

Book Review
**Deepening Literacy Learning:
Art & Literature Engagements in K-8 Classrooms**
By Mary Ann Reilly, Jane M. Gangi, & Rob Cohen

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Antitheses Strongly Marked

Educational research is the critical backbone of sound classroom management and instruction which promotes the growth and development of our youth.

That being said, we've got a subtle, but significant problem. The language of research is altogether other than the language of the common teacher. I have no doubt that modern research has certainly discovered something. No small amount of effort has gone into attempts to convey to me just what that *thing* may actually be. I'm afraid that such fervent explanations have reached this layperson's ears as a mere garble of diverse pitches and sounds; although a general mood of excitement has certainly been conveyed.

So, the researchers, being highly respected by all of us, relay to our leaders this idea that students need to be more than just compliantly engaged in their own learning. It has been discovered that students must instead be actively and genuinely engaged...that is to say, interested in their own learning as in a pursuit that they are personally desirous of getting to the bottom of.

These effective leaders then pass this information down the line and by the time it gets to the classroom teacher it sounds something like the following:

We need you to teach your one-hundred-sixty new concepts and one-hundred-twenty new skills in one-hundred-eighty days, and we need

you to do it in such a manner that the students are genuinely, actively interested and engaged in experiences which cause them to master at a very deep level all of these concepts and skills, while allowing them to visit and re-visit each of the hundreds of concepts and skills many, many times over, that they might demonstrate complete mastery of all. And by the way ... there will be a test!

When a colleague asked me to review Mary Ann Reilly, Jane M. Gangi, and Rob Cohen's *Deepening Literacy Learning: Art and Literature Engagements in K-8 Classrooms*, I had initially said yes without giving it very much thought. This is because when the request was presented to me, I had my hands full. I had a problem I was trying to resolve. On my desk, in a neat stack, were the meager results of my weekly reading assessments ... again. Half my class had failed the test ... again. Therefore, also sitting on my desk were books written about reading instruction. On a nearby table, on surrounding chairs and T.V. trays, arranged almost as though to give me the feeling I was sitting in among the stacks of my local university library, were various reading curricula, lesson plans, and idea upon idea, all of which held the possible solution to my problem.

My problem was not isolated to my own classroom. The entire building was struggling. Not only were we struggling with low test scores, but we were plagued, as well, throughout the building with major behavior challenges. It was not like any typical problem I had ever faced before, but rather more like a cruel riddle which none of us could solve.

I stared at the spine of several books with titles to the following tune: "How to Teach the Struggling Reader." Nowhere in my library was I able to find the book I secretly desired: "How to Save the Struggling Teacher!"

I had just about come to despair of solving my problem with modern, research-based, quality engagement experiences, and was about to turn and tighten down the bolts in my classroom, returning to the old-school tradition which is often signified by the seating of students in *rows and columns*.

Then I acquiescently opened up *Deepening Literacy Learning*. I had felt a little bit like I was *cheating on my homework*. Feeling thus rather nervous, I attempted to skim hastily through the book.

I was promptly halted, as the clean simplicity within made me think about the time when Dr. King was finally introduced to the writings of Mahatma Gandhi. Little did I know that this simple, practical book would end up becoming for me something like a numinous, modern day, *Rosetta Stone*.

My first dawning came at the end of chapter four. This chapter cer-

tainly struck me with a deep and profound sense of *awe*. When I came to my senses, I stood and proclaimed to no audience at all, “Finally and at last! the key to unlocking the language of research so the rest of us can understand!” Reilly, Gangi, and Cohen literally *show* the reader what applied modern research actually looks like, in practice. I was able quite facily to visualize in this book what researchers had failed to teach me through their patient explanations.

The old, traditional idea of enforcing compliant engagement upon our students had suddenly been replaced by the novel idea of active, genuine engagement, which was key to leading students in the complex and magical *wonder* we modern educators seem forced to all but pine for. And within *Deepening Literacy Learning* I saw empirical evidence, not only relaying to me just what it was the researchers were saying, but evidence proving to me that what they were saying was *believable* and *true*.

Remember that magical wonder of the very young child whose play was a most serious business? This is a wonder whose very memory causes every modern day educator to ache and to yearn. And perhaps, it *should* pain us—just enough to help us stand up and oppose the unpetitionable fact of inertia. Inertia! whose persistent resistance to change we always seem prone to befriend! After all, any change may be a threat to our perceived progress.

We moderns have become accustomed to favoring quantity in education, to the neglect of teaching a few specific, yet transferable skills more deeply. I expect that it began quite innocently enough. Perhaps, many decades ago, it looked as though we were in some grand race, as we set off on our modern voyage; perhaps we feared we might fall behind. So, forthwith, we decided to begin educating our young in, well, in the rigors of basically *everything*.

But, whatever led us to our present state of affairs is not the subject of our discussion. Our point of discussion turns upon what we will choose to do now equipped with this new information. For, our latest latitude-longitude readings have an embarrassing bearing upon where we were meaning to take the ship. What, indeed, will you and I do to set this massive and impressive vessel back on course again?

Teaching a few key skills and concepts more deeply means parting with much of our inventory of things to teach. Teaching which genuinely engages students is much more time consuming than the current *status quo* seems willing to allow.

We could, instead, continue to drill, as we have become so accustomed to drilling, but we may well soon discover the ship going down beneath us. For our drilling is doing little more than making holes in the very hull of our own cherished vessel.

Deepening Literacy Learning turns out to be a fully developed and brilliant *idea*, but demands much time as it seeks to teach meaning through deep exploration and extensive differentiation within the classroom setting, where choice is one of the staples.

Of course, I was forced back to thinking about the troubles in my own school. Reilly, Gangi, and Cohen's book helped me to realize the type of environment I had been unintentionally creating in my classroom. It was an environment which strongly favored *natural protest*. My students had been confronting me with a quite psychologically sound form of *civil disobedience* against this present system I kept trying, with such vigor, to impose upon them!

If our current instructional plans for students are constantly being ship-wrecked on their persistent defiance against them, then it may warrant one of two things. Perhaps we need to be more firm in our enforcement of these plans! This is a formidable option. Another option, and just as formidable, would be to change the plans, themselves.

If this massive vessel is only off by a few degrees today, then mark my words, in a very short, almost negligible amount of traveling time, we may, as an entire nation, find ourselves very nearly *lost* at sea, and faced with her many infamous and unannounced dangers. Would we that a very well written book signal us to apply the necessary force upon the rudder ourselves, or would we rather something like an iceberg apply that force which changes our proud motion?

This book is as *the flag of truth* planted in a very established fortress. What it shows us may just well *set us free*, but not before first *setting us all on edge*.

We can only hope to see a steady decline in student cooperation, if we continue to enforce compliant engagement from our students as we lead them to cooperate with our turning them into a *nation of test takers*.

Deepening Literacy Learning is certainly a key to unlocking the language of research behind what we commonly refer to as *best practice*. The constructivist theories of meaning-making have been recently modeled for us, by the popularized *cooperative learning structures*. These *engagement structures* have gained popularity, and are becoming increasingly common as a research-based means of instruction within the American classroom. This is a good thing. We layperson's need such models in order to help us *make meaning* of the researcher's *meaning-making* theories!

However, *Deepening Literacy Learning* provides a model, whereby when compared with this more popularized model, is as a three-dimensional cube in its contrast against a two-dimensional square. There is nothing at all wrong with the former model. But it lacks the depth that the *Deepening Literacy Learning* model so aptly provides.

Our current *engagement structures* work very well at getting learners to dialogue, participate and cooperate in a social context, and yet its limitations make it feel a bit *thin or tinny*, so to speak. These structures, alone, cannot be at the heart of what the pioneers of constructivist theories had in mind. These still put too little control into the hands of the learner.

I am afraid that what the pioneers had in mind may be quite a bit messier than preferred. The model may not be quite as two-dimensionally simplistic, after all. *Deepening Literacy Learning* teaches us how learners must not only be exposed to literature types which reflect their own cultural script, but literature which also shows them cultural scripts which are different from their own. It then teaches us that true learning cannot be deeply internalized by the learner until he or she experiences a battery of experiences which include personally responding to what is read and personally generating new knowledge through transmediation—a movement of meaning between different sign systems, such as recasting meaning from text to image.

Because this is a highly personal endeavor, it is quite a bit more involved than something like *Simultaneous Round Table*, or *Hand-Up-Stand-Up-Pair-Up*.

I had said that the *Deepening Literacy Learning* model teaches us. Let me be more precise. This book makes commendable efforts to show us what began in the minds of such past greats as Piaget and Vygotsky. Not only does it provide a model which—with a plethora of classroom examples, lists referencing both quality children's literature along with quality teacher resources, as well as scores of student work samples—shows us what genuine, quality *engagement* looks like [as opposed to compliant engagement], it also shows us in detail, the complex relationship between learning and the cultivation of the social or the society, through exchanges between students, teachers, and community via the diverse forms of communication and expression afforded the human being by art.

Deepening Literacy Learning shows us how to use choral reading to improve fluency and augments it, showing the reader how to teach students to re-think meaning as they decide how best to assign parts or to decide what needs emphasized, etc. It shows us how storytelling deepens a learner's ability to make meaning of what has been communicated or expressed. It models improvised dramatization as well as scripted reader's theater. It brings choral reading to life through dynamic, interactive poems, even suggesting that students might reformat a beloved piece of literature for the purpose of choral reading as a community of learners. *Deepening Literacy Learning* models the use

of collage in fueling writing fluency, and the study of published writing as a means of teaching students the craft of creating their own writing. It is a program which gives back to the educator and the learner, the power of decision-making involved in the most beneficial forms of meaning-making.

I could go on. I will not. But notice what this does to our role. It makes it a much riskier road to travel. With such rigorous and meaningful learning experiences, it is much more difficult for us, as leaders of this institution, to guarantee our results in any empirical manner, initially. It is a regime which relies heavily upon faith instead of reason.

As I recoil from your gasp, it occurs to me that I have failed to mention this one powerful aspect of the *Deepening Literacy Learning* model. It makes learning absolutely genuine for the learner, in that it gives control—in the main—over to the learner for possession, which creates a genuine social situation, whereby the student is then trusted or counted upon to play his or her role, and in so doing, produce or generate certain results. These would be similar to the results we currently demand our students to demonstrate on standardized tests, and all the learning which currently leads up to these.

The difference is a shift in power or control. We, as educators, would have two tests to pass in order to make this happen. We must take a lesser role in the classroom, and we must take a much larger role outside of the classroom, in our planning and preparation. Our reliance upon a single reading curriculum, or even a single framework, would have to be “let go.”

We would have to do as Dr. King did, as he set himself down to study the thinking of the past social greats of his time. He did not discover that one philosophy was the more superior, but that in each philosophy there was some element of truth which all the others had neglected to consider. Drawing from all of these, he constructed his own meaning of social justice, and a solution began to foment in his mind. The final piece to the solution he sought, came in Ghandi’s love-force, or *Satyagraha*.

There exists a balance between academic freedom and structured checklists of standards, benchmarks, and indicators. That balance does not come by throwing the standards out of the window, any more than it does by discouraging the passions born of decision-making freedom.

Dr. King’s words teach us when he says, “In my own life and in the life of a person who is seeking to be strong, you combine in your character antitheses strongly marked. You are both militant and moderate; you are both realistic and idealistic.” (*The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*. Edited by Clayborne Carson. New York: Warner Books, Inc. 1998. Page 3.).

This trait Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. discovered to be present in every good, true, noble, courageous, strong-as-steel, beloved of honor character under fire. Such characters will certainly *pass the test* on the day that they are assayed! Not only will they pass the test, but they will likely become as the knights of old who actually went in search of *tests*. They will be ever looking for ways to be proved worthy, both to themselves, and to the professors who seek to test them!

Have you ever noticed the relationship between learning and humility? And there is between courage and humility a sort of timeless chivalry. A very brave captain will admit he's gone off course, if this is as the case may well be. His mission is his life; and that mission is to safely transport his crew and his passengers to a specific and designated port. That port may end up being nothing short of the pure, clean, humble thing known as *home*.

Reilly, Gangi, and Cohen's *Deepening Literacy Learning* turned out to be far more than just another book to review. It is an idea which can become for us something like an applied force is in the world of physics—but not just any force. It is as the small, humble applied force which sets into motion that most coveted of all motions commonly referred to by modern physicists as *resonance*. Some may refer to it as synergy. It is the force responsible for substantiating atoms, and leading scientists into a sort of flirtatious mathematics which seems to demand additional dimensions. It is the force which prevents our beloved planet from going off on a tangent, to-day. It is the subtle, humble force which, every single autumn, reliably causes the tree's to rebel, and to turn the tables of the *status quo*, surrounding us with a reality which nearly seems so *make-believe*. Reilly, Gangi, and Cohen's idea, like resonance, is a splendid wonder. It is full of delightful surprises at every turn. But mark my words, it beckons us. It beckons us to change.

Information on the Book

Reilly, Mary Ann, Jane M. Gangi, & Rob Cohen. (2010). *Deepening literacy learning: Art & literature engagements in k-8 classrooms*. In Tonya Huber (Series & Vol. Ed.), *Teaching <-> Learning indigenous, intercultural worldviews: International perspectives on social justice and human rights: Vol. 4*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age. 500+ pages.