

# How Can I, as a Teacher-Librarian, Support Secondary Students in Developing their Reading and Research Skills?

Pamela Wilson McCormick



## Biography

I am in my fifteenth year of teaching at Pauline Johnson C. V. S. in Brantford. My main subject discipline is English literature, in which I hold a Master of Arts degree from the University of Toronto. For the last seven years, I have been working in the Library Resource Centre at Pauline Johnson, and I completed my Teacher-Librarianship Part III qualifications in April, 2003. My future professional plans include rebuilding a sequential library information literacy program covering all grades and most subjects.

## Abstract

My action research project examines the role that I, as teacher-librarian, can take in teaching and encouraging the development of reading skills as students undertake the research process in the library. In particular, my project focuses on:

- including struggling readers in the research process, from which their poor reading skills tend to exclude them
- teaching and facilitating the use of reading strategies such as highlighting signal words, skimming for a basic idea of the text, and adjusting reading speed and note-taking volume as part of the research process
- facilitating note-taking strategies that encourage students to “have a conversation with the text”

I would like to thank Cheryl Murray, who allowed me to work extensively with her STEP class on their career research project. And I would like to thank the class, full of interesting individuals, who allowed me to experiment with them.

## Background/ Context

My school, Pauline Johnson C. V. S., and particularly the school’s Literacy Committee, has worked extensively to help students improve their communication skills for the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. We have achieved some success with student writing skills, but student reading skills have lagged behind. As a result, the attention of the Literacy Committee and the staff as a whole turned to reading skills this year. I jumped at the opportunity to become involved with a group of teachers doing Action Research that focussed on reading.

As a teacher-librarian, I have many short-term contacts with students, but I was not sure how I could work with students in the long-term effort that improving reading seems to demand. In fact, in my studies on teaching the research process, I have noticed that no one writes about reading skills; the ability to read adequately, it appears, is assumed. My interpretation is that readers with poorer reading skills are thus shut out of the research process. This exclusion bothers me: as a teacher-librarian, I want to help all students improve their reading and research skills. I began to examine reading strategies, considering which ones fit most neatly into the research process. I also started to talk to teachers, looking for a class with which I could work on a long-term basis second semester.

## The Class – Cheryl Murray’s grade 10 STEP Careers class

I chose Cheryl Murray’s grade 10 STEP (Student Transition Experience Program) Careers class to work with because as part of a more flexible program, the class has fewer time constraints than other classes trying to manage a packed curriculum. In addition, in the past, the STEP students have tended to have significant difficulties with reading; charting reading skill development with this group would be simpler, I imagined, than with a higher functioning group. Finally, Cheryl, as a member of an informal reading research group at our school, was enthusiastic about developing reading skills in her students and willing to work with me.

The Student Transition Experience Program was piloted at P. J. 4 years ago, and has since expanded to other venues. The STEP program services students who are at risk of being unsuccessful in school, primarily because they lag behind in credit acquisition because of skill, attendance, or social issues. The Grade 10 STEP program, occurring for half days for a full semester, combines the curriculum expectations of Career Studies, Civics, and Learning Strategies. The program includes a workplace component. Students involved in the program must have an Individual Education Program, allowing for course curriculum to be modified.

### Set-up of the Assignment

- in the classroom with teacher Cheryl Murray – assignment set-up and attitudes towards reading
- teacher- teacher-librarian planning and sharing
- resources in the library
- in the library – rapport with the teacher-librarian and attitudes towards research

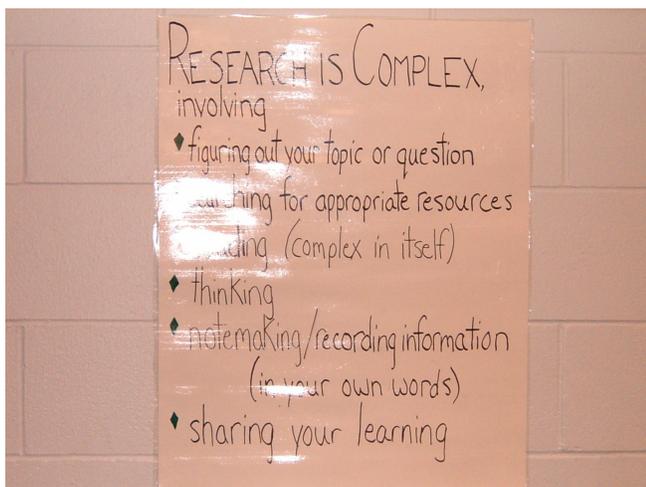
Cheryl started this assignment with students in the classroom in connection with their work on careers. Students were directed to choose three careers they might be interested in researching. When they narrowed the choice to one career, they completed the first two sections of a K-W-L (“What do I know, what do I want to know, what have I learned”) chart as a pre-reading (pre-research) strategy.

Cheryl also began using reading strategies with students in the classroom. She started with discussion of the question, “Why read?”, as a motivational tool in the classroom. Cheryl and I met briefly to discuss and agree on which reading strategies we saw as most useful to these students (Journal entry, Feb. 3). We had recently received copies of *Think Literacy* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003) and were excited to browse through the excellent strategies included. Still, we agreed that our choice of reading strategies did not have to be identical.

Meanwhile, once I had received the students’ choice of research topics, I looked for suitable library resources for students to use. Students chose topics such as video editing, snowboard instructing, and hairdressing. I tried to select three articles for each topic, one short and a couple longer, and a mix of background texts and essential texts for the topic. I copied these articles so that students could use highlighters on them as part of a reading strategy. The reason I chose the articles for students to use was because I guessed that these students may not have the focus to both find resources and use them effectively (I find that with students fairly often in the library). Since I wanted to focus on reading skills and strategies with students, I did not want them to use up all their energy looking for resources. Frankly, finding appropriate resources was a challenge in itself. Many excellent secondary school resources are too challenging for dependent readers. Elementary resources with a lower reading level tend to look too childish for secondary students to use. Gladys Rodgers, educational assistant in the STEP class, did much of the photocopying of resources, and shared her concerns regarding the reading level of resources when I questioned her (Journal entry, Feb 12). She suggested building a vocabulary glossary into the articles as a way of making the articles more accessible to students (Journal entry, June 10).

When the students finally arrived in the library for a class, I felt I had two tasks at the beginning of this assignment. First, I had to build a sense of rapport with a group of students not enamoured of teachers and school. Without that rapport and the understanding that we were on the same team, I felt little could be accomplished. Interestingly, my instincts corroborated with research I later stumbled across: “Students who struggle with literacy need ... strong positive relationships with teachers” (Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario, 2003, p. 16). Second, I had to sell the students the idea of research, much as Cheryl had tried to sell the concept of reading in the classroom.

Rapport starts with knowing students’ names, so we began by making name cards to place on the tables during classes. On a whim, I brought stickers and stamping markers so that students could decorate their name cards if they chose. Right from the start, many students amazed me with their creativity. I realized that some of these



students were indeed “creative, artistic, visual learners” (Journal entry, Feb. 18). Sharon Foster, the supply teacher accompanying the students, noted as well the students’ enthusiasm for creative work (Journal entries, Feb. 18, May 31). In turn, the students realized, I hope, that there is room for fun and creativity in the library. I tend to be friendly with students and deliberately kept the atmosphere informal all through the lesson. The relationship between the students and myself was established well enough that close to the end of the class, students listened contentedly, for the most part, to a Stella and Sam picture book (*Stella: Star of the Sun*) as a demonstration of the place of asking questions in research.

As the students had discussed the question, “Why read?”, in class, we discussed the question, “Why research?” in the library. Students were able to suggest many reasons, including for help making decisions as consumers, making travel plans, and finding health information. They certainly seemed to see the importance of research, even outside the school setting. They listened fairly attentively and participated well (Journal entry, Feb. 18). Setting research in real life situations seemed to be a motivational factor. We moved on to a look at the research process, including the “complex task” of reading. The lesson was designed so that students could see the explicit connections between reading and research (see picture of “Research is Complex” note). I felt that the lesson itself had gone “fairly well,” especially considering that I “[found] [research] ... a difficult complex topic to condense for kids” (Journal entry, Feb. 18).

Because of the teacher-student rapport and the students’ attitudinal “buy-in” to the research-reading process, I was able to be up front with students about the sometimes frustrating nature of research. By definition, research is a process that is not linear, but instead loops back on itself – research is never a quick activity. Instead, research, like reading, demands hard, consistent work as the researcher reads materials, deals with information and notes, questions, reworks, and communicates learning. We talked about the hard work that students do (eg. raking leaves, part-time jobs) and compared such tasks to the commitment necessary for research. I felt that students had some grasp of the concept of task commitment (Journal entry, Feb. 18).

## The Lessons – Reading Strategies and Their Practice

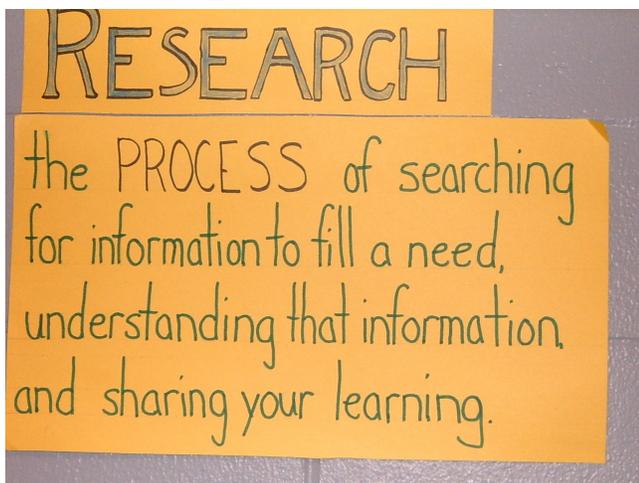
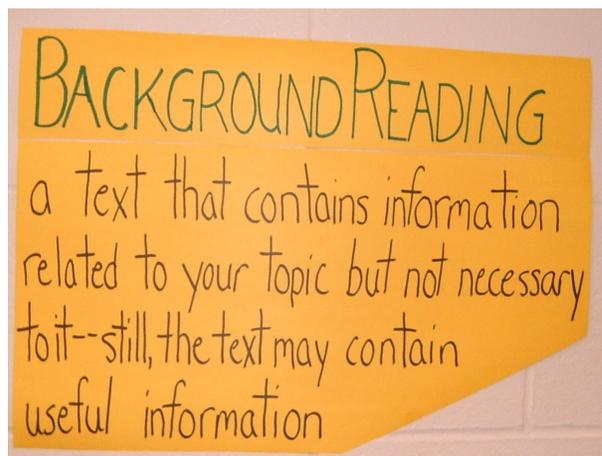
In our subsequent classes together, the class and I used the following strategies:



- word wall for the language of reading and research
- visual notes
- reading strategies – scanning for signal words, skimming for basic idea of text
- four step reading-research process – “detective work” of deciding how to approach the text
- scaffolding — modelling the process (think-aloud), trying out the process together
- “having a conversation with the text” – a graphic organizer for notetaking

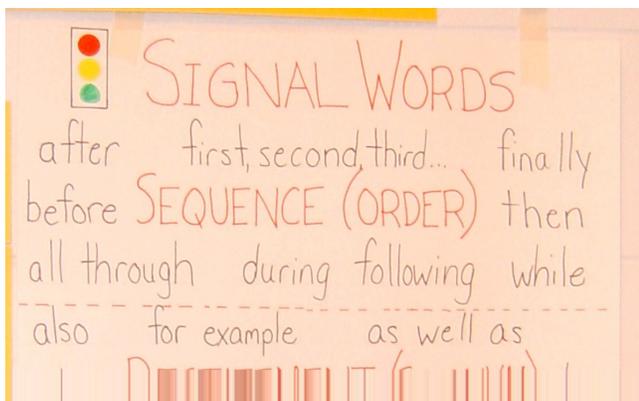
From the first class, I used vocabulary strategies with the class to raise their knowledge of and comfort level with the language of research. For example, I used the “word

wall” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 30) technique with new and/ or important reading and research terms. I wrote the terms and their definitions on pieces of bristol board and taped them up (with students’ help) in the seminar room that was “home base” for the students in the library (see pictures). I wanted students to have visual reminders of important terms, and I wanted to be able to easily review important terms. I also wanted to show students (implicitly) that I considered their research skills to be worth this extra work for myself. Similarly, I wrote the main class notes (see picture of “Signal Words” note) on bristol board, and put up a banner and student quotations supporting our work as we reached appropriate points in our learning. One student actually questioned the amount of work that such visual notes demanded: “It’s stupid. Why do you bother?” (Journal entry, Feb. 27). He seemed less belligerent when I told him his research and class were worth the effort (Journal entry, Feb. 27).



We focussed on two distinct reading skills to support the reading process in research. First, we worked on scanning for signal words (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 24). Signal words are words in a text that indicate where the thought of the text is going. Most often, they indicate sequence, restatement, or contrast. We talked about signal words, looked at examples, and I prepared a bristol board note with more signal words on it. Students tried out the strategy with a short text comparing parts of a camera to parts of an eye (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 28).

I was surprised at the difficulty students had highlighting signal words. They found it tough to decide what was a signal word. Because of their lack of comfort with the task, they took forever – and many highlighted almost



everything! Then, I found in classes where we went beyond scanning that students had no energy left for other parts of the reading-research process (Journal entry, Feb. 27).

When at the next class, I did a “think aloud” for the students, attempting to model the process of scanning for signal words, I saw part of the problem with the strategy. The text I used was a general article on “Careers” (1999). I noticed, while I was in front of the class(!), that even where signal words are rare, the directional signals of the text are often given by means of patterns of words.

I adjusted the scanning chart by adding a section on word patterns. Furthermore, I added that students should highlight bold headings and then spend only about 5 - 10 minutes highlighting signal words – if they saw any. Students adjusted their practice. Because the thinking portion of this strategy is invisible, it’s difficult to know to what extent this strategy aided their reading. They certainly did not end up consistently highlighting what I considered significant signal words.

Next, I worked with the students on skimming the text to get a general idea of what the text is about. Our skimming technique involved reading the full first paragraph, reading the first sentence of each of the middle paragraphs and any highlighted material, and reading the full final paragraph. The skimming strategy is closely tied to a purpose: upon completion, students need to briefly summarize the text, and decide whether the text is “background” information for their topic, or “essential” information for their topic. This information is important because it directs the next part of the reading-research process; if a text is “background” information, it may be read quickly, and probably few notes will be made from it, whereas, if a text is “essential” reading for a topic, it should be read more slowly, so the researcher misses nothing important, and probably the researcher will take more research notes from it.

Both the scanning and the skimming techniques were thus closely tied to a clear purpose – they were not merely “busy work.” Getting an initial understanding of the text is necessary as the “detective work” for deciding how to approach a research text.

Together, the reading strategies constructed the reading of research as a four-step process. Students were instructed to

1. Scan for and highlight signal words in the text.
2. Skim the text to gain a general sense of what it is about.
3. Summarize the text in one sentence, and state whether it contains “background” or “essential” information.
4. Take notes on a graphic organizer encouraging conversation with the text.

Once students began to understand that the “detective work,” done properly, actually cuts down the amount of work in total, they seemed to accept the initial stages, at least in theory. This understanding came slowly, however, usually as a result of individual discussion and explanation with the student. In practice, the process was perhaps longer than students could maintain their attention for.

Working with a process that included more than one step appeared difficult for students. Some days, especially early in the assignment, students were able to work through the steps effectively. On March 23, the first class using the full process to do individual research, both the supply teacher, Angela Putschli and I were impressed by the focussed manner in which students worked (Journal entries, March 23, June 1). On subsequent days, however, some students got bogged down in the process.

<p>Name: _____</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Career Notes</b></p> <p>Article Title: <u>Motor Vehicle Mechanics, Technicians</u></p> <p>Article Source: <u>The National Occupational Classification, Human Resources Development</u></p>
<p>Summary (what is this article about?)</p> <p><u>The article is about the main duties and employment requirements</u></p> <p>Background or Essential Reading? Explain.</p> <p><u>This is Essential Reading because it explains the main duties that you will do and the requirements for getting the job</u></p>
<p><b>Point Form Notes</b></p> <p>This confirms what I already knew.....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• repair and replace parts of vehicle</li> <li>• inspect motor while running</li> <li>• scheduled maintenance service</li> <li>• completion of high school</li> <li>• complete reports to record problems</li> <li>• test and adjust units for proper performance</li> </ul> <p>This is surprising information.....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• test mechanical units</li> <li>• 4 year motor vehicle apprenticeship program</li> <li>• diagnose faults and malfunctions</li> <li>• advise customers on work performed</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;">OVER</p>

tween the reader and the text during the reading process (pp. 20 - 25). As a result of my research, I decided to create a note-organizer that encouraged that kind of conversation. (See picture of note organizer.)

Some students related well to the organizer. Others were loathe to focus and take any notes at all. Most students preferred to assume that they would remember on their own what the text said that they already knew. Pictured are two examples of student work. They show the range of achievement and effort. Insert 2 student note samples here.

In addition to these strategies for student work, I took the time to hear students read as a diagnostic tool. The first time, Cheryl Murray and I each simply took students aside to read during their research time. I adapted Billmeyer's (2001) rubrics to shorten the number of reading characteristics we were looking for. Students read short passages to each of us orally. My method was to quietly make notes and to discuss each

I was not sure how to approach the final step of the process, the note-taking. Students generally find note-taking difficult unless they know exactly what they are looking for. Ambitious students write down everything, often word-for-word from the text. Unambitious students often write down nothing. One thing that stuck in my mind from my reading was the notion that strategic readers talk back to the text, however unconsciously, as a mode of response to the text. Beers (2003) notes that less skilled readers “often fail to see reading as an active process” (p. 102). This is because the process of actively reading is largely invisible; when watching skilled readers reading, we “don’t observe ... all the times good readers reread a passage or a sentence, all the times they ask themselves, ‘What’s going on here?’ [We] don’t hear that internal dialogue a good reader has with the text or with herself while reading.” (Beers, 2003 p. 103)

Similarly, most of the seven characteristics of “independent strategic readers” described by Beers and Howell (2003) emphasize the constant interaction that occurs be-

<p>Name: _____</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Career Notes</b></p> <p>Article Title: <u>Program Leaders and Instructors in Sport</u></p> <p>Article Source: <u>National Occupational Classification</u></p>
<p>Summary (what is this article about?)</p> <p><u>My article is about snowboarding</u> <span style="float: right;">→ my article was about duties of instructors in sport.</span></p> <p>Background or Essential Reading? Explain.</p> <p><u>Essential because it's important</u> <span style="float: right;">→ you need to explain why</span></p>
<p><b>Point Form Notes</b></p> <p>This confirms what I already knew.....</p> <p><u>I know <del>this</del> that you need to know how to snowboard and ski.</u></p> <p><u>Right -- but what did the article say?</u></p> <p><u>② definition?</u></p> <p>This is surprising information.....</p> <p><u>Provide lifestyle awareness information first aid and safety.</u> <span style="float: right;">(I wonder what the article meant by this)</span></p> <p style="text-align: right;">OVER</p>

student's understanding and reading techniques afterwards. In particular, we discussed whether or not students saw pictures in their minds as they read, and whether or not they "talked back" to the text. These two actions show most clearly, it seems to me, whether or not a student is "conversing" with, or responding to, a text. For me, and for Cheryl Murray as well, I believe (Journal entry, March 3), this was truly more of an education for us than a diagnosis of difficulties and recommendation of next steps for students. We finally had words to describe reading problems, and a sense of where such difficulties placed a reader on the continuum of skills from struggling, or "emerging," to strategic, or "expanding." This experience was exciting!

After I listened to the students read and "think aloud" (Beers, p.119) for the second time, I tried to expand the opportunities to hear students by having them read and respond with a tape recorder. I thought students would have fun with this activity, but they were adamant that they did not wish to try. Possibly my life was simplified at that point by the fact that I could not get either of my tape recorders to work.

The class and I spent 7 classes together, in total, as outlined below:

Class 1 (Feb. 18/04) – class lesson: "Why research?" and outline of research process

Class 2 (Feb. 27/04) – class lesson: "Strategic readers and how they read"

– practice highlighting signal words, modelling "think aloud" (Beers p. 119)

Class 3 (Mar. 2/04) – introduction of 4-step reading process

– individual application of process to careers article by students

– teachers heard students read

Class 4 (Mar. 23/04) – individual research on career topic, including note-taking

Class 5 (Apr. 1/04) – individual research on career topic, including note-taking

– teacher-librarian heard students read

Class 6 (Apr. 16/04) – individual research on career topic, including note-taking

Class 7 (Apr. 23/04) – individual research on career topic, including note-taking

## Challenges/ Concerns

I was confronted by several challenges during this project:

- Attendance by STEP class members was extremely poor, and had been all semester. Much class time was spent reviewing concepts and instructions, finding texts, etc.
- The stamina of these students for thinking, reading, and writing was low.
- Challenging attitudes towards school and work in general made progress in the assignment extremely slow.
- Equipment difficulties occurred with my old tape recorders.
- Eventually, Cheryl Murray ran out of time for this part of her program. Though few students had completed their research, students had to move on to writing their assignments, and my contact with them was concluded.

I also discovered several concerns as I considered working with students this way on a wider scale:

- Copying the research texts to allow for highlighting seems to me necessary, but it is costly as well. I'm not sure my department could pay for it on a wider scale.

- I need to be far more organized, especially in the area of assessment, to build effective teacher-librarian-directed and student-directed (reflective) assessment into limited library time.
- I built the assignment to include 3 research texts, at least one of which would be “essential” reading. I thought that was the minimum number of sources for effective research. Given the students’ low stamina with the research process, I’m wondering whether I should have lowered the number of resources.

## Results/ Conclusions

The results of my action research project add up to lots of learning for me, about teaching reading, building effective library units, and even about action research in general. About the learning gained by the students, I can say very little, partly because of the challenges and concerns listed above, and partly because of flaws in the way I set up my action research project.

What I learned about teaching reading through the research process

- The most effective reading strategy that students used was talking back to the text as evidenced in the note organizer. As students followed the questioning format of the organizer, they were able to separate what they read into categories of information based on their initial response to it. Encouraging these responses to the text is valuable, I believe; I would like to try this strategy with more students next year and further assess its success.
- The least effective reading strategy that students used was scanning for and highlighting signal words. The concepts embodied by signal words are very abstract. Students did not seem able to distinguish these signposts. As I consider this phenomenon, it seems logical: reading is itself a highly abstract activity, extracting and building meaning from symbols with no intrinsic significance in and of themselves. That students who have difficulty with such an abstract, cerebral activity should have difficulty taking that abstract activity one step further into the abstract seems hardly surprising. Next time, I think I’d leave out highlighting for signal words; focussing on skimming to discover the basic direction and content of a text would be more useful for students.
- Modelling the “think aloud” process is difficult! I need to practise my skills in order to do this effectively.
- Task commitment, or a basic work ethic, and attitude have a tremendous effect on the stamina of students to work through the research process. In my school, we are realizing this in connection with the Secondary School Literacy Test, which many of our students seem to be passing one half at a time, and with the quality and completion of reading tasks in general in all schools. In my work with these students, I see the effects of attitude and task commitment in how inconsistently the students were able to focus on their research, both reading and note-taking during library time. Helping students achieve some success early in an assignment aids their commitment and attitudes, but does not guarantee task commitment. Somehow, in my own work with students, and, I believe, in the secondary school system as a whole, we need to continue to work to develop these essential learning skills.
- Another non-surprise is the correlation between attendance and effective research. The attendance of this group was atrocious; I never taught the same students during two library periods in a row. Cheryl Murray described this as one of the characteristics of this particular STEP class (Journal entry, April 16). Since students were often absent, they constantly needed instructions. Few completed the assignment. How can students learn unless they are participating in the program? Even one of the students recognized the connection between her attendance and her learning: “When I was there I didn’t really learn that much because I wasn’t there enough.” (Student journal, June 7)

What I learned about building effective research units in the library

- Planning, planning, planning! In order to teach my program and assess the learning of students, I think I need to plan my assessments, including clear time lines, right from the beginning of the assignment planning with the classroom teacher. I was caught by surprise during this project when Cheryl Murray, frustrated, I think, by the slow progress of the students through this research assignment, ended their library time to continue with other curriculum (Journal entry, April 17). If I had been clearer, with students and with Cheryl, about the expectations and time lines of the research, I think I might have accomplished more with the students.
- I have discovered this year, in my work with these students and through my Teacher Performance Assessment with Phil Midgley, that I tend to talk too much in my library lessons. I think this is because I'm aware that I have little time with most classes, so I try to pack too much information in (Journal entry, Feb. 27) I think I did this with these students during my second lesson, on reading, and, as a result, they listened less than attentively (Journal entry, Feb. 27). I need to redevelop my skills in teaching through short activities in the library setting.

What I learned about action research

- The process of formally examining our practice, planning to improve it, implementing our plans, and reflecting on and evaluating the effects is incredibly valuable. It's what most of us do naturally, but the formal dimension gives it intent and consistency, thus making a natural process more useful. Discussing projects with other people interested and involved in continually improving their professional practice is an added bonus. I would recommend the action research process to anyone who would like to renew or further develop their passion for teaching.
- Planning ahead to decide (at least partially) what kinds of evidence to collect builds the internal cohesion of the project. Leaving data collection to the end results in papers short on concrete evidence, like mine.

In their own words: what did the students learn?

*"I learned how to find the main ideas in a paragraph or story by skimming or scanning, and the KWL chart was helpful." (Student journal, June 7/04)*

*"I didn't learn anything because I already knew some stuff and I was absent. When I read I find that there are too many distractions." (Student journal, June 10/04)*

*"I didn't really learn that much because I wasn't there enough." (Student journal, June 7/04)*

## References

- Beers, K. (2003). When kids can't read what teachers can do. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Beers, S., & Howell, L. (2003). Reading strategies for the content areas. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Billmeyer, R. (2001). Capturing all of the reader through the reading assessment system: Practical applications for guiding strategic readers. Omaha: Rachel and Associates, Inc.
- "Careers." (1999). In World Book Encyclopedia (pp. 214 - 219). Chicago: World Book, Inc.
- Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario. (2003). Think literacy success. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education.
- Gay, M. (1999). Stella: Star of the sun. Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2003). Think literacy: Cross-curricular approaches, grades 7 - 12. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education.