Fishing for Information: Finding Online Resources

BY JUDITH M. ZORFASS AND JENNIFER A. MINOTTI

Typical examples of educators’ information needs highlight how Web-based resources can enhance professional learning.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES ARE FACING A GROWING LITERACY CRISIS. An estimated eight million students in grades 4–12 are struggling readers who perform below the proficient level on national assessments (National Center of Education Statistics, 2003). Approximately a quarter of the population of 12th-grade students are still reading below basic levels, which means that they are barely able to comprehend at a literal level, make interpretations, identify relevant information, make simple inferences, and recognize and relate interpretations and connections (Kamil, 2003). These students are at risk for academic failure, are likely to drop out of school, and have limited opportunities for postsecondary education or productive employment.

To meet the needs of these students, many schools adopt professional development programs designed to improve literacy. When carefully selected and wisely used, online resources can make effective professional development even more effective, especially when it comes to improving literacy development in the middle grades. Consider the role that online resources could play in the following situations:
In one middle level school, a faculty study group—which includes the seventh-grade English and language arts, social studies, science, special education, ESL, and math teachers—meets twice each month. After deciding to focus on improving reading comprehension, they developed a yearlong agenda for covering such topics as comprehension difficulties students may face, research-based comprehension strategies, instructional strategies to focus on building vocabulary skills, and assessment. Each study session begins with a commonly used professional development strategy—a jigsaw—during which each person reports on a different article. Although productive, this approach creates a heavy demand for articles. Where can the team members go to fill their steady need for high-quality literature?

A literacy coach meets separately with the English and language arts teachers from grades 6–8. The protocol they use for looking at student work encourages teachers to generate instructional strategies to meet students’ needs. Where can they find a rich resource for lesson plans using evidence-based strategies to infuse new ideas into their conversations?

The principal of a middle level school devotes part of each month’s faculty meeting to discussing cutting-edge topics. The teachers have just read Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy from the Alliance for Excellent Education, so the upcoming faculty meeting will focus on the 15 principles of effective adolescent literacy programs. The principal wants to find a resource that compares research-based literacy programs against these principles. Where to look?

A technology specialist is conducting a series of workshops on technology integration, focusing on ways in which technology tools can meet the needs of students who struggle with writing. Knowing that the school’s budget is limited, she wants to find free, Web-based resources to show the teachers at the literacy and technology workshop. Is there one good place to find a set of reliable resources?

A veteran special education teacher is mentoring a first-year teacher. Each time they meet, they focus on key skill, such as helping students to understand text structure. Where should they look to find a good online resource that provides articles, activities, and instructional materials?

These examples are drawn from the typical daily experiences of principals, staff developers, specialists, and teachers. The question is, however, given their limited surf and search time, where can they easily and quickly find the needed online resources that align with their face-to-face activities; focus on research-based strategies; provide articles, lesson plans, and teaching materials; and offer annotated explanations?

Literacy Matters
With funding from the Annenberg Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education, literacy experts at Education Development Center in Newton, MA, have been developing a free Web site (www.literacymatters.org) that is devoted to “what matters most in adolescent literacy development” since 2000. They have been culling information to post on Literacy Matters from different sources, always looking for the best Web sites, articles, lesson plans, research-based and classroom-tested instructional strategies, tools, online student tutorials, adolescent literacy programs, guidelines, and book lists. Currently, the free Web site’s ever-evolving content covers the following “matters”: making the most of adolescent literacy, reading and writing in the content areas, adolescent literacy programs, and literacy and technology.

(See figure 1 for the subcategories of each matter within the Web site.) Following are some examples of the types of resources available on the Literacy Matters Web site.

Judith M. Zorfass
jzorfass@edc.org
Zorfass is the associate director of the Center for Family, School, and Community at the Education Development Center Inc. in Newton, MA.

Jennifer A. Minotti is a technology and research associate at the Center for Family, School, and Community.
Articles for Study Groups
When the members of the study group in the first vignette went to the Literacy Matters Web site to find articles for their jigsaw, they selected different pathways on the basis of their interests, past knowledge, and experience. For example, within the Content Literacy section, the social studies teacher followed the link to the subsection on Social Studies. There she found links to articles under the headings of Literacy Skills for the Social Studies Classroom and Reading and Interpreting Primary Sources. Also starting at the Content Literacy section, the math teacher found articles within the Math subsection, which contained literacy-based strategies for understanding math vocabulary.

Taking another route, the English and language arts and ESL specialists surfed the Adolescent Literature section, opting to explore the materials under the heading of Questioning. There they found links to articles that contain questioning strategies to promote literal and inferential comprehension. Because they work so closely with the content teachers, they sought articles with strategies that bridge English and language arts with other content areas. Recognizing that questioning occurs as a natural part of every good classroom routine, they explored the Before, During, and After subsections, where they found a variety of research-based teaching strategies and articles describing how to use question-answer relationships, literature circles, and think-alouds to scaffold the reading process before, during, and after reading. Continuing to search, they found information that helped them expand what they were already doing in relation to journals, story grammar maps, learning logs, think-pair-share activities, and quick writes.

The special education teacher took still another path. She went to the Technology and Reading section of Literacy Matters to download a relevant article. Knowing that high- and low-tech tools can support reading comprehension, especially for students who are struggling, she selected an article that examines key issues associated with the disconnection between the skills that students with disabilities bring to the general education classroom and the expectations that are deeply rooted in learning from text instructional models (Edyburn, 2003).

Lesson Plans
The literacy coach in the second vignette knew that the Literacy Matters Web site is rich with links to judiciously screened Web sites that contain free lesson plans. Going to the Lesson Plans section of Literacy Matters, she browsed through adolescent literature and content literacy lesson plans, following links to lesson plans for using primary sources, conducting online research, and teaching study strategies. Finally, and because she was looking for lesson plans that were linked to Massachusetts State standards, she went to the eWorkshop Lesson Plans section and downloaded several motivating lesson plans developed by teachers who had participated in online graduate courses offered through Literacy Matters. The lesson plan from one course contained strategies that focus on reading and writing in the content areas, and the other lesson plan focused on strategies for comprehension of literary selections.

Adolescent Literacy Program Descriptions
The principal in the third example went directly to the Programs section, where he found practical information, already summarized, about research-based adolescent literacy programs: America’s Choice Ramp-Up Literacy, Read 180, Springboard, Supported Literacy, Strategic Instruction Model, the Strategic Literacy Initiative, and Reading Is FAME. He asked his faculty to compare the programs in light of the key elements described from the online summaries—target population, purpose, approach (including philosophy, instructional components, setting, materials, and alignment with standards), professional development components, assessment strategies, effectiveness, and cost—and suggested that teachers explore each program’s Web site.

Tools for the Literacy Workshop
The technology specialist in the fourth vignette was in luck. As she prepared for her first technology workshop, she went to the Technology section of Literacy Matters. First, she downloaded a PowerPoint conference presentation that she modified to meet her specific goals for the workshop. Delving deeper into the content within Technology and Writing, she downloaded a wealth of free, Web-based resources to share with her teachers—background information, lesson plans, and online tools. She anticipated that the teachers would be amazed when they

ONLINE RESOURCES
This article focuses on the Literacy Matters Web site (www.literacymatters.org) because we know it so well, but many other resources can serve the same purpose:

Knowledge Loom
http://knowledgeloom.org

Read-Write-Think
http://readwritethink.org

Scholastic Teacher Resource Center
www.teacher.scholastic.com/ilp/index.asp?SubjectID=1
saw all the online technology tools, such as graphic organizers and online dictionaries. She also found good background information about word-prediction software, text-to-speech, spell checkers, text-editors, grammar checkers, and tools to create bibliographies.

**Text Structure Materials**

The first-year and veteran special education teachers in the fifth vignette spent time looking for materials that would be highly motivating for students. In the Content Literacy section, they selected the subsection titled Text Structure—the semantic and syntactic organizational arrangements used to present written information (e.g., compare and contrast, sequencing, and cause and effect)—as a gateway to the Compare and Contrast, Cause and Effect, and Sequencing subsections. They were delighted with the variety of materials they found. First were the three online tutorials, each focusing on different text structures. Two of the tutorials—Help Lee Decide and What Should Maria Do?—focused on teaching students to recognize and use the compare and contrast text structure. American History Idol: Thurgood Marshall focused on cause-effect relationships. After deciding that they definitely wanted to use these tutorials with their students, the teachers downloaded the accompanying handouts and lesson plans to use before and after students engaged in the step-by-step tutorials.

**Conclusion**

Schools want to make the most of their professional development dollars, stretching them as far as possible to offer their teachers the most powerful learning opportunities possible. One route to ensure ongoing learning across varied and ongoing face-to-face venues is for principals, staff developers, specialists, and teachers to take advantage of free online resources that have already been compiled by experts in the field. PL

**References**