

Teachers know how students learn to be powerfully literate

The Accomplished Teacher in the English/Literacy Classroom

Listening and Speaking

For accomplished teachers, talk is at the centre of English curriculum and pedagogy.

Their classrooms are rich linguistic communities in which all students participate. They give focused attention to various aspects of listening and speaking, teaching their students to listen actively and to share their ideas and experiences. Crucial in this respect is the establishment of a classroom environment that supports productive interaction between students in both small group situations and whole class activities. Accomplished teachers know how to structure such activities so that their students are able to jointly construct knowledge through talk.

Accomplished teachers understand that their students may belong to communities that speak a diverse range of dialects and languages other than English. They are adept at devising strategies that encourage all students to participate in the language of the classroom, including students who may otherwise be disengaged from schooling. They are sensitive to the needs of individual students, to the range of skills and abilities that students evince as listeners and speakers, and to the way oral language is bound up with self esteem. They understand the complexities of code switching, enabling their students to learn about the variety of discourses in which they participate from day to day, and the protocols associated with each. They celebrate this rich linguistic diversity, while teaching their students to handle the linguistic conventions of discourse communities or situations with which they may not be familiar, including discourses of power and influence.

They enable students to make their knowledge of oral communication explicit, building on and extending their knowledge of the diverse linguistic communities that constitute Australian society. Accomplished teachers teach their students to monitor their listening and speaking, encouraging them to internalise criteria with which to gauge the effectiveness of their exchanges with others.

Accomplished teachers value oral communication as a means for all students to participate in the English curriculum, and they are skilled at using oral work as a basis for writing and reading and critical thinking. Through listening and speaking, their students engage in imaginative play, negotiating issues of value and identity in a way that is unique to the English classroom. For such teachers, classroom talk is a vital medium for exploring the interface between school and community, for mediating between the formal demands of schooling and the linguistic communities to which their students belong.

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Writing

Accomplished teachers value writing as a means of grappling with language and meaning. They have a finely tuned sense of the complexities of the writing process, and they use this knowledge to support their students to write texts for a diverse range of purposes and audiences. They encourage all their students to experiment with and to learn about new genres and forms of communication, including digital and multimedia texts. They know that learning to write is a process of learning how to mean, that each type of writing involves a specific set of conventions, a specific way of representing the world.

They encourage their students to see writing as a means of actively participating in their local community and the larger society. Their students might be writing letters to the editor of a local newspaper, designing picture story books for children at the local kindergarten, or developing multimedia texts to be published on their school's website – accomplished teachers seize every opportunity to promote writing for real purposes and audiences.

Accomplished teachers teach in the expectation that they will learn from their students. They recognise that their students bring a wealth of experience and knowledge into their classrooms which constitutes an invaluable resource for writing. They devise strategies that enable their students to draw on cultural practices outside school, including the rich semiotic resources of popular culture.

As teachers of writing, they are also conscious of the critical expertise and knowledge that they have to offer their students. They are committed to extending their students' repertoires as text producers, heightening their awareness of the enormous range of texts available to them. As well as the stories, poems and plays that are typically used in English classes, they are always seeking out new genres, including texts associated with the work place, politics, advertising and other public domains. Magazines, sit-coms, comic books, computer games, posters, prose poems, information brochures – all such texts provide potential models for students in their attempts to learn how to mean. Accomplished teachers know that learning to write is more than simply learning to emulate pre-existing conventions or knowledge, but a matter of experimenting with forms, testing boundaries and gaining critical insight into the ways texts work.

Accomplished teachers endeavour to motivate their students, even when they encounter resistance. They are adept at devising prewriting activities, giving students time to talk about possible ideas for writing and to consider what they would like to achieve. They establish classroom structures and routines that enable students to learn through revising their work. Their classrooms are writing workshops in which students are able to discuss their work with each other, benefiting from feedback from their peers. They encourage their students to internalize criteria that allow them to assess their own and each other's writing in supportive ways. Accomplished teachers also sense when they need to intervene and make explicit key skills and aspects of language, whether it be note taking or the use of nominalisations in argumentative writing or other linguistic conventions.

Accomplished teachers are acutely aware of the diverse range of abilities and needs of students in their class. They devise strategies that enable all students to engage in writing that is personally meaningful to them. When they assess their students' writing, they give them specific feedback that allows them to revise their writing in appropriate ways and to develop as writers. They are alert to opportunities to extend their students' range of written skills, building on their accomplishments to open up new dimensions of language. They are especially sensitive to the needs of students who are experiencing literacy difficulties, for whom writing may be a strange and alienating task.

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Reading

For accomplished teachers, reading is always a purposeful activity. They might be giving support to beginning readers in their initial encounters with print texts, or working with adolescent readers as they investigate popular culture, or facilitating senior students' engagement with poetry – all reading should engage students in personally meaningful activities, allowing them to make connections between texts and their own knowledge, values, and experiences.

Accomplished teachers know that all forms of reading involve prediction and interaction, framing and interpretation, an active process of constructing meaning. It is never simply a matter of receiving or absorbing the meaning of a text. Meaning is always the product of an interaction or exchange between readers and texts.

Accomplished teachers understand how readers draw on a complex repertoire of cognitive skills when they engage with texts. With beginning readers, this means teaching them to employ a systematic range of strategies in order to make sense of print. Accomplished teachers make finely tuned professional judgements about the knowledge and skills of their students, and they know when it is appropriate to intervene in order to teach their students new skills when reading new texts.

Accomplished teachers know that learning to read is a life long process, and that different kinds of texts require a diverse range of interpretive strategies. They know that reading serves a variety of purposes, including information gathering, pleasure in the play of words and imaginative world of the text, as well as critical discussion and insight. Their aim is to enable students to develop an awareness of the different strategies required when interacting with texts, whether fiction or non-fiction, imaginative or practical.

Accomplished teachers recognise that adolescents engage in a complex range of literacy practices, and that their dialogue with students should embrace more than simply novels, plays or poems – the traditional fare of English classes. Their aim is to teach students to become discerning participants in the diverse cultural activities that constitute their daily lives. They understand the complex ways in which texts position readers, and they are committed to alerting their students to how they are positioned by texts. All texts have designs on the reader, and accomplished teachers have developed strategies that allow their students to identify and explore the range of viewpoints presented, as well as those which are silenced by the text. Accomplished teachers provide a classroom environment that allows their students to explore the multiple readings that might be generated by texts. Their classrooms are places in which students can investigate a variety of interpretations, where all texts are open to critical scrutiny.

Accomplished teachers are widely read in children's and adolescent literature, and exercise acute discriminations when matching the right book with a particular student according to their abilities and interests. They know how to use writing to facilitate generative responses to texts, and they are equally adept at devising speaking and listening activities that provide a base for engagement with and evaluation of texts.

When assessing reading, accomplished teachers devise strategies that will allow them to gain information and insight into the needs and abilities of their students and apply this knowledge to advance their reading skills. They are able to exercise discerning professional judgements with respect to professional development packages, intervention programs, diagnostic tests, and other reading materials.

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Viewing

Accomplished teachers know that their students have acquired a rich repertoire of interpretive strategies through engaging with visual and multimedia texts and other popular cultural forms. They enable their students to make these interpretive practices explicit and to apply this knowledge to other texts. They understand that students' skills as readers of visual texts are often more sophisticated than their skills with print literacy, and that focused attention on interpretive strategies associated with visual literacy can provide a basis for students to reflect on their strategies when dealing with print texts.

Accomplished teachers draw on the analytical skills their students have developed through reading visual texts, encouraging them to articulate the critical insights and pleasures they gain from viewing, including the power of visual imagery and the range of emotions that images can evoke. They understand that students sometimes require encouragement and explicit teaching to gain a critical perspective on the films, television programs and advertisements they find entertaining. They devise strategies that enable their students to explore the complexities of framing and interpretation of visual texts, to recognise links between texts, and to acknowledge how their own experiences and values cause them to read these texts in certain ways. They also seek opportunities to introduce specific genres and conventions that might be peculiar to certain types of visual texts. Their aim is to teach their students how to engage in a sustained analysis of these texts without diminishing their pleasure.

Accomplished teachers understand that they must provide their students with the specialised language of viewing and visual texts in order to describe, deconstruct and critique these texts. This process commences in the early years by focusing on the use and effect of camera angles, the role of composition and framing, and other aspects of visual literacy. When teaching adolescents, accomplished teachers enable students to build on their existing knowledge of the technical, symbolic and written codes of visual texts, and to engage in an increasingly sophisticated analysis of the ways such texts imply a certain set of values and beliefs. They also focus on the impact that structural elements, such as linear narrative or non-linear hypertext, have on the way readers engage with visual texts.

Accomplished teachers understand that visual texts constitute a vital element of popular culture that shapes their students' understandings of self, society and an increasingly globalised environment. By focusing on visual texts in the classroom, students can begin to raise questions about inclusion and exclusion, stereotypes and archetypes, popular culture, mass media and marketing. They can critique the values promoted by popular cultural texts, exploring their own values and the values of the larger society. Rather than seeking to protect students from popular culture texts, accomplished teachers encourage them to critically evaluate such texts and to make an informed decision before accepting or rejecting them.

Accomplished teachers recognise the multimodal nature of many visual texts. They draw their students' attention to the ways that written texts are transformed when juxtaposed with visual images in picture books and display advertising. They also enable their students to explore how music, sound and voice can be used to support visual images in film and television.

When assessing viewing, accomplished teachers ensure that students have acquired the specialised language of viewing and that they are able to explain how visual texts are constructed and how this construction works on the viewer. In addition to these fundamental understandings of visual texts, accomplished teachers seek opportunities to assess the capacity of students to reflect critically on the way such texts are constructed and their own viewing practices. They focus their assessment on *how* rather than *what* meanings are constructed by engaging with visual texts, and provide opportunities, including the production of visual texts, to help students express and test their understandings.