

**Carol Santa (Project Criss):**

### **Adolescent Literacy: Learning across the Content Areas**

Too many of our adolescent learners are not reaching the level of literacy proficiency they need to be successful. We only have to pick up the latest newspaper or journal to read about the escalating drop-out rate or the statistics about students lacking the literacy skills to succeed in secondary schools and colleges.

When sifting through research and my own practical wisdom ([www. projectcriss.com](http://www.projectcriss.com)) about improving adolescent literacy, four principles emerge as essential for helping students become more effective readers and learners. They are: (1.) Classroom communities and relationships (2.) Strategy instruction throughout the content areas. (3) A student framework for learning, and (4) Professional development

I have listed classroom communities and relationships first because all learning rests with positive human relationships. Students work for teachers they like--they need to connect with teachers before they will put in the effort to succeed. In these days of high stakes assessment, scripted curriculum, and educational mandates, we sometimes forget this underlying principle-- and why

we became teachers in the first place. Successful learning and teaching has far more to do with human relationships than with the content of our classes.

Next, teaching students how to learn must occur within the content subjects where teachers include direct, explicit, comprehension instruction as part of daily instruction. Each content area requires different approaches to learning--learning effectively in science demands different strategies than responding to a poem in American literature. Gone are the days when content teachers merely assigned students to read without showing them how to learn their content. Moreover, research supporting strategy instruction is one of the most well documented areas of literacy research. Effective content teachers show, tell, demonstrate, and explain not only the content but the processes of active reading and learning.

The third principle is helping students internalize a framework for learning to use as the foundation for learning in any content area. This framework centers on what it means to be a metacognitive learner. Metacognitive learners monitor their own learning. They know whether or not they are understanding and have ways of going back and fixing their understanding when their comprehension breaks down. Metacognitive learners have internalized the following processes:

- (1) They relate information to their own **background knowledge** and have a **purpose** for reading.
- (2) They know the **authors craft** differs by content area and how to use the author's style of writing for comprehending
- (3) They **impose structure** on what they read by organizing information through notes, charts, and concept maps, etc.
- (4) They use **writing** and **discussion** as

tools for learning (5) When the going gets tough, metacognitive learners don't give up—they **self-check** their learning and **actively persist** after meaning. These metacognitive ingredients comprise a framework for learning from any kind of text. Learning strategies may differ by content area but the underlying principles are the same regardless of content. As teachers, we must help students internalize these principles so they can apply them to any learning situation.

Finally, building classroom communities and relationships, incorporating strategy instruction throughout the curriculum, and helping students internalize a framework for learning cannot be captured in a teacher's manual or in one-shot staff development programs. Teacher expertise is the variable making the most difference in student learning. Helping content teachers modify their teaching to include process along with content frequently means a philosophical shift in what it means to teach for teachers who see their role as primarily as disseminators of content. Whether the staff development program is homegrown, developed as part of a school and university collaboration, or conducted by outside experts, effective student learning must become a long-term, multi-year goal.

