

One Content, Every Skill

Why threading the same content through all of language arts builds knowledge and frees students to learn the skill

Imagine a student who reads about a community on Monday, writes an essay about that same community on Tuesday, studies its vocabulary on Wednesday, practices grammar in its sentences on Thursday, and edits a paragraph about it on Friday. That student never has to stop and learn a brand new topic before practicing a language arts skill, so the skill is where the effort goes. This is threaded content, and it does two things at once. It lets students spend their energy on the writing, reading, spelling, and grammar rather than on a constant stream of new information, and it builds the deep, connected knowledge that reading comprehension depends on. The research on both is strong.

Knowledge is the engine of comprehension

Reading comprehension is not a free floating skill that works the same on any text. It rides on what the reader already knows. In a now classic study, researchers gave students a passage about a baseball game and found that a student's knowledge of baseball predicted how well they understood the passage better than their measured reading ability did, so that students with lower reading ability who knew baseball outperformed students with higher reading ability who did not (**Recht & Leslie, 1988**). The lesson is that knowledge is not a nice extra for comprehension, it is the engine. A curriculum that builds a student's knowledge is building the very thing that lets them read to learn (**Cabell & Hwang, 2020**).

When the content is already familiar, the student is free to spend everything on the skill. When the content is always new, the skill competes with the topic for the same attention.

Familiar content frees the mind for the skill

A working mind can only hold so much at once. When a lesson asks a student to learn a new topic and a new skill in the same breath, the two compete for limited attention, and the skill usually loses. A student wrestling to understand an unfamiliar passage has little left over for crafting a thesis about it. Threaded content removes that competition. Because the content is already known from earlier in the week, the student can pour full attention into the move that matters, the thesis, the evidence, the spelling pattern, the edit. The same familiar material becomes a stable workshop where one skill after another can be practiced without the cost of starting over.

Building knowledge builds readers

When language arts is anchored in real content rather than disconnected passages, students gain both knowledge and literacy. A study of ninety four fourth grade classrooms found that an approach integrating content instruction with reading and writing produced stronger content understanding and vocabulary than business as usual teaching **(Cervetti, Barber, Dorph, Pearson, & Goldschmidt, 2012)**. And because knowledge compounds, the effect reaches the students who need it most. Children who arrive with more background knowledge learn new words and understand new stories better than children who arrive with less **(Kaefer, Neuman, & Pinkham, 2015)**, which means a knowledge rich, threaded curriculum is also a matter of fairness, giving every student the shared content that comprehension requires.

Why threading beats switching

Every time a lesson switches to a new topic, it spends time and attention that could have gone to the skill, and it leaves the knowledge shallow, a scattered set of facts that never connect. Threading the same content across the week does the opposite. It deepens knowledge through repetition in different forms, reading it, writing it, spelling its words, editing its sentences, so the content is seen from many angles and truly learned. It also makes the language arts skills transfer, because the student practices the same move on familiar ground until the move itself, not the topic, is what they are thinking about. Depth, transfer, and fairness all point the same way.

Thread one strong content through the whole week, and students stop learning a new topic every day and start mastering the skill that was the point all along.

What this means for Teach BIG

This is the reason we anchor the year in stable content, such as our social studies topics, and run that same content through the writing process, essays, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, editing, and revising. A student is not asked to switch gears and learn something new before every skill. Instead they meet one rich topic again and again, each time practicing a different language arts skill on ground they already know. The path runs from familiar content, to the freed attention that lets the skill take center stage, to the deep and connected knowledge that makes an established reader. Threaded content is not only more efficient. It is how we build both the knowledge and the skill at the same time, which is exactly what a language arts program is supposed to do.

References

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