

SREB

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Advancing Literacy and Math Achievement



From: Gene Bottoms
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You Can Teach an Old Dog New Tricks



Sheri Blankenship is an instructional coach with **Rankin County School District, in Brandon, Mississippi**. An experienced English teacher, Blankenship knows her way around a classroom. But the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) strategies help her focus her lessons so students get a clear picture of what they must learn to meet college and career standards.

Blankenship provides professional development to three middle grades schools and three high schools in her district. Ten more schools (five middle grades and five high schools) are being phased into LDC in 2016. Below, in her own words, she describes how LDC training from the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) makes her a better teacher and helps her plan instruction and engage students in successfully completing more challenging assignments.

LDC: A Pathway to Clarity and Sanity

I have a confession: I struggle with planning. My mind is so full of ideas, texts and concepts that it is difficult to make strategic choices for instruction.

Since I first began LDC training with SREB a year ago, my planning has become more focused, aligned and clear. After 21 years in the classroom, **I do not believe the adage that “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”** I’ve always valued continued growth and learning and always look for ways to

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) provides middle grades schools and high schools in member states with intensive teacher training in leading edge literacy and math strategies that enhance students’ outcomes across all disciplines. The training is offered at no cost to qualifying schools or districts in member states except for Florida, Kentucky and Tennessee.*

Read on: Find out how your school and district will enhance students’ creative thinking and problem-solving abilities while enhancing their reading and writing skills to meet state standards and succeed in school and life.

This week: Mississippi’s Sheri Blankenship believes that planning better assignments helps her students master college and career standards.

Pass this information on to your peers: Schools, superintendents, math and literacy supervisors and teachers, contact us and share your successes.

No cost teacher training: SREB is offering training in your area now; contact us to register your teaching team.

constantly incorporate new ideas and strategies.

Focus on Strategic Planning

Creating more focused and connected lessons has improved my planning and instruction greatly.

I used to approach a new unit with an idea of what students will write at the end. With LDC, the major writing assignment is designed first through the Teaching Task. **This liberates me to be the facilitator in my classroom. It allows me to sort out what must be in my instructional plan and what does not need to be there.**

Before using LDC, my students often included more information than needed in their writing pieces, thus weakening their arguments. My students had difficulty making solid connections to big ideas with so many things thrown in — the “kitchen sink” method.

Now, I write a Teaching Task asking my students for independent thought and depth. My students have a laser-like focus on exactly what they need to learn and how that connects to what they need to write. Consequently, students are growing as readers, writers and thinkers.

True Standards Alignment

LDC is about true standards alignment, and it provides me with tools to teach standards to the depth at which they are written. Now, I understand not only what the standards demand of my students but how to put my toolbox of research-based strategies into action in the context of a major assignment. **Instead of teaching a standard here and a standard there and sprinkling strategies throughout, I choose focus standards, write a Teaching Task and determine the skills necessary for my students to successfully achieve this task.**

Once skills are determined, I choose appropriate instructional strategies that build those skills. Having a process for aligning standards, skills and instruction makes it easier to ensure my instruction aligns with what students need to know and do. This makes it easier to identify where my students have gaps in their understanding. Ultimately, this alignment process creates self-directed, confident readers and writers.

Clarity of Connection

Teaching is like the 1,000-piece puzzle that takes hours and lots of patience and cooperation to put together. **You know there are many pieces to connect, but you are unsure how to create the magnificent picture displayed on the box cover.** I have been a part of a beautiful journey as a teacher, and my students and I put together some amazing puzzles. LDC clarifies all the corners of the puzzle so that my students can create and see the complete masterpiece. Using LDC tools for planning my accountability in the classroom, my students become independently proficient readers, writers and thinkers; therefore, I am helping to develop productive 21st-century citizens.



Sample Assignment

My first LDC module centered on a dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451*. Through reading literature, students

* Training fees negotiated separately for direct contract states.

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experience what happens in a society when citizens abdicate the right and the responsibility to think for themselves. It is important for them to grow as independently proficient readers, writers and thinkers.

In my classroom, students hopefully learn not *what to think*, but rather *how to think for themselves*. I want them to not only think about what happens in *Fahrenheit 451* as a stand-alone exercise, but to compare what they see to their own society – to examine, to compare, to evaluate how their own world parallels (or does not) this fictional world, so that they can determine how important it is to become the thinkers and the innovators of the future. Planning through LDC modules allows me to encapsulate a purposeful focus for reading so students draw their own informed conclusions.

Teaching Task

After reading *Fahrenheit 451* and analyzing author Ray Bradbury's societal commentary on government, education and relationships, write an argumentative essay comparing Bradbury's *Fahrenheit* society to current American society and argue to what extent the United States does or does not resemble this fictional society. Support your position with evidence from the text/s.

Don't miss the opportunity to send your teaching and leadership team to the most important professional development conferences of the year.

Networking Conference

Can your district benefit from planning strong math assignments to meet college- and career-ready standards? Join us for the **Fourth Annual College- and Career-Readiness Standards Networking Conference**, July 11-13, in Louisville, Kentucky. Look here for updates.

HSTW Conference

Share and learn best practices for engaging your students while preparing them for life after graduation. Join us for the **30th Annual High Schools That Work Staff Development Conference**, July 13-15, 2016, in Louisville, Kentucky. Look here for more information and updates.

SREB Ready

The Readiness Courses Institute will be held at the 30th Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference, July 13-16, 2016, in Louisville, Kentucky.

[Click here](#) to learn how you may receive up to **\$600 in stipends** to attend the Readiness Courses Institute. **Bonus:** Attend and receive complementary registration for the High Schools That Work Staff Development Conference.

Ready for High School courses in literacy and math prepare eighth- and ninth-graders for high school and strengthen their critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills. They will be available at no cost to schools starting in 2016-17. For schools interested in implementing these courses, we encourage you to attend the Readiness Courses Institute.

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