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Spotlight On... Surface Learning: A Strong Start for Meaningful Learning and Powerful Impacts

In the [October 2016](#) edition of *Literacy Links*, we introduced the concept of a three-phase model of literacy learning: surface, deep, and transfer. In this edition, we focus on the surface level of literacy learning as a foundation to much deeper learning.

Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey, noted education researchers who have produced numerous professional texts supporting literacy instruction, frame their approach around three phases: surface, deep, and transfer. Although transfer of learning is a critical component of any proficiency-based system of learning, examining and understanding each phase of learning is essential to creating the conditions for demonstration of learning transfer.

Surface learning is characterized by building fast thinking and automaticity, but it involves more than skimming or recall. Tapping a student's prior knowledge of a subject or topic, revealing embedded misunderstandings, and providing appropriate corrective instruction builds a strong foundation for building deep learning. Surface learning can be categorized into two sub phases: acquisition and consolidation.

The primary goal of the acquisition phase is to help students summarize and outline the topic of study. During this phase of learning, students learn the essentials of the topic, the basic building blocks for moving toward a larger learning goal. Consider the act of learning to drive a car. Students must first experience classroom instruction about the principles of driving including parts of the car, rules of the road, and motor vehicle symbol systems before they can actually get behind the wheel and drive a car.

The consolidation phase is when learning is reinforced. Students adjust understandings based on testing their ideas and responding to feedback. Consolidating freshly acquired knowledge and skills takes time, repetition, practice, rehearsal, and feedback.

“To simply state that inferential questions are good and recall questions are bad is wrong. Timing and context are vital considerations.”

~Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (p. 38)



“...almost everything in published research works at least some of the time with some students. Our challenge as a profession is to become more precise in what we do and when we do it.”

~Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (p. 36)

Some examples of surface level learning:

- Leveraging prior knowledge
- Phonics instruction
- Direct vocabulary instruction in context
- Repeated reading
- Reading comprehension
- Summarizing and outlining

Strategies to support surface learning are familiar to educators. The key to building a successful foundation for deep and transfer learning during the surface learning phase is to know what the student needs at the moment. Identifying the key learning at the moment and providing direct instruction targeted to that learning need enhances surface learning to make it meaningful, useful, and personal.

Online resources to support surface learning:

[Read, Write, Think](#)

This website is searchable and provides a rich variety of lessons and tools to support specific instructional topics.

[Summarizing: Reading Rockets](#)

Reading Rockets is a bank of literacy-related information and resources compiled by the Public Broadcasting System. Details about a variety of surface learning strategies, such as this one on summarizing, can be found at this valuable site.

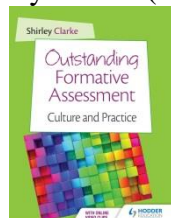
Professional Texts

Formative assessment is particularly important to the surface learning phase. Shirley Clarke is a leading proponent and researcher of formative assessment. The following books are written in educator friendly language and include specific examples of formative assessment practices in a variety of classrooms. They ship from England so they tend to be a bit pricey.

[Outstanding Formative Assessment:](#)

[Culture and Practice](#)

Shirley Clarke (2014)



“When you learn new things, these tiny connections in the brain actually multiply and get stronger. The more that you challenge your mind to learn, the more your brain cells grow. Then, things that you once found very hard or even impossible to do – like speaking a foreign language or doing algebra – seem to become easy. The result is a stronger, smarter brain.”

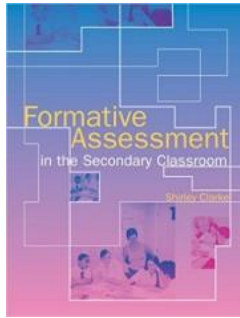
Carole Dweck, (2011)



Clarke provides a brief explanation of formative assessment and precise lesson components such as effective starts and ends as well as models of effective feedback.

Formative Assessment in the Secondary Classroom

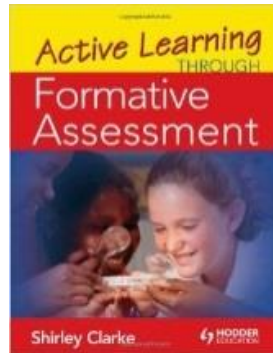
Shirley Clarke (2005)



Clarke provides explanations and examples specific to secondary classrooms relative to most content areas (not just ELA).

Active Learning Through Formative Assessment

Shirley Clarke (2008)



Clarke demonstrates how to maximize student engagement, effective dialogue, and reflective thinking. Practical advice and specific examples across grade span and content areas included.

Literature for Children and Adolescents

The Most Magnificent Thing

By Ashley Spires



To explore potential training sessions that may be of interest, be sure to check our extensive list of professional development offerings at

www.maine.gov/doe/calendar/



Perseverance and creativity are two qualities educators work hard to instill in learners. In this engaging story, a young girl and her best friend model the adage, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

[Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard \(series\)](#)



Amazon has identified some of the most “wished for” teen and young adult books. *Harry Potter*, *The Walking Dead*, and monsters aplenty populate this list. No surprise: Rick Riordan is a huge favorite!

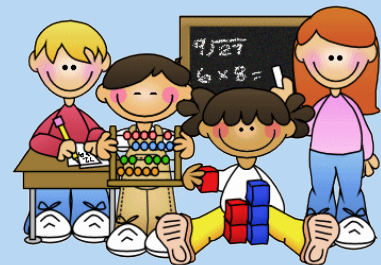
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