

The Architecture of a Reading Workshop: The Management System

A transcript of remarks by Kathleen Tolan Deputy Director of Reading, Teachers College Reading & Writing Project

Minilesson: Connect, Teach, Active Involvement, Link

A **minilesson** begins the reading workshop. This is the time the teacher plans for a whole class lesson on reading. These lessons are usually about ten minutes long. The teacher calls the whole class over to the meeting area to give the lesson, which is instruction in an explicit strategy or skill that good readers use. The minilesson has four parts: the connection, the “teach”, active involvements, and the link.

The **connection** starts off the mini-lesson. In choosing a connection, the teacher asks, how do I take what I’m trying to teach right now and help it resonate for my children? Sometimes an anecdote from the classroom or a story from her life can connect the instruction to her students’ lives. In the connection, the teacher has a teaching point that explicitly tells the children what she’s going to teach them that day. So, the connection is a way for us to be really clear and explicit to our children so they get trained to stop and think, “this is what I’m going to be taught today.” Usually, the teacher will say, “Today I’m going to teach you...”, so the kids know what is coming.

The next part of the minilesson is the **“teach”** part. In the “teach” part, the teacher is going to again name the teaching skill and strategy, and then show the kids what that will look like in action as a reader. About 80% of the time, the teacher will demonstrate it as a reader. She picks up a book, the current or a past read-aloud book, and she puts into action the strategy she just named. As the kids listen and watch, she usually talks a little about the process she’s going through as she’s putting that strategy into action. The “teach” is a good time for the teacher to demonstrate the difficulties kids might run into and show how they can work through these. Then, when she’s finished demonstrating, she usually reviews what she just did, so that kids can recognize the explicit steps of putting that strategy or skill into action.

The next part is the **active involvement**. The kids are now going to try the strategy or skill themselves. The teacher might set up this section by reading aloud a little bit more of the text, or, the children might use their own books to try it. Usually in that time, the teacher is going to guide them a bit, either by voicing over things for them to be paying attention to, or going around and supporting the children as they’re doing the strategy. Often, the teacher has the kids turn and talk, so she can walk around and quickly identify who’s getting it and who needs a little more support. Another helpful tip is to make note of who gets and who doesn’t, so that you can make sure to support those kids who need it.

The next stage, after the active involvement, is the **link**. This is the ending point of the mini-lesson, where the teacher restates the teaching and the purpose (the “Why do we do this?”). The teacher is going to encourage the children to transfer this skill or strategy to their reading when it makes sense for them. At this time, the teaching point is transferred onto a chart, so that kids can easily reference how to use the new skill or strategy. They are now ready to independently practice what have been taught.

Independent Reading and Conferring with Students

After the mini-lesson, students begin **independent reading**. Independent reading usually begins with the kids recording information in their log: the date, the page they’re starting, and the time that they’re starting to read. At first, teachers have to help the kids get into the routine of logging. So the teacher has to remind them as they’re walking back to their seats to take out their logs and fill them out quickly.

During the time when children are reading, thirty to forty minutes, the teacher is **conferring with students** one-on-one, in partnerships, or pulling small groups together. The teacher carries her recordkeeping with her as she meets with students so she can keep notes on what she taught and observations she had, and perhaps identify how she should follow up with the children.

To establish an expected classroom environment, the teacher has to do some management. The teacher has to make her presence known. So she might have to sweep around the room to make sure everyone is

reading before she begins conferring with students. She might tap a couple of children on their shoulder. She might make a gesture, pointing their eyes back to their book or putting her finger to her lips to tell the children that it's time for them to get back to reading.

When the teacher is conferring with students, she's really researching them to find out what they're doing as readers. And one of the things that the teacher really wants to do is make the student a co-researcher by starting off with a research question such as, "What are you working on as a reader?" Or, "Can you talk me through your Post-its so I can see your thinking?" "Can you tell me a bit about any problems you're having as a reader? How can I help you?" The teacher listens to the child and asks follow-up questions in order to identify what she wants to teach this child.

In the conference, just as in a minilesson, the teacher has to decide how she'll approach teaching the topic. You can demonstrate, just like you did in the minilesson, you can become the reader, and you can have the child watch you put the strategy into action. Or, you can coach the child through the use of a strategy or skill. In a conference, the teacher must find something to **compliment the reader** on, so that the reader can recognize how s/he is growing as a reader. It's important for teachers to identify what the child is doing well, instead of focusing only on what the child needs help with. Of course, if the child is not making any real effort, you wouldn't want to compliment them because then it almost becomes a joke. They will think that it doesn't matter what they do. So you want to make sure that your compliments also nudge kids forward. Consider bridge statements like, "one thing you could do even better", or, "another thing you could do as you're doing that work." So it kind of ratchets up what they're already doing. And then, the teacher, using the same structure as the minilesson, will use a **link** to identify what they've worked on and to explain to the child that it's not just in this book that they can do that work, but they can always do that as a reader. The teacher will then send the child **back to reading**. The child understands that s/he will return to reading and put not just that strategy/skill into practice, but that s/he will use everything in their repertoire as it's needed.

Strategy Lessons

Strategy lessons is small-group work where the teacher pulls kids in her classroom together. It could be two kids, five kids, six kids. I think the better you are at a strategy lesson, the more kids you can have at that strategy lesson. Strategy lessons are a way to reach more kids. It's assessment-based. You identify which particular strategy these kids need some extra help on. A very common structure of a strategy lesson is that it mimics a minilesson, except in a minilesson, the demonstration, the "teach" part, is longer than the active involvement. The reason for that in a minilesson is that you have 28 to 32 kids in front of you. You cannot give as much individual attention as you want. You rely on the "teach" part to help kids understand what they're doing. But in a strategy lesson, it's just the opposite. The "teach" part is brief, and the time the kids are practicing the strategy is longer. Because you only have four to six kids in front of you, you have time to coach and guide them through that strategy lesson. A strategy lesson helps you really get your hands on them as readers, get in there a little bit more—and coach. It does also end, just as a mini-lesson does, with a link. You can also have a strategy lesson that doesn't have the teacher demonstrate. It could be an inquiry, where the kids are studying each other's Post-its, and you build off of one of the Post-its and say, "Let's all try to do that kind of work, and push ourselves in that way." The kids can then go back to their own jottings, and the teacher coaches them in how they can take that one quality noticed on that Post-it and lift the level of thinking they're doing about their books.

So, the teacher has been conferring or she's been doing small groups, and about half-way through the workshop the teacher may decide—it's not something that has to happen every day—but she may decide to do a mid-workshop teaching point. The teacher goes to a central place in the room and she interrupts the kids. The students look up and it's kind of like a voice-over. Or the teacher can decide. The teacher identifies something for students to do. For example, at the beginning of the year, she might want to say, "we've been reading for fifteen minutes and it feels like a lot of people's attention is off, so we want to go back and reread and get ourselves back into our reading before we read forward. And that's a good thing to do when you find yourself distracted. Instead of reading forward, you might go back and reread to get yourself back on track." The mid-workshop is a time for you to manage the class. It can also be a time for you to share an example of something a child did in conferencing that would be a good example for other kids to hear. It might be not connected to today's minilesson, but prior work, that you want to revisit. This

can serve as a way of reminding kids that, “Oh yeah, I can do that, too!” It might ratchet up the strategy you taught in the minilesson or add another layer to it. Whatever you choose as your focus, it is important to keep the mid-workshop teaching lesson very short. It’s only about one to two minutes. Sometimes it has an active involvement in it, and sometimes a little partner work in it. But the object isn’t to shut down the reading workshop because ultimately we want the kids to spend more time with their eyes in their books, reading. The teacher then sends them back into their reading after the mid-workshop, and she goes back and she confers or pulls some small group work during that time.

Teaching Share

The **teaching share** ends the reading workshop. The teacher can decide to either gather the kids back at the meeting area or have the kids stay at their seats. It’s up to the teacher to decide what works best. Sometimes, if it’s going to be mostly partner work, I leave them in their spots, so they can get closer to their partner and do the work that I’m asking them to do. If I’m going to be talking to them for a longer period of time and demonstrating something or have a child demonstrate something, I usually pull them back to the meeting area because I think that it might be too much for the kids to hold on to as they’re spaced out around the classroom. The teaching share is from two minutes to five or seven minutes. Setting the kids up for partner work takes time. As students work in partners, the teacher then can go around and support the kids. There are many different kinds of partner activities: kids could be talking, studying their logs together, studying their Post-its together, making plans for their reading, etc. The point of the teaching share is to wrap up the day by getting the kids to talk about books and talk about themselves as readers. That the kids are sharing books and Hopefully, the conversations they’re having will later become conversations in their mind that they can have with themselves.

So, to review, reading workshop, just like a writing workshop, starts off with a minilesson, where the teacher explains a reading strategy or skill that good readers use. Then the kids go off and compose their reading lives, where they’re reading the books that they’ve chosen, the just-right books that match them as readers. The teacher has helped them choose books by assessing them and identifying a reading level. As students read, they’re putting into effect the strategy that the teacher taught today or other ones, because we want them to be saying, “Hmm, what work do I have to do as a reader?” The teacher confers during the independent reading time. She also pulls small groups together during that time. Half-way through the reading workshop, there’s a mid-workshop teaching point, where the teacher can either refocus the kids, teach forward a bit, or revisit something. The kids then go back to their reading and the teacher does more conferring and small group work. The workshop usually ends with a teaching share that sets them up for partner work. And that structure happens each and every day, with some variety. The teaching share doesn’t always have to be partner work, partner work could come in the mid-workshop interruption.

Read-Aloud Time

Each and every day, teachers should read aloud from the **read-aloud** book that they’ve chosen. The minilesson might be the time for read-aloud, but it can happen at another time of the day. During read-aloud, the teacher may read for ten to fifteen minutes from a chapter book, picture book, short story, or nonfiction. During that time, the teacher is demonstrating a repertoire of reading strategies. She’s just being a natural reader, thinking aloud about how she’s making sense of the text. What’s really nice about that is that a minilesson can then take one of those strategies/skills and really show how the teacher does it. A read-aloud shows that as you read you do a lot of different things. And so it can balance the minilesson, which is to show one thing. The read aloud can put that one thing back into the repertoire of what readers do, so children get a view that everyday I shouldn’t just be thinking about one thing, I should be thinking about many things as I read. During the read aloud, the teacher will not only think aloud but she’ll also set the kids up to turn and talk and share what they’re thinking. So there’s partner A and partner B, just like in a minilesson, and the partners share their thoughts. They might even act out some things together. They might do some stopping and jotting. It could be on a series of different reading skills, or just one. The teacher can also have the read-aloud time followed by accountable talk, a **whole-class conversation** in which the kids talk about the part of the text they read, in addition to the parts they read earlier. In the whole-class conversation, the teacher acts as a coach, getting the kids to build on their understanding. For example, the teacher could ask if there are parts in the story that match that example, or ask who thinks differently about something, all as a way of opening up discussion to other kinds of ideas.

The point is that each and every day, the teacher is reading aloud, and usually two or three times a week, the teacher has whole-class conversations. But every single day, when kids are read aloud to, they do some kind of talking, which is usually turning and talking to a partner, and two or three times they have a whole-class conversation. In a whole-class conversation, everybody talks but not everybody is heard. What I mean by that is that if we have a whole-class conversation where everybody has to talk and everybody listens, sometimes it sounds more like a share. But in the conversation we want it to sound more like a conversation you would have with your friends at a restaurant. You wouldn't all just go around and take turns saying what you're thinking. However, you have to strike a balance. In a whole-class conversation, you just don't want the same eight kids sharing their ideas, so what you do is you move from whole-class, where everybody is listening to one person, to turn-and-talk and ask kids to tell their partners, "What are you thinking right now?" In this way, every child gets a chance to think, "If I got the chance to talk right now, what would I say about what we're discussing?" Use this formula: from whole-class (where everybody's listening) to turn-and-talk (where everyone is talking), back to whole-class. And that way, everybody gets to share their thoughts.