Each of us can remember at least one time in our lives when we were trying to accomplish an assignment and were frustrated because we didn’t have the appropriate bank of topical knowledge, language, or skills to proceed or succeed. Even though we had the interest, we were stuck! Fortunately, because each of us is skilled at learning, we knew what to do to fill in the missing information. We probably retreated to a less difficult text on the same topic and read it at a slower pace so that we could chunk the information into manageable units. This supplemental text almost certainly contained supportive visuals and basic levels of information. Those fortunate enough to find an expert on the topic most likely engaged in a conversation in order to gain the needed topical language, knowledge, and confidence to continue learning. We succeeded because we had well-developed learning skills.

Diane had this experience when she was trying to learn to sail and was given an all-text manual with words and phrases like rigging the mainsail and attach to outhaul—phrases that were not part of her vocabulary or experiential base. Doug also had this experience when he attempted to learn to use his first iPhone, and Nancy felt similar frustration when she encountered a statistics text in her first graduate course. Fortunately, each of our struggles resulted in success because we were skilled enough as learners to secure the knowledge and language we needed to succeed, either by moving to less difficult materials or to experts willing to share their thinking. In other words, we knew how to support our own learning.

In most instances, teachers are the patient tutors who plan engaging lessons, answer questions, and explain, model, guide, and share scaffolded topical information with the intention of helping students build the information, literacy, and metacognitive learning skills needed to become independent learners. While doing this complex task of teaching, teachers continually assess what is frustrating and confusing in order to sustain every student’s move to independence.

There is still work to be done to ensure that all students are supported in the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and independence they need to succeed in all academic areas of their lives—both on and off campus. This is quite a task, for without this background and confidence, our very peer-oriented students will become frustrated and tune out rather than publicly admit they don’t know. Wise teachers understand how to turn learning around for their students by providing experiences that enable them to become managers and creators of their own learning.

This power of knowing how to support one’s own learning is emphasized by the new Common Core State Standards (2010) that describe what it means to be an independent learner who can succeed in school and in future workplace situations:

Students can, without significant scaffolding, comprehend and evaluate complex texts across a range of types and disciplines, and they can construct ef-
ffective arguments and convey intricate or multifaceted information. Likewise, students are able independently to discern a speaker’s key points, request clarification, and ask relevant questions. They build on others’ ideas, articulate their own ideas, and confirm they have been understood. Without prompting, they demonstrate command of standard English and acquire and use a wide-ranging vocabulary. More broadly, they become self-directed learners, effectively seeking out and using resources to assist them, including teachers, peers, and print and digital reference materials.

(p.7)

The call for such metacognitive independence is not new to middle school educators who have been studying for decades how the acquisition of the language and both topical and experiential knowledge needed to access information across the disciplines can result in learning success (Beane & Brodhagen, 2001; Gatewood, 1973; Wolfe & Goldman, 2005; Fisher & Frey, 2009, Lapp & Moss, 2012). Middle level teachers also realize that in addition to designing instruction that builds and activates appropriate background knowledge for their students, they must also model and provide opportunities for their students to learn how to actively support their own inquiry, learning, and subsequent independence. The articles in this issue of Voices from the Middle offer excellent examples of how to promote such learning.

Educators Diane and Rebecca Barone describe how students, utilizing the role of the investigator as depicted in literature circles, learned to develop and scaffold their own knowledge. As active readers who posed questions in response to what they were reading, they reread their texts and then searched for additional information to satisfy their curiosity about the story language, characters, and events. In addition to gaining these understandings, they also came to know themselves as independent readers and learners.

The power of independence when learning is also recognized by William Bintz, Petra Moran, Rochelle Berndt, Elizabeth Ritz, Julie Skilton, and Lisa Bircher. They describe the significant impact that one’s background knowledge about a topic and text structure has on one’s ability to infer deeply and widely. Moving across the content areas, they provide instructional examples of how to help readers understand (infer) what is really meant by the author. They also illustrate how to support students as they expand their banks of knowledge.

Knowing what is known is the beginning place for new learning. Beatrice Newman actualizes this idea through instructional examples that convey how to use culturally relevant mentor texts to illustrate for students that they, too, have life experiences to share and language to support their sharing. As she illustrates, however, one’s personal territories are only the starting point, because once inspired, students are willing to read, write, and converse more widely and deeply, thus expanding their funds of knowledge.

How does one’s ability to look deeply at the language of a text begin to occur? Robert Marzano answers this by providing both a review and an extension of what is known about effective vocabulary instruction. He reiterates a comprehensive plan for vocabulary instruction that is concretized by Sarah Davis’s examples, which illustrate that by teaching students to use word variations, to go beyond bolded words, and to focus on connecting words to support their comprehension, they can develop language knowledge that allows for their deeper observation, thinking, and understanding.

The power of learning and precisely using language is further emphasized as Antony Smith and Robin Angotti introduce 5 Cs, an instructional tool to help teachers recognize which content words to teach. The 5 Cs—Concepts, Content, Clarify, Cut, and Construct—serve as a framework to guide teachers in identifying words that may be new or unfamiliar to students, categorizing these words by importance and relevance to lesson goals, and deciding which words to teach as well as when and how to do so.

And let’s not overlook the value of personal interest in learning. After their two-year investigation of the magazine-reading habits of middle school students, Rachel Gabriel, Richard Allington, and Monica Billen understand the power
of utilizing a student’s interest to develop the language and information base needed to read a difficult text. They demonstrate through their descriptive analysis how students can use their background knowledge and language to continually grow their own understandings of topics of interest to them. Additionally, they present suggestions that move us to new imaginings about how magazine reading can be a powerful support for within-school content reading and learning.

This power of personal motivation as an incentive for learning is also clearly conveyed by Rose Cherie Reissman as she so cleverly describes how she used her students’ background knowledge about snacks to motivate their reading of the labels. Moving beyond the allure of advertising, they metaphorically dug deeply into the facts about these products in order to analyze the “truth” or “untruth” of advertising. What resulted was that these students became analytic investigators who, by scrutinizing both print and nonprint texts, were able to use their funds of knowledge to identify additional areas for investigation.

These excellent articles remind us of the power of utilizing students’ interests and knowledge about specific topics to teach them how to be lifelong learners. We hope you also enjoy the powerful instructional ideas and insights these authors share.

References


