

# Teaching Adults to Read

# with Reading Apprenticeship

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BY MICHELE BENJAMIN LESMEISTER

**H**ave you ever thought how one goes about teaching reading to an adult? The complexity of this task can, at times, be overwhelming. Adults attending community and technical colleges normally carry the responsibility of

making a living, and they also have many non-academic life concerns. They often possess a sense of personal insecurity, or worse, failure from either previous educational or work experiences, have a need to learn new skills to make a living wage in an ever-changing environment,

and hold the social stigma associated with having to learn reading again. Reading is not one of those “want to learn” subjects. Students view it as a skill they either have or don’t. In fact, most of these students do have basic reading skills, but they are inexperienced readers who need to learn

skills beyond the basics to equip them for success in college and career.

How do educators face such adults with optimism and an eagerness to help improve specific reading skills so that these students can read and understand a variety of materials? Community and technical colleges are seeing a widening gap of readers—from students trying to get a General Education Diploma (GED) to under-employed college graduates who are trying to retrain for a sustainable wage-earning career. These individuals, often highly selective or technical readers, meet the broad-based coursework of a community college, but a reading learning curve exists. Students express their need to ramp up their reading skills to cover the extensive academic and technical reading assignments and to keep pace with their peers.

In addition, educators see a growing number of second language learners transitioning from English as a second language and adult basic education classrooms into community college courses. Many second language learners have had careers in their homelands, but arrive in the United States to discover that their trade is no longer valid here, or that retraining is required. Students who are already literate in their first language don’t need to learn to read again, but they do need to learn how to make meaning with academic and technical texts in English. Reading in English takes time and energy to master—it is not merely a translation task.

As an educator of adults with more than 25 years in the field, I have been searching for some way to teach reading that fosters the adult student’s psychological and social aspects of learning (the cognitive and skill-building skills are covered within the curriculum). With this vision and goal, I discovered Reading Apprenticeship (RA), a research-based framework for discipline-based literacy instruction developed by the Strategic Literacy Initiative at WestEd, a nonprofit research

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and service agency. RA is a powerful framework that allows faculty to mentor readers in discipline-based instruction. Faculty are trained in routines that support readers across four dimensions: personal, social, cognitive, and knowledge building. Faculty members orchestrate and integrate these interacting dimensions of classroom life to support reading instruction. Integrating these dimensions into subject area teaching through metacognitive conversations, discussions about the thinking processes that students and faculty engage in when reading, offers a support system for reading development.

RA positions the faculty as expert readers in their fields. Their task is to mentor their students, the apprentices, in how expert readers read. Through extensive modeling and scaffolding of reading routines and skill building, instructors show students how to become active, strategic and reflective readers. Furthermore, RA works to achieve equity in the classrooms: all students, and especially those struggling to make meaning from text, have the support and opportunity to access an academically rigorous curriculum. This method also supports “just in time” learners who suddenly recognize that they need discipline-based training but may not have the skills. It also supports those learners who need scaffolds, or guided support, for learning advanced reading skills. RA effectively provides the scaffolding for emerging reading skills. The metacognitive conversations around

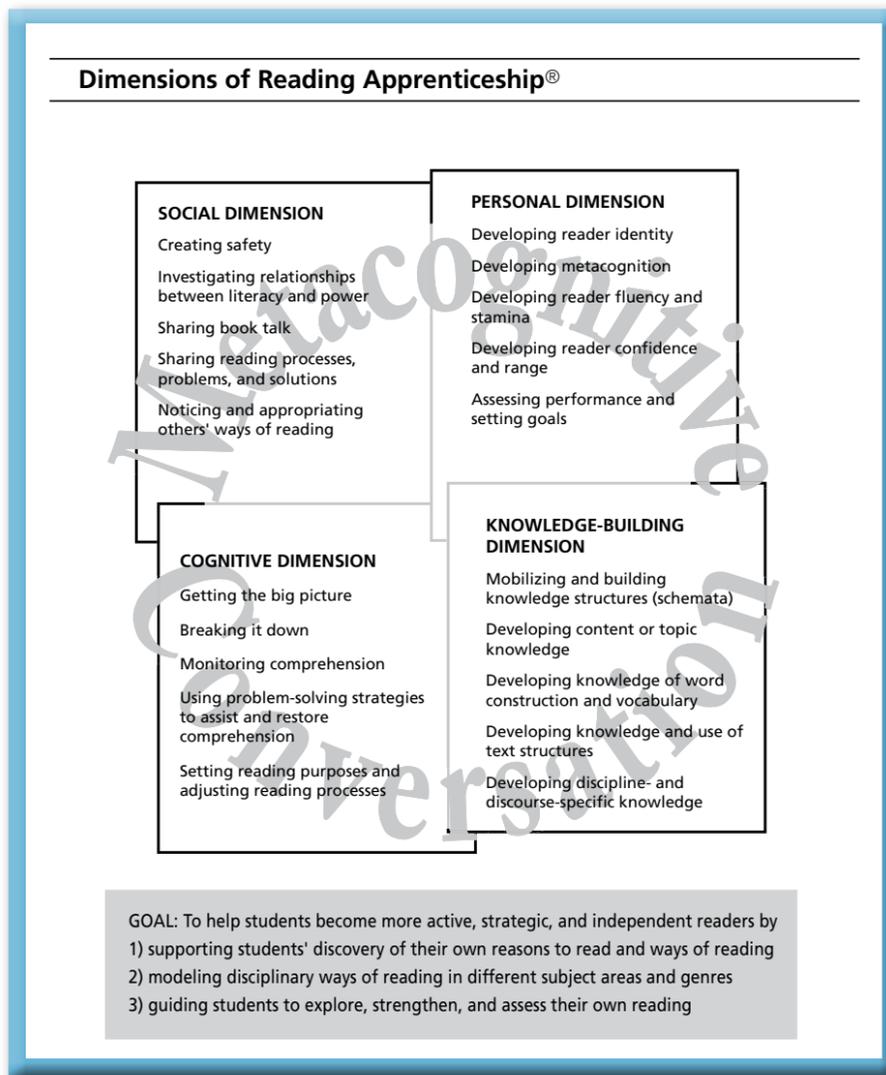
the reading of text encourage students and faculty to engage with the text in new and deeper ways.

### Developing a Community of Leaders

My intention was to generate a new way of looking at reading and to develop a collaborative reading community. Ultimately, I wanted to develop a community of thinkers and talkers about reading. To accomplish this, I knew that I needed to:

- Make the classroom a comfortable learning environment.
- Encourage conversation about reading processes.
- Locate readings that appealed to my audience.
- Model the invisible processes of reading and thinking with challenging text that is visible and accessible to students.
- Dispel misconceptions about what expert readers do.
- Engage students in metacognitive conversations as part of class work.
- Change the student mindset of reading as an individual task to one that is a community and social task.
- Model my reading and thinking about the reading process.

I model my reading and thinking processes daily to provide scaffolds and routines that students will use. I do this by “thinking aloud” as I read a text. A lot of questions and discussion occur. The pace



▲ Dimensions of Reading Apprenticeship

is initially slow and reflective. I identify my own inquiries and thoughts from the text, grammatical structures, genre, the graphics and style of writing. My thinking aloud appears as questions or observations: "How do I understand that from the text? Where do I find out about that in the reading? Isn't that personification of the ocean, where is this leading me? This looks like foreshadowing; I need to see where it is going. That colon tells me a list or definition or example is coming."

When I model, I methodically work my way through the passage noting every-thing from specialized terms, punctua-

tion, sentence structure, and any clues like transition words to show the interplay between groups of words or ideas. Modeling was, at first, very stressful because I was unaccustomed to showing others my own reading processes. I had to find a natural pace for myself, and so this took some practice, lots of false starts, and reworking the passages. I found that if I did a thorough text analysis first and then set it next to my clean copy under the document reader, that I was much more explicit with my modeling. Soon students started to engage; I realized that they were becoming experts on

how I read a passage.

One day during a modeling exercise, I stopped for a moment.

A student said, "You look like you are thinking about something important—does that mean that you are having a relationship with the text?"

I said, "Exactly, I am engaging the text and this takes time and energy, doesn't it?"

Another student asked, "So what you are doing is active, like active learning?"

I said, "Yes."

Then the first student said, "I always thought that reading was a passive activity, and we had to be quiet like in the library. Maybe that is why I never did well in school, but I am doing great in this reading class. This on-the-job training or whatever you call it, RA, is helping me realize that when a writer writes something, it is a lot more than words. Yeah, before I thought it was just words."

The students, working in small groups, practice their own think-aloud, sharing what they see in the text, what they make of it, and what strategies they are using to make meaning with the text. This has created an active classroom that has the certain buzz of learning. The students are able to find answers in text, explain how they know what the author's intent is, locate evidence and support their interpretation through fact and inference. The classroom is often charged with students discussing the text among themselves before class or during breaks. When disagreements occur, I model for students how to redirect the discussion from personal anecdote back to the text: I often say, "Can you show me in the text where you get that idea?" "Let's review the passage and see if we can see what you are seeing." "Shall we look for evidence of this in the paragraph; point me to your source of this information." "Tell me more about that." When the students are heard making similar statements in their groups, they are becoming experts—experts in their own reading processes and in how to

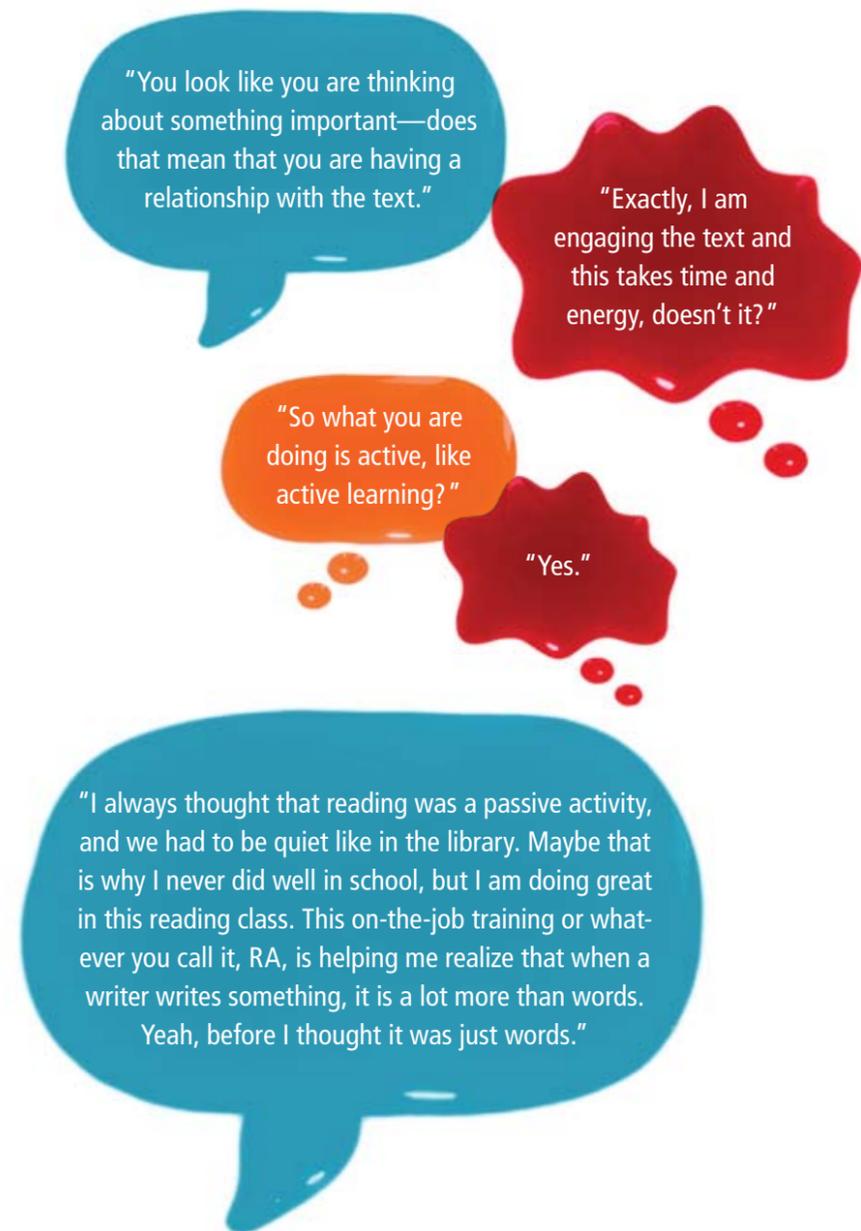
tackle difficult texts with a toolkit of skills gained in a collaborative manner. Such apprenticeship models team-building for the workplace and develops their cognitive, personal, knowledge-building, and social skills for learning in the future. Thus, this is a case of building an active learning community around reading in a way that all can contribute and gain insight into their own and each other's reading processes, especially the ways in which they recognize and solve problems in their understanding of various texts.

**Practice Makes Perfect**

Like so many things in life, the key is practice. RA uses routines that support the four dimensions of the classroom and equal access is given to all students. In multi-level classrooms, faculty often struggle with how to approach the emerging readers. The modeling and scaffolding in RA allow all learners to gain reading skills and improved processes because the routines are repeated and the discussion revolves around making visible what may seem invisible. This brings all readers into a metacognitive conversation about how to make meaning from difficult text. When community and technical college faculty provide this type of access, it is a huge service to their students. Reading is often the means for the students' language learning in structure, punctuation and grammar.

**Why Does RA Fit Community and Technical College Students' Needs So Well?**

An important shift in attitude toward text and toward oneself as a reader occurs when traditional classroom dimensions are altered by student engagement with discipline-based texts. Metacognitive conversations open the door for student engagement. Using the personal, social, cognitive and knowledge-building dimensions, students' existing knowledge and experiences can be validated and enhanced through routines that ask them



to discuss the problems they are encountering and what they are doing to address them as they grapple with a text. As these processes are brought into the classroom conversation, students build a repertoire of strategies for engaging with and understanding text in a variety of disciplines. Student engagement levels increase and readers are more apt to strive to comprehend the text. Furthermore, students become more receptive to prepare and master the cognitive and knowledge-

building aspects of the discipline-based texts when the personal and social dimensions are attended to.

Readers also need to have a meaningful reason to read (the personal and social dimensions). The interplay of these four dimensions support reading development and offer faculty a way to talk with students about the thinking processes behind reading advanced academic texts. Observations from my RA classroom are:

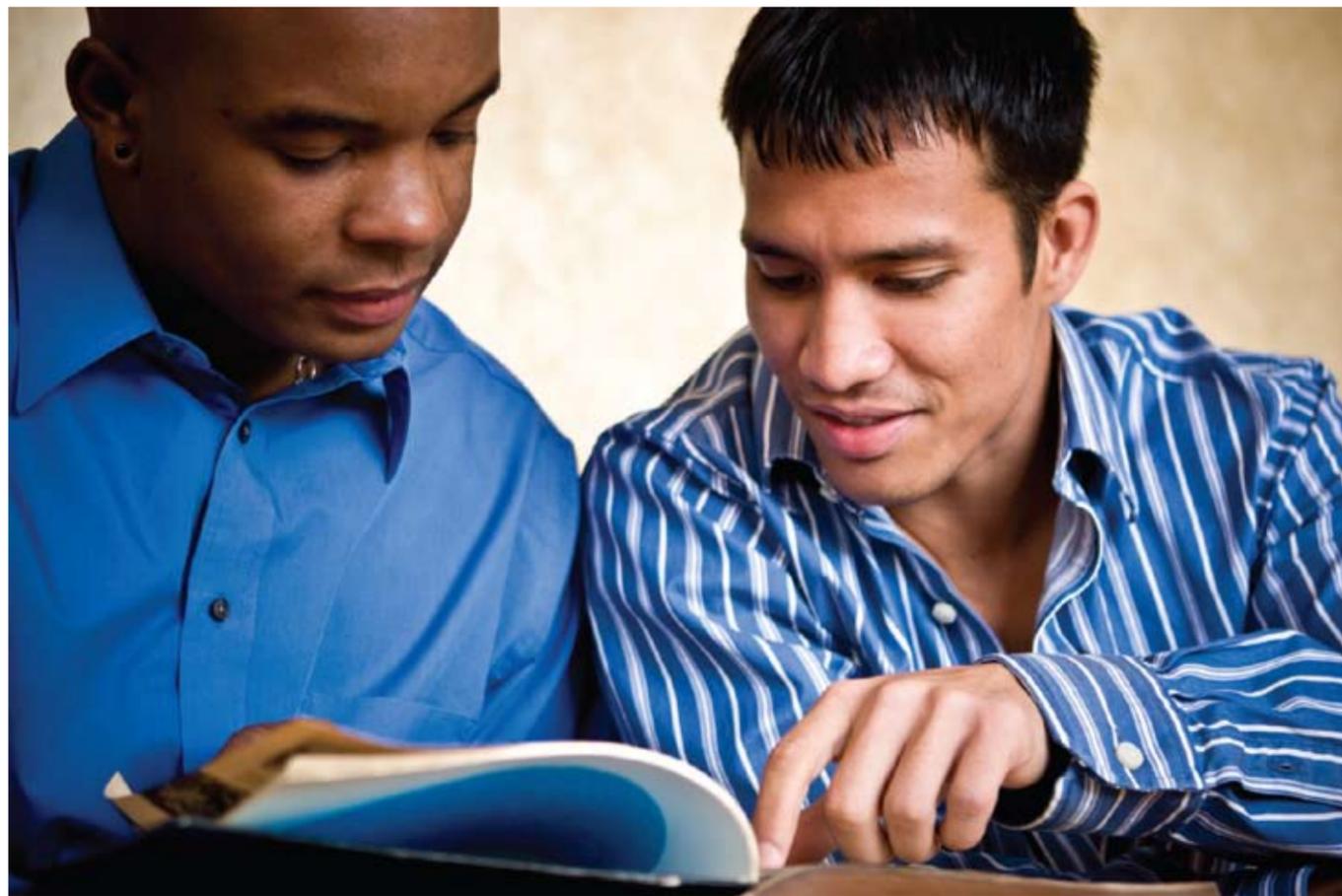


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- Students remark about their reading improvement; their assessment is supported by test data.
- Student persistence and investment in the RA classroom are excellent.
- Students are reading for longer periods of time, daily, and more difficult texts.
- Students are relying on RA to support their comprehension routines.
- Students are much more willing to take intellectual risks in a classroom alive with participation and inquiry.
- Reading is now a social and collaborative effort in my class.

By applying the students' conceptual sophistication and intellectual maturity, and by thoughtfully applying RA routines and scaffolding, I can cross such superficial boundaries; these initiatives have led to

**a much more engaged reading classroom.**

Often, adult educators teach within the confines of the tested reading levels of the students. By applying the students' conceptual sophistication and intellectual maturity, and by thoughtfully

applying RA routines and scaffolding, I can cross such superficial boundaries; these initiatives have led to a much more engaged reading classroom. More importantly, my students are reading with more competence and mastering content area learning more quickly than in past courses. **T**

To learn more about Reading Apprenticeship, and WestEd's Strategic Literacy Initiative, visit [www.wested.org/ReadingApprenticeship](http://www.wested.org/ReadingApprenticeship).

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## Why I Joined...

"The networking and everyone working together toward a common goal to get career and technical education out there and show the importance of it and the success of our students. To accomplish what we need to accomplish, we need to come together as a large group and join ACTE."

- Katherine Bradford, CTE Student Support Facilitator, Charleston County School District, Charleston, South Carolina

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"The difference between the haves and the have-nots is knowledge." **Chef Jeff Henderson**  
ACTE 2009 Keynote Speaker

"Schools deserve resources that help students to reach their potential through relevance and action." **Nai Wang**  
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