

**Journal 3:**

*Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom*

**Kimberley Daly**

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**Dr. Woolsey**

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## Introduction

As it seems more useful for me to link the readings into my teaching and my life at Thomas Edison High School, I have chosen once again to select questions at the end of the chapters we were required to read in H. Lynn Erickson's *Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom*. By writing my journal in this manner, I am able to apply my reading to my classroom experiences, perhaps not just at Edison, but also to what I have encountered over the last 13 years.

Question 1: In too many high school districts, a high percentage of students do not read adequately for middle school and high school work. They face the possibility of being denied a high school diploma. What steps could be taken by school district administration to address the problem?

In the text, there is actually more to this question but I am going to stop there because it is this first part of the question which struck me the most. One of the classes I teach is a remediation class for students who failed the Virginia English Standards of Learning (SOL) examinations. I currently have seven students in that class and have those students until January. Edison is on a block schedule where some students have semester courses and other students have embedded courses. IB courses are embedded but this course is on a semester schedule. The students come to me with various reasons why they failed either the writing or reading SOL tests but they all have one thing in common. Not one single student in that class reads enough and all argue with me when I suggest that they read anything regardless of how short it is. These

students are the most reluctant of learners, the most difficult to reach because they have decided that first, the tests are stupid, and second, the things tested on the assessments are meaningless to them in their lives. I have a very difficult time making them understand that there is a value in reading and writing well. For example, one of my current students is also enrolled in our vocational academy's HVAC program and earns significant money working as a heating and air conditioning technician. When he completes high school, he will have a HVAC certification. It is very difficult to explain why knowing how a metaphor works in a passage will help him in real life.

In this remediation class, students get the chance to retake the assessments they have failed but remain with me until the end of the semester. The reading issue the value of reading is always at odds in the classroom. There is no required reading list for this class, only the mandate that I get these students to pass the test or tests (some of these students have failed both the reading and writing SOL tests). I can use any text or book that I want with the exception that it is not something that is being covered on another grade level or something that my students will get in another course. Towards that end, I have pulled articles from popular magazines, obscure horror, science fiction, memoirs and biographies of people they find interesting and even culled selections from the IB book list. Sex and violence have never been off limits, nor has gore. Since many of the students I get in this course are 18 and sometimes older, I have sought out and obtained permission from my department chairperson to teach excerpts that are on banned lists in many other places including excerpts from *Slaughterhouse 5*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. For the record, *The Handmaid's Tale* is also taught as part of Edison's IB English junior year curriculum but I use it with these students because there is no

chance of any overlap. Getting these students to read is always a battle and every day I go into fully armored. I just never knew how bloody I will come out.

Getting back to the question, I think the lack of reading is a definite factor in these students' difficulty in passing the graduation tests. The passages on these tests are long, running 800-1100 words and the students who are not practiced readers do not have the patience and the focus to read those passages. In addition, the passages on the reading assessment in particular, come from literature, science, and history and are a mix of fiction and nonfiction. Unskilled readers do not have as much skill with main idea, supporting details, and inferencing tasks, all of which are needed to pass these assessments. The reading SOL, for example, averages approximately 19 questions asking a student to demonstrate they can work with main ideas and supporting details. If a student cannot do this, it is highly likely that they will not pass this assessment. In grade 11, students are required to pass the two English assessments in order to receive a high school diploma. They cannot simply pass the course, fail the test with a 375 or above and receive the verified credit as is allowed in other subjects. This is another reason reading is so crucial.

One way school districts can address the problem is to address struggling students earlier than in their 12<sup>th</sup> grade year, after they have failed the tests. In Fairfax County, for instance, there is a very good literacies program consisting of three distinct courses. My course is the last in the sequence. However, in my school, it is the only one that runs consistently every fall and even that is an issue because we do not run the course in the spring and the students who need the assistance I provide get "dumped" into another course where I have to provide the assistance I do in the fall while I teach something else. After having this situation for two years and heading into my third, I can say that simply doesn't work. The first course in the literacies series, a

course called Developing Literacies, is for ninth grade students who need a little extra support with reading and writing skills but also provides instruction in study skills and organization. It is never offered at my school because of the existence of another program called Focus. The second course, Expanding Literacies, is the course I teach in the spring and is for 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders who need support in reading and writing. Technically, the students in this class should not have taken the Virginia exams yet or have not failed them. They may have been formerly English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students who need additional support or simply general education students who need additional support. This spring, I am slated to teach Expanding Literacies 1 and Expanding Literacies 2 at the same time. I expect our guidance department will also put a few students who also really need the third course but since we aren't offering it into my classroom. What they code these students for remains to be seen. Edison has routinely had this problem for two reasons. The first is staffing. We are on a block schedule and the county does staffing numbers by looking at teachers having a total load of 150 students. When teachers are on a block schedule with embedded classes like myself, there's no way to hit the 150 number. My 90 IB English 2 students, although they meet all year and make for a hellish grading load for me, coupled with seven remediation students now until January and then 21 additional students (as of now) beginning in January will never hit that 150 magic number. My daily load is higher than most faculty who only have semester classes. Those teachers teach three classes daily with a cap of about 24 students, making about 75 students a semester. The county never sees Edison as priority for relief or additional staffing which is why we can never staff the additional remediation classes. Asking the county for a teacher for 7 kids continually gets turned down. The problem is that kids slip through the cracks and I am stuck basically teaching three courses at the same time during a semester. In a standards-based world,

this is not a way to keep children from being left behind. In addition, when second language learners continually fail the state mandated tests members of my department, including myself are beginning to have to provide answers to administration and county supervisors for it. After-school remediation and pre-test practice sessions have not helped with these students as these students are the most economically disadvantaged and also need to work after school to help support families.

Question 2: Why should we spend time designing instructional units for the year when a textbook “has it all”?

When I saw this question, I actually started to think back a number of years. It has been almost seven years since I taught out of a textbook for any of my classes. Since coming to Virginia and not since midway through my last job in New Jersey did I teach from one of those large English anthologies because of the nature of the classes I taught. I am personally inclined to think this is a good thing because it has allowed me to not just slip into a comfortable position of having my students know facts and simple vocabulary. I actually have to create lessons that are create and that stimulate the minds on the upper levels. I do realize from my experience in graduate school methodology classes that I always seemed to design my lessons for the two upper levels of Bloom anyway. I somehow had that in my head as a goal in the first place. The classes I have taught over the last seven years also have not always been the types of classes that have had the required textbook. I taught honors 10 and photojournalism/yearbook, a remediation class very similar to the one I teach now, and then my current schedule of IB English 2 and senior remediation. None of these classes had used one of those large anthologies that are often

so present in English classroom and often are accompanied by a giant box of lessons, copy masters, overheads, assessments, differentiation materials, projects books, and scores of other goodies, Working with honors and IB classes allowed me to change books every year if I desired to do so and I have been pretty careful to choose books that do not have many student study aids accompaniments such as *Cliff Notes* unless I had no other choice. This has given me the freedom to create better lesson plans and instructional units in the long run and has probably made me a better teacher by keeping me away from those preconceived materials.

## References

Erickson, H. L. (2007). *Concept-based curriculum and instruction for the thinking classroom*.

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