HELP!

I need a web site that is kid friendly where my students can find information about particular cities. Does anyone have any ideas? We tried ajkids and encyclopedia.com.

—Dorothy, history teacher, blog entry, January 2004

DOROTHY IS A VETERAN SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER IN A RURAL LOUISIANA MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL; she is using a blog, or Web log, to ask her fellow teachers for information. Dorothy and 20 other teachers from rural middle level schools in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas are participants in a training program for schoolwide literacy coaches. They communicate through blogs as they learn and experience the role of literacy coach in their respective schools. Unlike educators in urban settings, Dorothy and her fellow teachers are separated from universities and other educational organizations by acres of sorghum fields and miles of concrete highways. Their rural locations and limited resources impede participation in professional development opportunities.

The challenges that Dorothy and other educators in rural schools face make it difficult for them to implement many of the structural and instructional elements that recent publications claim are necessary for focusing effectively on students’ literacy skills (NASSP, 2005; National Governors’ Association, 2005; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). These publications call for professional development that focuses on literacy, data-driven schoolwide literacy plans to address the needs of all students, and teaming to share ideas and specific lessons that build students’ literacy skills. One way to overcome the issues of distance and isolation is by using a systematic, schoolwide literacy approach that combines face-to-face training with online support. The training builds on two programs at the Education Development Center (EDC): Supported Literacy and AIM at Middle Grades Results.
A Common Knowledge Base
Dorothy has participated in the AIM at Middle Grades Results program for two years. AIM is a comprehensive school reform program that helps schools become learning organizations through professional development and enhanced instructional capacity. Dorothy joined teachers from four other AIM schools, two in Mississippi and two in Arkansas, who are working to build their knowledge of literacy skills and become literacy leaders in their schools.

The schools include grades 6–8 and range in size from 583–848 students. The student population is predominantly Black. The percentage of students receiving free and/or reduced-price lunch is 85% in the Louisiana school, 73% in Arkansas, and 56% in Mississippi.

Dorothy grew up in northern Louisiana. Her subject is history, and her first love is Louisiana history. She says she grew up in the kind of rural poverty that doesn’t exist any more. She was in grade 3 before she had any clothing that came from a store. Her dresses were made from flour sacks; her shoes were hand-me-downs from an older sibling. “Some of them fit. Some of them didn’t,” she said. Dorothy loved school, and her teachers were the first women she ever encountered who seemed to be part of a larger world. From them, she absorbed both a love of learning and ambition to succeed. She is the only member of her family who ever finished high school, much less college.

Dorothy’s greatest ambition is to motivate students to want to succeed, but to her sorrow, when she tries to tell the story of her life to her students to inspire them, they don’t want to hear it. It’s too remote from them; they cannot picture a world without television or shopping malls. “At some point, I realized that in order to survive, I had to expose myself to something new,” she said. “AIM and Supported Literacy gave me new tools to use, especially in the areas of literacy, assessment, and hands-on activities.”

Literacy Program Components
Supported Literacy is a comprehensive literacy program that focuses on three literacy areas: comprehension, writing, and reading (Morocco, Cynthia Mata Aguilar cmata-aguilar@edc.org Aguilar is a senior project director with the Center for Family, School, and Community at the Education Development Center Inc. in Newton, MA.

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Hindin, & Aguilar, 2001; Hindin, Morocco, Aguilar, & Clark-Chiarelli, 2001; Kotula & MoHindin, & Aguilar, 2001; Morocco, Aguilar, & Clark-Chiarelli, 2001; Kotula & Morocco, 2006). Comprehension in Context integrates evidence-based comprehension strategies and comprehension support into thematic units. Writing to Learn builds expository writing throughout the integrated units. Students learn the features of expository texts as they work with them and learn to write their own compare and contrast and persuasive texts. Foundations of Reading is designed for students who read below the 25th percentile on standardized reading tests—struggling decoders.

AIM teachers came together for two 3-day Supported Literacy Institutes during September 2003 and January 2004. The goals of the institutes were to provide teachers with a framework for integrating literacy strategies in all content areas; to engage teachers in using prototype curriculum materials and lessons that demonstrate the framework and can serve as excellent, standards-based curricula in their schools; to build teachers’ collaboration and coaching skills for intensifying literacy development in their schools; and to begin to build a literacy community across those schools.

**The Meaning-Making Cycle**

The AIM teachers began their training by learning the Comprehension in Context component. Key to this component is the meaning-making cycle (figure 1), which consists of five phases: engage, respond, elaborate, revisit, and represent meaning. The teachers used cross-content text in science, math, and social studies to develop a lesson that begins with the teacher posing a question or a problem to the class (engage). Students then wrote journal entries (respond) and participated in student-led discussions (elaborate). They compared their interpretations in teacher-led discussions (revisit) and wrote interpretation essays (represent). Teachers integrated evidence-based reading, writing, and discussion strategies identified as most important in the recent Rand report *Reading for Understanding* (Snow, 2002).

**Support Through Blogging**

The teachers who participated in the initiative needed a way to remain connected to one another and the Supported Literacy staff after the summer institutes, so the staff developed a section of the Literacy Matters (www.literacymatters.org) Web site expressly for the teachers. This site was tailored to fit their assignments, lessons, and reflections and also housed a series of blogs that the teachers could use to share classroom experiences, ask questions, and turn to one another for support. Blogs function as an instant Web publishing system and provide tools for posting comments and linking to information on other Web sites. In 2003, blogs were relatively new to the educational world.

At the start of the institute, none of the teachers had ever used a blog before, but they familiarized themselves with blogs by completing two assignments. The first assignment asked the teachers to create their first post by sharing something about their life, such as a special song, hobby, or favorite food. The Supported Literacy staff wanted the teachers to practice posting and adding comments rather than worrying about the content itself. Unexpectedly, this activity also built trust and bonding among the teachers. They enjoyed learning about one another’s religion, education, and life experiences.

The second assignment asked teachers to share their experiences using Supported Literacy in the classroom. The staff wanted to offer feedback and support as the teachers crafted lessons that embedded reading and comprehension strategies. Teachers’ blog entries varied from cries for help to success stories about using the meaning-making cycle in the class. A math teacher wrote:

> I have enjoyed using the literacy circles in my classroom. From the very beginning, I have been able to see results. I went back and retaught decimals. The second time around I used literacy circles. My test scores went up 30%.

The teachers’ posts revealed evidence that they were implementing literacy strategies across the content areas. Dorothy, who admitted that she used to approach computers “like they
Suzanne and Bill
English Language Arts Teachers

Suzanne and I have introduced the supported literacy process to our school improvement team. We used the meaning making process with our students support team. We presented Supported Literacy to them using the meaning making cycle. We waited until we had a chance to use it more in our classes then we shared the ideas with everyone. We gave them a chance to write about strategies that they have used in classes to start with, then we then put those strategies under the possible parts of the cycle. After doing this we presented the meaning making cycle and purpose for using supported literacy; by doing this the participants were less threatened because it was things that they were already doing. We have seen the students working together more as well as the teachers being more energized by the students gaining a more in depth understanding of texts in all content areas.

Lisette
Foreign Language Teacher

The supported literacy cycle has given a depth to my teaching methods that was lacking before, and has given me a tool to help my students increase their reading skills, and their vocabulary. I have noticed since using this in my foreign language class that the students are more enthusiastic and that they are enjoying reading the materials. This means that they are getting more out of it as well. After hearing from lots of other teachers, I got some new ideas this time that I would like to focus in on. One is more of an emphasis on engaging my students at the beginning through questions because I think this will help guide them through the reading. The second is that I would like to work towards deeper questioning and help the students really think through what they are reading! Wishing everybody else success. I really enjoyed seeing you all again and learning so much from you!

Lorena Morgan
Anderson Middle School, Starkville, MI
Sample Lesson in Math
Great Activity for Mississippi Curriculum Test

The activity that I used the literacy circle with was very useful. I used my students’ Mississippi Curriculum Test [MCT] results from last year to show the students all areas on the test.

Engage
We started the lesson off by writing in journals about their thoughts on the MCT. Volunteers shared. We then looked at an example of an MCT test result sheet. We talked about the 4 grades and what they meant (Minimal, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced). We then looked at the 3 subject areas in detail. We talked about all categories in the subject area and gave examples of questions that would be in this area. (Ex. Reading—context clues, word structure, word pattern, etc).

Respond
I gave each student his/her test results to examine and a summary sheet to fill in the results. They then wrote about what they understood about their results. We then wrote the fraction for the questions they got correct in each category of every subject area on the summary sheet. We found the percentage for one subject by dividing the fractions with paper and pencil. After monitoring students to see if students understood, we used calculators to find the percentages for the other subjects. Upon finding the percentages, the students then ranked the categories from weakest to strongest under each subject on the summary sheet.

Elaborate/Revisit
After individually ranking the categories (in groups), the students found common problem areas and common strong areas among the group. The groups then reported to the class, their weakest area and their strongest area. We then found the weakest area as a class and the strongest area as a class. The students then used the summary sheet to individually make a list of strategies that could help them improve in their weakest area. After making an individual list, the students shared suggestions with the group and with the class.

Represent
The final part of the lesson was a writing assignment. The students had to write an essay on “Why is it important to understand the MCT’s scoring, categories, and overall results?” The students really enjoyed the lesson, and I really think that it is a wonderful diagnostic method to help prescribe interventions for these areas in math, reading, and language.

The literacy circle was very successful in teaching this lesson. It took 2 days of 60 minutes class time to complete the lesson. The thing that I had problems with was making sure that I used the literacy cycle. I felt confident that I was following the steps in the cycle, but I needed to make sure that I incorporate the strategies and the cycle. It was a wonderful experience. Every math teacher was responsible for using the test scores to instruct students; however, upon sharing my method with them, they got better results from it that made the lesson more meaningful.
might explode if I did the wrong thing,” was so eager to participate that she overcame her fears, got some technical help from the resident tech expert in the school, and wrote the following:

I have seen test scores go up as a result of using the literacy circles in my classroom. The students are forced to read and analyze the information when in groups. Even if they do not try to contribute to the discussion, they have the opportunity to hear what other students are saying about the text. This contributes to their understanding and retention of the content. More than anything, I think that it makes the students think about what we are discussing, instead of just listening to what I have to say about something. I also have an opportunity to discuss test-taking skills by pointing out the importance of titles, topic sentences, rereading, etc., on the state test and how much better they understand the reading by using these skills. I wish I could do it more!!!

**Building Schoolwide Literacy Practices**
A follow-up assignment asked teachers to share their plans for schoolwide implementation. They felt great anxiety about returning to their schools and taking a lead in literacy, especially if they were not English or reading teachers or if (like Dorothy) they had never before thought of themselves as leaders. Some decided to begin the work with their grade-level teams; others, with the school improvement teams; and still others, with the whole school. One said:

We are very excited about using Supported Literacy. We have incorporated supported literacy into our district's writing curriculum plan. It must be implemented by January of 2004. Suzanne and I are meeting with the School Improvement Team on Nov. 5th to present supported literacy to them. We have samples to show them from the lessons that we have done in our classes. They will visit our classes to see it in practice and will then help us present it to the rest of the faculty by January. Teachers on my team and Suzanne's team have been introduced to it already. They are sold on the idea, and we feel that the rest of the teachers will be too.

**Using Blogs to Support Literacy**
Using technology to support teachers when they embark on new instructional practices is a promising approach to
overcoming time, distance, and lack of resources. It is not, however, a matter of pointing teachers toward computers and hoping for the best. Leaders must make a concerted schoolwide, even districtwide effort, to provide the following:

- Literacy leadership in the school and the district
- A comprehensive literacy program that includes literacy across the content areas and targeted instruction for students who read below grade level
- Sufficient training for the teachers at the start of the initiative
- A community of teachers from across disciplines who learn together
- A designated technology expert in each building who can provide tech support
- Clear direction and purpose for using blogging as a medium
- Adequate technology resources (especially in small and rural districts and schools) so that teachers can connect with the broader education field.

The old model of a teacher closing his or her classroom door to the outside world is unlikely to produce students who are successful, literate adults. Supported Literacy is a professional development approach that fuses face-to-face training with online support to build teachers’ literacy practices, a sense of community, and leadership skills. With the advantage of overcoming distance and isolation in a cost-effective manner, this professional development approach is one solution, especially for small rural schools. PL

References