Introduction

"I would rather teach thirty years once instead of one year thirty times"
-Author Unknown

During my 13 years of teaching high school science, I have had almost every type of student imaginable, rich and poor, in private and public schools, of every shape, size and color.

Adam was under house arrest when he jumped out a (first floor) window. Chris was an experienced thief and budding entrepreneur who tried to start a business called "Pimps Are Us." And then there was Kelly, who cried because her first college choice, MIT, put her on a waiting list. Her second and third choices, Harvard and Stanford, accepted her.

Most of the teachers in this book tell similar stories. All of us constantly search for the best ways to meet the needs of our students, regardless of backgrounds, baggage, and behaviors. I represent my colleagues in my attempt to find the "magic bullet" that will solve all of my teaching woes and help me reach every child.

For example, one summer I spent months typing notes on overheads. I figured students would read my pearls of wisdom and automatically absorb chemistry. It was a great theory until I realized some of the students had limited reading and comprehension skills or because they immediately lapsed into a coma at the thought of staring at an overhead for an hour.

I believed professional digital assistants would be the next big breakthrough in education. I could walk around with what seemed like a computer in the palm of my hand as I assessed students and gathered anecdotal evidence during class activities. The only problem was that I spent more time staring at a tiny screen and trying to figure out what button to push instead of talking to students. The magic bullet finally appeared when I began to look at teaching and learning in terms of Best Practice.

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Best Practice examines research about teaching and learning and then applies this research to actual classroom practice. Success and continuation is based on student achievement; if improvement occurs, than the teacher keeps the practice. If not, we explore new avenues. It is not "guess work." Empirical research destroys the myth that "some kids just get it and some don't" and that "some people are just born teachers." The key is to discover which strategies work for which students and then model and mold these to fit struggling learners.

Ample research and methods have centered on how good readers and thinkers comprehend information (Tovani, 2000; Zimmerman & Hutchins, 2003; Keene and Zimmerman, 1997). Good thinkers interact with the text and undergo a series of processes, or strategies, to gain comprehension. The words, sentences, and paragraphs need to flow together in the readers' heads and form continuity, not just be words on a page. It's our job to help struggling readers not see reading as merely a mechanical process, but as an evaluative one. As Thordike (1917) said, "It is not a small or unworthy task to learn 'what the book says.'" Best Practice strategies include:

     Making Connections – Good readers connect text characters and events to familiar people or events from their own lives or familiar characters from a book or movie to create meaning.

     Questioning- Good readers interact with the text by asking questions and making predictions of what will happen later.

     Visualization-Good thinkers create mental snapshots of events and characters. They don't just read the text; they see it.

     Inferring-Good readers use background information, or schema, to provide information, increase comprehension, and bring familiarity to the text. Readers who draw on past experiences and make analogies have greater understanding with the present.

     Importance-Good thinkers quickly separate the important points, or main ideas, from the trivial details and focus on these.

     Self Monitoring - Good readers know when they are stuck or confused and know how to fix the problem.

     The goal for the teacher is to model these strategies, and then encourage students to practice them during classroom reading and activities.

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Best Practice research emphasizes the reading, thinking, and learning strategies of successful teachers. (*Teacher Evaluation to Enhance Professional Practice* Danielson & McGreal, 2000). Successful teachers know their students' learning styles and abilities, offer positive feedback and constructive criticism, and establish active learning environments to engage even hesitant learners. They grab sudden teachable moments, perhaps during class discussions, to elaborate and focus on; these are the flashes students are more likely to remember. However, the teachers only begin there. They focus on comprehension instruction. They ensure that students understand text, not merely decode the words. They teach students the art of comprehension and the thrill of "getting it" and not just reading the words.

That's why these are not merely reading strategies, but learning and thinking strategies. Students won't get physics and algebra until they comprehend the question and understand the task. Students can't solve math and science problems if they can't *understand*, not just read, the text. Durkin (1978-1979) noted that teachers she observed spent more time on extraneous tasks and minimal time on teaching comprehension. We need to change this.

Struggling students can't do this on their own; perhaps if they could, they wouldn't be struggling. As teachers, we need to model text strategies. We need to ask questions (I wonder what makes Romeo and Juliet so headstrong?), create analogies (they remind me of my cousin Eunice who eloped), make predictions (I think their families will finally get along), introduce background information (if this is like other Shakespeare tragedies, then I'm going to need Kleenex), make connections (they remind me of Tony and Maria in West Side Story) and monitor ourselves (I need to reread this section to get the main idea).

After class, good teachers reflect on what part of the lesson went well, what should be dropped, and what changes are needed for next time.

The following stories are written by teachers who successfully use comprehension strategies across the curriculum. These are our attempts to have students relate to their texts, not just read and forget. They are followed by feedback from a supervisor or administrator. The feedback is not just an opinion or feeling about

how the teacher or students performed. It is an analysis based on a researched framework by Danielson and McGreal. They looked at data and research into what made good teachers and they broke it down into four domains that are illustrated below.

Domain 1: Planning and Preparation
> *Demonstrate knowledge of content and pedagogy*
> *Demonstrate knowledge of students'*
> *Select instructional goals*
> *Demonstrate knowledge of resources*
> *Design coherent instruction*
> *Assessing student learning*

Domain 2: The classroom Environment
> *Create an environment of respect and rapport*
> *Establish a culture for learning*
> *Manage classroom procedures*
> *Manage student behavior*
> *Organize physical space*

Domain 3: Instruction
> *Communicate clearly and accurately*
> *Use questioning and discussion techniques*
> *Engage students in learning*
> *Provide feedback to students*
> *Demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness*

Domain 4: Professional responsibilities
> *Reflect on teaching*
> *Maintain accurate records*
> *Communicate with families*
> *Contribute to the school and district*

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These four domains guide the feedback and constructive criticism that can allow a good teacher to get even better and it elevates the discussion between the evaluator and instructor.

The following authors are candid, sharing "aha!" moments alongside less memorable ones. You are invited to read, reflect, make your own judgments, and extract parts for your classrooms.