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*Literacy and Learning Centers
for The Big Kids:*

**Building Literacy Skills
and Content Knowledge,
grades 4-12**

Katherine S. McKnight, Ph.D.

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CHAPTER ONE: **WHY SHOULD WE USE CENTERS FOR THE BIG KIDS?**

The Literacy and Learning Center (LLC) model is based on research and theory about the most effective practices for the development of literacy skills and content knowledge. LLC was developed through teacher collaboration that occurred in schools all over the United States and internationally.

As a veteran teacher myself, I am usually cautious when I am introduced to the “next great thing” in education. I know that a great teacher is dependent on many variables, including context, available resources, research, and most importantly, the diverse needs of students. Navigating the bridge that connects reading, writing and literacy skill development with content knowledge continues to challenge us. I have been working in this area for over thirty years and I will be the first to admit that I don’t have the answers to all of the questions that face educators.

What I do have is a ton of ideas, and that is what this book and the LLC model are all about: ideas, creativity, effective research-based teaching, and ample practice. When we bring together all of these principles, we get an effective model for the development of literacy skills and content knowledge.

Let me begin this chapter by addressing some of the frequently asked questions about using centers with older students.

I am often asked:

How can I teach literacy skills when I am required to cover content?

As educators, we need to resign ourselves to the reality that we will never, ever have enough time. That’s just a fact. However, in the last decade, I have discovered that teachers are very surprised (especially high school teachers) when they realize that they are able to cover more content in less time through center-based instruction.

If our students are engaged in center-based activities, they are actually doing more, not less. When we lecture for what is sometimes referred to as “sit and get,” our students become disengaged and bored. They aren’t learning or retaining information.

Am I getting my students ready for college when I lecture?

In addition to being an experienced high school educator, I was a tenured professor for fifteen years at two different universities. Guess what? Long lectures that don’t engage students are no longer the norm for college professors and universities. Lecturing that does not allow for discussion and active interaction is not as effective as more student centered activities. Furthermore, most colleges are preparing students for 21st century careers that require collaboration, creative problem solving and innovation. College assignments often call for completing portfolios, engaging in projects and working in teams. Therefore, when high school students work in centers, they learn the skills that will be in demand in a college setting. They learn how to apply what they know and demonstrate their understanding of content.

How can I do centers if I have to get my students ready for “the test”?

This is largely connected to the first question. When I speak here of “the test,” I refer to that high-stakes state assessment that comes in all different versions throughout the country. Over the course of any school year, that test will produce anxiety for educators, schools, and students alike. Yet here’s what I know: good teaching always takes care of testing. Always. When students are engaged in meaningful work in centers, and are actually doing rather than being lectured on how to develop skills and content knowledge, they learn how to be more independent, confident, knowledgeable and competent. In every district where I have implemented the Literacy and

Learning Center model, student performance and proficiency goes up. There's quite a bit of evidence out there, too, that if we keep purchasing test prep books and prepare students to take "the test," overall student performance goes down (Wilhelm, Smith & Fransen, 2014).

I have coached numerous schools where the Literacy and Learning Center model was implemented and student performance increased:

Mesa View Middle School in Farmington, New Mexico: A Title I school that was struggling to raise performance. Over a two-year period, the Literacy and Learning Center model (coupled with a proficiency scale based assessment initiative) was implemented. In two years, Mesa View's state report card skyrocketed from an "F" school to a "B." Their sister school, Hermosa Middle School, witnessed similar gains. In the same two-year period, the school's state report card rose from a "D" to a "B." (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2016).

Here's another example. I served in an East St. Louis, Illinois district that had been featured in Jonathon Kozol's seminal work, *Savage Inequalities*. Mired in extreme poverty, the district was searching for new and innovative instructional methods for its students. For the first time in decades, after the introduction of the LLC model, the middle school and high school students in East St. Louis demonstrated increased performance on the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA) test. My East St. Louis colleagues and I were encouraged and excited to learn that the students' proficiency levels increased over 15% on the middle school and high school level in two years.

To be honest, as an educator, I am reticent when someone shouts from the hilltop that they have THE answer for increasing student performance. I am immediately suspicious. It has been my experience that it is always a teacher, not a specific program, that increases student achievement. For that reason, I ask only that you

use this book as a resource and a guide. There is no one who knows his or her students better than a teacher. This book is intended to provide a model, tons of information, different sample activities, structures, suggestions, and teacher tips. I encourage you to treat the Literacy and Learning Center model as a guide. I expect you will make changes and adaptations in accordance to *your professional judgment*.

The Literacy Challenge

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from 2013 indicates that over 60% of our high school students are not reading with proficiency. This means that our high school students lack the basic ability to read text for information, and therefore are not college and career ready (Bandeira de Mello, Bohrnstedt, Blankenship, & Sherman, 2015).

I would argue that literacy is the critical foundation for all students to succeed. Yet, the dual priorities of building reading and writing skills while teaching content can be challenging for many teachers. When I became a high school teacher over thirty years ago, I was woefully unequipped to help students with reading difficulties. Unlike elementary school teachers, I was neither trained nor required to take any college courses in literacy when I prepared to become a teacher. Sadly, this is still the reality in many educational settings.

Richard Allington and Rachael Gabriel (2012) reported that there are six common factors that lead to school success and student growth. All six can be traced back to how students select their materials and practice their lessons as they develop literacy skills:

1. Every child reads something he or she chooses.
2. Every child reads accurately.
3. Every child reads something he or she understands.
4. Every child writes about something personally meaningful.
5. Every child talks with peers about reading and writing.
6. Every child listens to a fluent adult read aloud.

These experiences are critical for academic success for students from every age group. The Literacy and Learning Center embraces all of these experiences – while also emphasizing content knowledge. Keep these six common factors in mind as you read through the following chapters. As you create Literacy and Learning Centers for your classroom, and adapt the model for your own students’ needs, you’ll want to keep coming back to this list. If your centers are built on these findings, then you are creating an awesome learning environment.

As we continue to explore the literacy challenge with our students, let’s take a look at the four components of reading:

Alphabetics: This involves understanding and using the sounds that make up words (phonemic awareness) and the letters that correspond to those sounds (decoding). From there, students must also relate those letters and sounds to the particular words they represent (word recognition).

Fluency: Learners are able to identify words accurately and effortlessly, and read them within a text using appropriate intonation, stress and phrasing.

Vocabulary: Students know and understand the meanings of words, and can use them with flexibility and precision.

Comprehension: This is the process and the product of constructing meaning from what we read. It consists of the interaction between a reader and a text, which occurs for a purpose and within a context.

What do the four components of reading mean for our older students, and how does this impact the teaching of our different content areas? Oftentimes, I encounter teachers who report that their students can decode text, but become puzzled and stuck when asked about the content of what they have read. Our students can decode and they “seem” to read, but they aren’t able to make sense of the text. As teachers of adolescents, our students need us to primarily focus on comprehension skills and the development of

academic- and content-specific language. If a student at this level (4th-12th grade) is still having difficulty with alphabets and fluency, they need the support of a reading interventionist. I often assert that it is completely unfair to expect a content area teacher to teach these skills. It is especially unfair to the struggling student. They need an expert who is trained in how to teach reading.

Comprehension and vocabulary should be the focus of all content specific teachers. As students progress through school, the demands of the texts they encounter increase. As Allington and Gabriel (2012) assert in their findings, students need practice and choice in order to develop greater skill proficiency. Jeff Wilhelm and Michael Smith arrived at similar conclusions about the importance of choice and practice (Wilhelm, Smith, & Fransen, 2014). This is exactly why tired practices like lectures, PowerPoints, round-robin reading, and all-class reading fail. During those ineffective exercises, students are not given the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of content, and they are not allowed to exercise choice.

Let's Not Forget About Writing

Another challenge that faces many teachers is how to approach writing in the content areas. In order for students to be college and career ready, they need ample writing practice, especially in evidence-based argumentation. In fact, argumentation is the heart of college and career readiness (Hillocks, Jr., 2011). Just as with reading, the Learning and Literacy Model provides students the opportunity to practice their writing skill practice in all the content areas, even math.

Student Choice Doesn't Mean "Anything Goes"

Giving students a choice can sometimes make teachers nervous. This is part of why I always look at choice as a "democratic dictatorship." I will offer my students choices, but they are always going to be choices that I provide. For example, let's say that students in a U.S. history class are studying the Bill of Rights. I want the

students to write an evidence-based argument in response to the following prompt: “The Bill of Rights was written over two hundred years ago. Are these rights still relevant?” The students are instructed to choose one of the amendments and argue its relevance for 21st century America. The choice in this assignment is the opportunity for students to select any of the amendments that they wish.

Yes, incorporating student choice really can be this simple! Here’s another example.

In a 7th grade English class, middle schoolers are studying Edgar Allan Poe, with a focus on his impact on American literature and the short story genre. The students are offered the choice of reading any one of the following short stories: “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat” or “The Cask of Amontillado.” Regardless of which story they choose, students will develop the same literacy skills, and content instruction will focus on Poe’s influence on the American short story genre.

We will address choice as we learn more about the Literacy and Learning Center model in subsequent chapters.

More Reasons Why Centers Work for the Big Kids

There are several reasons why Learning and Literacy Centers is an effective strategy for developing content knowledge and literacy skills. The strategy aligns with several pedagogical approaches, including:

- Gradual Release of Responsibility
- Growth Mindset and Self-Regulation
- Formative Assessment
- Differentiated Instruction
- Response to Intervention (RTI)

Gradual Release of Responsibility

The Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model has been lately popularized as a result of the work of Fisher and Frey (2008), and due to college and career readiness standards that promote greater student independence. In short, this model promotes a three-step process. The teacher models an instructional strategy, the students practice this strategy with their peers, and then students grow into greater independence. In the Literacy and Learning Center model, GRR is the framework, or overarching paradigm. This is how the Literacy and Learning Center instructional model is aligned with GRR:

Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR)	<i>Literacy and Learning Centers (LLC)</i>
I Do It	<i>Teacher-Led Mini Lesson OR Whole Group Instruction</i> <i>The teacher models a particular skill, usually through a think-aloud or read-aloud.</i>
We Do It	<i>Pair/Small Group</i> <i>In small groups, the students practice the skill that was demonstrated during the Teacher-Led Mini Lesson/Whole Group Instruction</i>
You Do It	<i>Centers</i> <i>The Literacy and Learning Centers include clearly focused activities that foster skill development and content knowledge.</i>

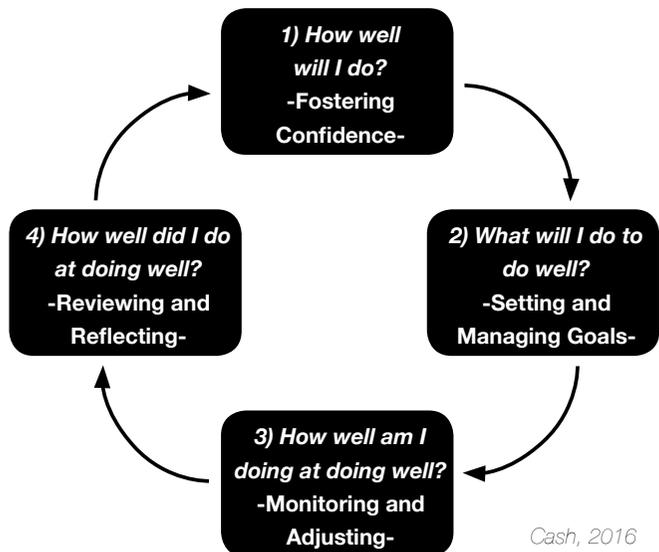
As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Literacy and Learning Center model shifts the focus of learning onto the student, while the teacher provides modeling and guidance through structured activities. When Literacy and Learning Centers are aligned with the GRR model, students can work toward developing a greater range of skills in order to promote independent learning.

Growth Mindset and Self-Regulation

In many of the schools where I work, colleagues report that their students often give up and do enough “just to get by.” My colleague, Richard Cash, is an expert in self-regulation and mindset and he and I have been fortunate to work in many different schools together. Lately, Dr. Cash and I have noticed that educators are recognizing the connections between self-regulation, growth mindset, and literacy development. We had the opportunity to test this connection for ourselves while working together at George Washington Community School in Indianapolis, Indiana, where we synchronized Cash’s work in growth mindset with my work in literacy skill development with adolescent literacy.

According to (Cash 2016), self-regulation for learning and literacy develops within a cycle of learning and can be defined as Four Phases of Engaging in a Task (see figure below). At first, a student must feel confident enough to pursue the tasks required. Then a plan to outline learning needs should be developed. This learning plan includes the what, where and when of the learning tasks. The third phase is self-monitoring, adjusting when necessary and reworking when needed. The final stage is the review and reflection stage. In this last step, the learner reviews what occurred, considers options for renewal or change, and sets a tone for the next learning task.

Whenever a student progresses through the Four Phases of Engaging in a Task, he or she grows more confident and independent. This is essential for the process of literacy skill development.



Cash, 2016

Phase One: Fostering Confidence

Each phase of engaging in a task requires both self-regulatory strategies and literacy strategies. In phase one, students must find the mindset that will give them the best result. Carol S. Dweck (2006) describes the differences between a fixed mindset, where intelligence and ability are fixed and are unlikely to change, and a growth mindset, in which intelligence and ability can and will change with hard work and effort. Both types of mindsets are parts of living and learning, but we succeed by being able to shift to a growth mindset when it is necessary. In order to help students make that shift to a growth mindset, it is important to ensure they feel safe and welcome in their learning environments. Students who understand the expectations, norms and structures of their classrooms will be able to learn strategies to assist in these tasks (see figure below).

Some ideas for fostering confidence in the classroom include:

- Creating and upholding the proper learning behaviors for the classroom
- Avoiding confrontations and power struggles in interacting with students
- Praising positive examples rather than singling out negative ones (“Ryan is working hard on his project!” rather than “Taylor, get to work.”)
- Finding opportunities to reduce stress - after difficult tasks, take the time to play a game or tell a joke
- Not allowing students to “get your goat” - disagreements with students should be discussed one-on-one rather than in front of the class

Affect	Behavior	Cognition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe & welcoming environment • Building self-esteem & confidence • Emotional resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set scholarly expectations • Develop academic habits, language • Introduce the use of content language • Actively uncover prior knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop questioning strategies • Build academic/scholarly thinking • Strategies to shift mindset
<p>Sample Literacy Strategies</p> <p>Read Aloud, Graphic Organizers, KWL/KIQ, Vocabulary Engagement/Instruction, Pre-Writing, Anticipatory Activities to Increase Interest, Word Sort/Trees, Brainstorming</p>		

Phase Two: Setting and Managing Goals

Next, students identify the plans and goals that will lead them to success. We can assist them in that endeavor by accentuating the worth and value in their aspirations. An ideal way to accomplish this is to cultivate student interest in the content. A student who wants to know more will feel more confident in setting a goal to achieve that knowledge. Additionally, students who witness teachers setting straightforward goals for upcoming work will know better what is expected of them. Students must also have the infra-cognitive thinking strategies readily available.

Goal setting is one great way to orient students for academic success. I use the acronym “SMART” to help students develop an action plan:

Specific: Select a clear target that you wish to improve upon.

Measurable: Define how you will measure your success.

Assignable: Plot out what materials, steps and resources you will need in order to succeed.

Relevant: Confirm that you have the resources available to complete your goal.

Time-bound: Determine a timeline for achieving your target.

Affect	Behavior	Cognition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage confidence through content awareness • Manage stress, “boredom” & distractions • Maintain a safe/risk-free environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn study behaviors • Develop organizational skills • Maintain high expectations • Teach goal setting • Learn how to ask for help • Learn to avoid distraction • Strategies to overcome helplessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical reasoning • Essential question development & use • Creative thinking • HOTS

Sample Literacy Strategies

KWL/KIQ, Peer Assisted-Learning Strategies (PALS), Directed Reading and Thinking Activities (DRTA), Reader Response Journals, Note Taking Systems (Cornell), Structured Note Taking, Organizational Strategies, Graphic Organizers, Question Prompts, Concept Mapping, Brainstorming, Vocabulary Mapping, Formative Process

Phase Three: Monitoring and Adjusting

By this phase, students are ready to start assessing what learning strategies are and are not working for them. Monitoring and adjusting demands that students be fully aware of their own progress. A common way that this is done is through formative

assessment strategies. Above all, quality formative assessments are descriptive. They tell students what they have accomplished as well as when and where they may want to change and improve their work. Descriptive feedback ought to have these qualities:

- Ongoing throughout the learning process,
- Communicated to the student in a prompt manner
- Clearly related to skill and self-regulatory development,
- Relevant to predetermined tasks, performances and goals
- Balanced, with neither too much nor too little detail
- Focused on students’ effort, not their achievement

Affect	Behavior	Cognition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain confidence through success awareness • Manage stress, “boredom” & distractions • Maintain a safe/risk-free environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use & monitor study behaviors • Use & monitor organizational skills • Maintain high expectations • Monitor goal approach • Monitor assistance seeking • Monitor distractions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routinely using thinking tools • Constructing essential questions and HOT questions • Implement creativity

Sample Literacy Strategies

Pre-assessment, Formative Process including Descriptive Feedback, Anticipation Guides, Entrance/ Exit Slips, Question/Answer Relationships (QAR), Questioning the Author, Selective Highlighting, Marking Up the Text/Annotation, Reciprocal Teaching, Writing to Learn, Jigsaw, Frayer Model, Stop & Jot, Growth Mindset Questions

Phase Four: Reviewing and Reflecting

The educational philosopher John Dewey once said, “We learn more from the reflection on the experience than we do from the experience itself.” So the fourth and final stage is a time for reflection. Students must identify what worked and why, and they must also identify what didn’t work and why. A cumulative assessment at this stage will demonstrate to learners how close to the learning goals they came, and how they effectively employed various strategies. By leading an in depth reflection, teachers can also help improve their students’ capacity for meta-cognition and self-regulated learning during this phase. All this work is vital to cementing students’ learning before they embark upon their next set of tasks.

There are many valid forms of reflection: journal entries, exit tickets, class discussions. Provide enough time for students to consider and record how they felt throughout the each phase, what was successful and unsuccessful, and how they plan to improve in the future.

Affect	Behavior	Cognition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess confidence through successes • Assess stress, “boredom” & distractions levels • Suggest environmental adaptations/ adjustments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess study behaviors • Assess organizational skills • Assess meeting expectations • Assess goal attainment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection through meta-cognition • Forecast mindset into the future

Sample Literacy Strategies

Summative Assessment Process, Reflection Logs, Portfolio Development, Collaborative Student Conversation, Teacher/Student Coaching Session, Summarizing (GIST), Graphic Representations of Learning, Goal Charting, Growth Mindset Compliments

Formative Assessment

Developed through the work of James Popham (2006) and Margaret Heritage (2013), the Formative Assessment model provides an instructional approach to determining how and what students are learning. When teachers have meaningful feedback from and insight into their students, they are able to adjust instruction to ensure that their students are developing skills and content knowledge. Usually, this involves conferencing with students and providing on-the-spot descriptive and supportive feedback. Using the Literacy and Learning Center model, students will receive this feedback on a regular basis through the teacher-led center. Here is a table relating the building blocks of formative assessment to the LLC model:

Building Block	Elements of the Building Block	Where this element is embedded in LLC Model
Learning Progressions	Learning progressions should clearly articulate the sub-goals of the ultimate learning goal.	Teacher-Led Center Proficiency scales
Learning Goals and Criteria for Success	Learning goals and criteria for success should be clearly identified and communicated to students.	Teacher-Led Center Each center has a clearly articulated focus. (see chapter 2)
Descriptive Feedback	Students should be provided with evidence-based feedback that is linked to the intended instructional outcomes and criteria for success.	Teacher-Led Center Proficiency scales
Self-and Peer-Assessment	Both self- and peer-assessment are important for providing students an opportunity to think metacognitively about their learning.	Teacher-Led Center Working collaboratively in centers
Collaboration	A classroom culture in which teachers and students are partners in learning should be established.	As articulated in the Literacy and Learning Center Expectations (see chapter 3)

We will discuss grading and assessment and how formative assessment is embedded within the Literacy and Learning Center model in greater depth later on in the book.

Differentiated Instruction

To ensure that we all have the same definition of differentiated instruction, I want to outline what differentiated instruction is and is not. As I am writing this book, I realize that there is substantial misunderstanding about differentiated instruction. This is largely due to the fact that differentiated instruction covers many kinds of activities and types of instruction. Rick Wormeli (2006) describes it as:

Differentiated instruction is doing what's fair for students. It's a collection of best practices strategically employed to maximize students' learning at every turn, including giving them the tools to handle anything that is undifferentiated. It requires us to do different things for different students some, or a lot, of the time in order for them to learn when the general classroom approach does not meet students' needs. It is not individualized instruction, though that may happen from time to time as warranted. It's whatever works to advance the students. It's highly effective teaching. (p. 3)

Differentiated instruction within the Literacy Learning Center model guides teachers and students to engage in the right instructional activities at the right time for the right purpose.

Specifically, Diane Heacox (2009) identifies twelve characteristics or elements of differentiated instruction (which, not coincidentally, are also compatible with formative assessment):

1. Integrate strategies for differentiation and Response to Intervention (RTI) in your classroom.
2. Identify Learning Goals
3. Examine your professional practices and skills in concert with your students' needs.
4. Apply practical, reliable and valid assessment strategies.
5. Create differentiated learning plans based on students' present needs.
6. Use choice to motivate your students.

7. Use flexible grouping for your students.
8. Be flexible in your teaching and responsive to your students' ongoing needs.
9. Develop student responsibility and independence in their learning.
10. Use ethical assessment practices that grow students (not punitive).
11. Differentiate learning for students with special needs and gifted students while incorporating learning profiles.
12. Create a teacher led leadership team as your school transitions to a differentiated instruction paradigm.

We know that all of our students are not the same. On the contrary, they are wonderfully different. Yet, when teachers are faced with large classes, how can we provide individual instruction and choice, as the differentiated instructional model promotes? The Literacy and Learning Center model is a teaching and learning method that meets these tenets of differentiated instruction. With Literacy and Learning Centers, teachers can create learning activities that involve student choice, flexible grouping, and modification of skills, the cornerstones of differentiated instruction.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

RTI cannot work without a differentiated instructional approach. As I write this book, many school districts now refer to RTI as multi-tiered intervention. However we decide to refer to this instructional approach, the framework remains the same. It is designed to identify struggling students before they fail and to provide immediate and targeted instruction to close achievement gaps with peers. Of course this is a brief explanation of RTI, and there is still much to learn about this approach. However, in the Literacy and Learning Center model, there is frequent and ongoing opportunity to work with struggling students and close achievement gaps. The teacher-led center is the critical component that allows this kind of intervention to occur.

Synergetic Approach

The Literacy and Learning Center instructional approach incorporates differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and response to intervention within a balanced literacy framework. When teachers focus on planning and instruction in this student-centered model, we are more equipped to meet the needs of all of our students while developing literacy skills and content knowledge.

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