the variety of methods they introduced (1);
- Simply everything was helpful! (1)

Summary of Survey Responses by the Teacher of ENG 2P/D 1

When asked to identify strategies from the following list that were helpful additions to teaching practice, the English teacher identified all as helpful:

- information about resources including internet links to *Think Literacy*;
- collaborative planning with a mentor-colleague;
- co-teaching with a mentor-colleague;
- observing modeled teaching;
- the use of reading discussion structures, sentence starters, exemplars, and graphic organizers;
- the use of peer editing strategies (*Think Literacy*, 2003).

When asked which teaching strategies she perceived were most helpful to students, the English teacher responded that all approaches improved achievement. (See Table 1:2 for specific strategies.) Because students responded enthusiastically to different strategies and “got it” at different points, it would be hard to select a “best”.

When asked to evaluate whether or not she observed a positive difference in students’ achievement, the English teacher indicated that students had improved in all categories: engagement, commitment, and understanding the task. In addition, students responded well to each other as editing partners, and improved their grammar, spelling and writing structure.

In response to the question, “What do you believe was the most important effect of participating in this action research project?”, the teacher valued the opportunity to improve her teaching ability, thus enhancing student success (Stevens, 2006). She intends to integrate the strategies she has learned into her practice.

Quantitative Data

ENG 2P/D1: Comparing pre- and post-intervention essay marks

The following chart compares the achievement of students’ on their first and second essay writing attempts, as assessed by the same checklist. The improvement is significant. The focused strategies are important, but students’ drive to achieve must also be credited.

Table 1.4: A comparison of first and second essay assessment marks

	90% to 100%	80% to 89%	70% to 79%	60% to 69%	50% to 59%	Less than 50%
Baseline Data: First Essay	0	2	3	12	7	6
Post- Intervention Data: Second Essay	10	7	5	4	2	2

Significance of Findings

- Students recognized, appreciated and responded to the enriched learning environment.
- Students believed the learning strategies introduced by the literacy consultant improved their abilities to read, write, and speak in English.
- Students indicated the enriched environment increased their attention, commitment, understanding, and enjoyment of learning.
- Students were able to identify which strategies were helpful to improve specific skills.
- The teacher’s previously-stated expectations were met.
- The teacher believes she learned from observing and working with the consultant.
- The teacher observed that students’ engagement, commitment, understanding and enjoyment were enhanced during the project.
- The teacher is able to make a link between employing specific strategies and the achievement of specific goals regarding student success.
- Assessment revealed that student achievement improved because of the enriched learning environment made possible through collaboration with the consultant.
- The teacher plans to incorporate learned strategies into her practice.

Reflections and Implications for Future Practice

- Action research, a form of teacher inquiry, is a vehicle for teacher learning that enhances students’ learning (Stevens, 2006).

- Collaborative action research exponentially enriches teacher and students' learning (Stevens, 2006).
- When students understand that the goal of an action research project is to improve their literacy skills in reading, writing, and oral communication, they become willing participants in the implementation process. (Education is not something you “do” to people.)
- A consultant working one-on-one with a teacher over time is an effective situation to create teacher enthusiasm and commitment, to meet teacher needs, and to provide a positive learning experience for students.
- Supporting teacher learning at the RHCLC through the assistance of a knowledgeable consultant increases the learning and achievement of students. It would be beneficial to continue such support.

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