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Intentional Instructional Practices for Engagement in Literacy

by Brandy Archer, Michigan Department of Education

When students complete high school they should be prepared for career, college, and community. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) defines this as the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively, problem solve, use appropriate technology and tools, and have confidence in constructing arguments as well as critiquing the reasoning of others. For students to gain these skills, experiences in the classroom must match the end in mind. Intentional planning to implement specific practices in the classroom can assist educators in attending to the three pieces of the puzzle that add up to the art of effective teaching: standards, instruction, and culture. These pieces include the **standards** students are striving for; acknowledgment of the **culture** of the students, teacher, and classroom; and consideration of specific strategies for **instruction** that best match the learning goal.

The MDE is supporting schools with four practices for effective teaching. One of those practices is intentional instruction of **academic vocabulary** to increase comprehension and to build background knowledge. A primary reason for achievement gaps is a deficit in vocabulary. The vocabulary disparity impacts background knowledge and access to higher levels of text, conversation, and writing, especially when students lack understanding of Tier 2 words that are can be described as “book language” and are often used in direction-giving. Some ways to enhance students’ vocabulary include focusing on word networks and spending time having students create definitions and graphic representations of words.

A second practice is to use **flexible grouping** and cooperative learning to facilitate instruction of rigorous tasks. Opportunities to collaborate,

communicate, and problem solve can allow for the higher-level reasoning and critical thinking necessary to improve student achievement. In flexible grouping, students move in and out of individual, small group, and whole group learning activities. The purpose of grouping students is to allow conversation and divisions of labor that allow for more rigorous thinking and doing around a task.

Providing tasks at varying **depths of knowledge** to increase rigor and to scaffold learning in the classroom is an example of a third intentional instructional practice. Thinking of the tasks presented to students in terms of levels can help educators understand entrance points of learning for students at varying levels. The following four levels: recall, skill/concept, strategic reasoning, and extended reasoning help to define the critical thinking involved at varying depths of knowledge. A task at level one focuses on recall and requires a “right answer.” Level two tasks focus on application of skills or concepts and also require a “right answer.” Level three tasks focus on reasoning and allow for more than one correct answer. In engagement with level four tasks students are planning, thinking, and making real world applications in new situations. An illustration of this is embedded in the ELA standards. For example, when looking at the anchor standards for literary text, you can see that the level of critical thinking grows as you read from Standards 1-3 regarding key ideas and details to Standards 7-9 for integrating knowledge and details.

Educators can use **quality questioning** to advance student learning, performance, and achievement. This fourth practice focuses on teachers AND students asking questions that inspire critical thinking. Artful question-asking places the teacher in a facilitator role and helps

students access the learning in meaningful and relevant terms. In the literacy classroom simple questions such as “What do you think?” and “Can you tell me more?” easily take students to deeper levels of thinking.

Although the intentional instructional practices are presented here through the lens of literacy, these high-leverage practices can be used across grade levels and content areas. To access MDE supports for these practices, please visit http://www.mi.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-28753_65803-337180—,00.html

Brandy Archer serves as the Content Area Literacy Consultant at the Michigan Department of Education. In addition to providing English Language Arts support for the department, Brandy promotes messaging and resources for implementing intentional instructional practices. Currently, her work centers on the MDE’s early literacy and mathematics initiative. Brandy can be reached by email at archerb2@michigan.gov.

When **Standards**, **Instruction**, and **Culture** intersect we’ll see...

