

Units of Study for Teaching Reading
A Workshop Curriculum, Middle School Grades

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Question: *Why reading workshop?*

Mary Ehrenworth:

It's interesting when you think about reading workshop versus other approaches, because most adults in this country grew up with other approaches because reading workshop didn't exist when we were children. Really beautiful reading work happened, but it mostly happened in the corners outside of school. I remember when I was a child, we would start book clubs, but we didn't have book clubs in school. I was reading all the time, but I didn't read in school. In school I was moving through either anthologies or textbooks, inching through books that I could've read in three to four days, we would read over six weeks. And a lot of those books, which would've been really beautiful books if we read them for three days or a week, became a lot less beautiful when you're inching through them. It's hard to imagine now, but every kid supposedly on the same page of the same book week after week after week. So one of the things is we just know that that doesn't work. You can go back and read Kylee Beers' *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do*. And in that book she has this really painful survey where she interviewed high school kids about what turned them off reading. And you know what the number one response is? What turned kids off reading, high school English, which was this model of taking books that were often a lot of stories that had no teens in them and didn't feel socially relevant to the lives that teens live, and then walking kids through page after page at this really, really slow pace.

So we know now that thinking about reading doesn't make you a better reader, talking about reading doesn't really make you a better reader—you get better at reading by reading. Reading is like baseball. Talking about baseball doesn't make you a better baseball player, talking about soccer, talking about piano. So part of what really works in terms of helping kids become more powerful readers is a really thoughtful approach that is going to say, we're going to take kids, they're going to read a lot. So we're going to set up a workshop, just like an art workshop or just like a soccer scrimmage, where the kids are going to read tremendous amounts, like hundreds of pages across a week. So this is not set up so kids read like six pages every day. This is set up so that every week they're reading whole novels. And across that time, there's a lot of really careful thought put into very deliberate book choice, so that kids are choosing among the hundreds and thousands of fabulous teen novels that now exist.

But we are also working to make sure that, say you get in a sixth grader at the beginning of the year who's reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and that happens to be just right for him, it's right at the outside edge of his zone of proximal development,

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we actually don't want that kid still reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* in March. We want that kid having moved steadily up levels of text complexity. So for instance, if he loves graphic novels, he's moved up levels in graphic novels. If he loves fantasy, he's moving up fantasy. But the main thing is that *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, which, by the way, my high school seniors still love to read, but it's fast weekend reading for them. It's not the reading that's their steady diet. So part of this is setting up a system where there's time in school for teachers to watch kids reading, research them as readers, confer with them and talk to them about the books that they're reading, kids are deeply involved with other kids and getting book recommendations from them, and they're moving up levels of text complexity, while also really learning about individual genres and literary traditions, including non-fiction as well as fiction. All of that, it just takes a lot of careful thought, and the answer to that is not let's read one book for six weeks, and then let's read another book for six weeks. The answer is really careful thought put into comprehension strategies, interpretation strategies, writing about reading strategies, talk strategies, while kids are reading hundreds of pages of text. And that's what reading workshop is.