

The Nine Principles of Effective Teachers

By Charles Dickerson

The importance of being an effective literacy teacher cannot be understated. Indeed, literacy has much to do with how we communicate with and understand others. Without effective literacy skills, we are left limited in our ability to understand the world around us and to contribute to it. Literacy by definition is the ability to read and write. Further, it is the competence or knowledge in a specified area.

In her book *Literacy for the 21st Century: A Balanced Approach* (2005), Gail Tompkins discusses how the practice of becoming an effective literacy teacher contributes to the overall effectiveness of said teacher. She explains that the goal of literacy instruction is to ensure that all students achieve their full literacy potential, and in the first chapter of her book, she introduces nine principles of balanced literacy instruction. These principles are stated in terms of what effective teachers do.

The first principle is effective teachers understand how students learn. She explains that student-centered theories that advocate children's active engagement in authentic literacy activities have become more influential over time. She further explains that while three of the most important theories are constructivism, sociolinguistics, and information processing, over the last two decades, a fourth theory – behaviorism – has begun a resurgence. These theories are best put into practice as educators teach using the seven learning styles: visual (spatial), aural (auditory-musical), verbal (linguistic), physical (kinesthetic), logical (mathematical), social (interpersonal), and solitary (intrapersonal). Tompkins argues that as teachers better understand how students learn, they can better recognize and understand their students' learning styles, and design techniques better suited for their students. This helps to improve the efficiency and overall quality of the learning environment.

Tompkins' second principle is effective teachers support students' use of the cueing systems. English, like other languages, involves four cueing systems: the phonological, or sound system; the syntactic, or structural, system; the semantic, or meaning, system; and the pragmatic, or social and cultural use, system. Together these systems make communication possible. Furthermore, we use all four systems simultaneously as we speak, listen, read, and write. The phonological cueing system helps readers to sound out unknown words. The syntactic cueing system gives the reader clues from the sentence structure as they can predict what type of word will come next in a sentence from their knowledge of the English sentence structure. The semantic cueing system involves using clues in the text to determine the meaning of an unknown word. The pragmatic cueing system states that based on the reader's background and the context of the reading, the reader has certain expectations for the text. For example, when the reader's cultural background is different from the author's, he may have trouble using this cueing system because expectations differ.

Principle three is effective teachers create a community of learners. To help create said community of learners, teachers must create a classroom community comprised of specific identifiable characteristics that are conducive to learning. These include safety, respect, high expectations, risk taking, collaboration, choice, responsibility, and family and community involvement. These characteristics emphasize the teachers' role in creating an inviting, supportive, and safe classroom climate.

Tompkins' fourth principle is effective teachers adopt a balanced approach to instruction. In a balanced approach to literacy instruction, teachers integrate instruction with authentic

reading and writing and experiences so that students learn how to use literacy strategies and skills, and have opportunities to apply what they are learning. Of course there are differences in what the balance might look like in different classrooms and across different grade levels. However, a balanced approach provides us with a best-practice model for teaching all students how to read and write across all stages of their education.

The fifth principle is effective teachers address standards. Standards, such as the Common Core State Standards, ensure better accountability – holding teachers and schools responsible for happens in classrooms. The practice of aligning learning to standards also helps ensure that a higher level of learning is attained, guides teachers in the process of assessment, and helps keep them on track. Moreover, addressing standards helps to ensure that learning is happening at the proper pace.

Tompkins' sixth principle is effective teachers scaffold students' reading and writing. She states that "teachers scaffold students' reading and writing as they demonstrate, guide, and teach, and they vary the amount of support they provide according to the instructional purpose and students' needs." (Tompkins, 2005, p. 21). This scaffolding may be summarized in five levels of support—modeled, shared, interactive, guided, and independent.

The seventh principle is effective teachers organize for instruction. Effective organization helps in a number of ways. It allows teachers to collect information and put it in order according to its relevance. If instruction is out of order or disorganized, it's difficult to piece together information in a useful way for students. Organizing for instruction also allows teachers to prioritize more effectively when developing curriculum and designing lesson plans.

The eighth principle is effective teachers differentiate instruction. Differentiation involves adjusting the content, the process, and the product. When differentiating the content, teachers identify the information that students need to learn to meet grade-level standards so that every child will be successful. When differentiating the process, teachers vary instruction and application activities to meet students' needs. When differentiating the product, teachers vary how students demonstrate what they've learned. The products include both the projects that students create and the tests used to measure their academic achievement.

Tompkins' ninth principle is effective teachers link instruction and assessment. Assessment in an effectively differentiated classroom is the foundation of successful instructional planning. It is the teacher's analog to the doctor's use of diagnosis. It is the process of coming to understand a student's current learning needs well enough to plan for the best possible instructional processes and outcomes for each learner whose academic welfare is the teacher's responsibility. Devoting time and resources to assessment-instruction during early childhood results in more students having optimal learning outcomes. Further, teachers need to consider how they can improve their teaching through such instruction-assessment practices as planning, monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting so that their students might be more successful.

Wherefore, effective teachers demonstrate their responsibility and commitment to ensuring that their students are successful when they adopt these nine principles.

References

Tompkins, G. E. (2018). *Literacy for the 21st century: A balanced approach 7th Ed.* New York: Pearson.