

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Comprehension Strategies for Struggling Readers

Donald Deshler, Ph.D. • January 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Comprehension Strategies

### Highlights

- Research suggests specific instructional practices that can help struggling students, beginning with providing students with a clear rationale about why it's important for them to learn and practice reading strategies.
- Dr. Deshler describes comprehension practices used by expert teachers that include modeling the thinking process students can use while reading, modeling explicit comprehension strategies, and engaging students in a cognitive apprenticeship to help them better understand how good readers approach text.
- Expert teachers provide students with opportunities for practice, scaffold learning, and offer feedback that is timely, specific, and emphasizes what the student has done correctly.
- After scaffolded practice, it is important for students to learn how to transfer and generalize the strategies they've learned to other instructional materials and other contexts.

## About the Interviewee

Donald Deshler is Director of the Center for Research on Learning (CRL) and the Gene A. Budig Teaching Professor of Special Education in the School of Education at the University of Kansas. The work of the CRL focuses on the validation of academic strategies to enable adolescents to meet state assessment standards and successfully graduate from college prepared to compete in the global economy. The CRL's work addresses ways to close the large "achievement gap" and reduce the escalating dropout rate within a world in which students must be prepared to meet increased academic and employment standards. Deshler and his colleagues have completed in excess of \$172 million of contracted R & D work related to the Content Literacy Continuum—a tiered intervention framework for raising literacy achievement for all adolescents.

Deshler serves as an advisor on adolescent achievement to several organizations including the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the National Governor's Association, the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Council on Families and Literacy, and the U. S. State Department. He recently received a presidential appointment to serve as a member of the National Institute for Literacy Advisory Board. He has presented on matters of educational policy regarding adolescent literacy to the nation's governors at the James B. Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy and has testified in Congress and several state legislatures on secondary school reform. Through the Aspen Institute, he has worked with members of Congress to shape policies addressing the challenges of high school reform. Deshler is the recipient of numerous awards including the J.E. Wallace Wallin Award for leadership in educational research, the Maxwell J. Schleifer Distinguished Service Award, and the Higuchi Research Achievement Award. Deshler's most recent textbook (with Annemarie Palincsar, Gina Biancarosa, and Marnie Nair) is *Informed Choices: Principles and Programs for Adolescent Literacy*.

## Full Transcript

I'm Don Deshler. I work at the University of Kansas where I'm a professor in the School of Education, and I serve as the Director of the Center for Research on Learning. Something that I am most excited about is the amount of progress that has been made within our field about learning how to most effectively teach students who struggle.

While there's many things that we still need to learn, we know a sufficient amount that we can develop very solid programs. Among the things that we frequently see in those classrooms where "master teachers" are applying their craft are these things: They are very good at clearly giving the rationale to students, "Here's why we're engaged in doing this. There's a few things within your approach to reading that can be enhanced. Hence, there's this strategy that we'd like to spend some time working on. But here's how it can pay some dividends for you." If they're going to be investing their time and their energy, they want to know,

“What is the payoff? What is going to be the return on my investment?” And we have an obligation to do that and to provide them with clear rationales and make them partners in the learning process with us.

Another thing that we see master teachers using is to do wonderful models of how to use a new learning strategy. If I am going to teach you how to improve your golf swing, it’s a relatively easy thing to show because it’s a physical act. You know, I can say, “Okay, you hold your left arm a little more straight. You go back. You swivel your hips. Can you feel that? I can demonstrate it.”

When I’m saying, “Here’s how you should think about this paragraph that you are going to be reading,” that’s something that is going on inside one’s head, and that’s where we need to rely on what we often refer to as expert teacher thinking or providing students with a cognitive apprenticeship. Here, the teacher is a master learner, and he or she is sharing their craft of learning with the student. And one of the ways to do that is to model for them how they actually go about approaching a reading task. And they make visible and audible to the student, things that they’re thinking about in their mind. “Here, this is by this author. When I’ve read this person before, it’s been a little difficult. I found it was helpful if I look at the summary. I think that’s where I will start.” And you point out to the student, “Those are some of the things that I quickly go through in my mind.” So, teachers who are effective in helping students close the gap are ones who understand the importance of modeling and not just doing it one time.

A third one is how opportunities for practice are designed and structured by the teacher for the student to follow. Master teachers recognize that, and one of the things that they do is they scaffold learning experiences for students. And so, they are very careful in the selection of the reading materials that they give them practice within. They want them to be at a level that the students can comprehend the text, but they also have an opportunity to practice the new strategies within the text, and they don’t get overly frustrated with it. But as confidence grows, then the master teacher notches up the difficulty level of the text, and the supports that he or she as a teacher might be providing to the student, the prompts that they might be providing to the student, tend to be pulled away.

That bridges into or should be very closely coupled with that is that the way in which teachers provide feedback to students. Now, one of the most powerful things that teachers can do, I believe where they quite frankly really earn their salaries is how they look at responses that students have made, how they analyze those responses and say, “Okay, here is where we really need to focus in on some additional information to the students so they can understand how they’re performing at this point in time.”

So, we find that the most helpful feedback is feedback that is timely, that happens as soon after what a student practices as possible, that is specific—that is, we outline, “Here’s what you did correctly.” The primary reason we say, “Here’s specifically what you are doing well,” is so that they remember next time I want to repeat that particular behavior. We sometimes will ask the student to repeat back to us, “Okay, now, next time you practice tomorrow, what are you going to focus on?” We want to push as much of the responsibility for learning onto the student and have them engaged in the process of setting goals and

predicting and so forth what they are going to be doing with their learning.

Something that then follows after good scaffolded practice coupled out with feedback is we need to make certain that we deliberately teach students how to generalize and transfer the specific skills or strategies that we've been teaching to them. Very explicitly build in to the instructional routine opportunities for the student to generalize the skills and strategies that were taught to other instructional materials and contexts where the students are prompted to use the strategies in other settings. And even there's collaborative planning with other teachers, where those other teachers that the student encounters throughout the school day can prompt the student to use the strategies at the appropriate time.