Reading to Learn
Improving Curriculum Literacies in Years 5–8

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) P–10 Literacy Strategy aims to provide a coherent and holistic approach to improving the literacy learning outcomes of students. The Strategy is underpinned by the five interconnected capacity-building ‘Innovation Streams’ from Learning Centred Schools: A Sacred Landscape: leadership for learning; curriculum by design; transforming pedagogy; assessment for learning and teaching; and learning environments (CEOM 2009).

As an initiative within the Literacy Strategy, Reading to Learn occupies a significant pedagogical space, as it is specifically designed to improve the literacy outcomes of learners in Years 5–8. In 2003, Reading to Learn was implemented as a research project and was successful as both an intervention and a mainstream strategy that enables teachers to scaffold student reading, writing and learning using texts from across curriculum learning areas and subject disciplines. In the education context, ‘scaffolding’ refers to temporary support structures that assist learners to gradually take over responsibility for learning – developing and applying new understandings, new concepts and new skills.

Background and History
Reading to Learn is based on the Scaffolding Literacy pedagogy initially developed by Brian Gray, David Rose and Wendy Cowey with Indigenous students in Central and South Australia, and with underachieving school students attending the Schools and Community Centre at the University of Canberra (Gray et al. 1998; Rose et al. 1999). Since 2001, Dr David Rose has further developed and refined this pedagogy in the program now known as Reading to Learn (Rose 2010; Rose & Acevedo 2006).

In partnership with Rose, the CEOM has developed Reading to Learn as a major professional learning initiative, aimed particularly at teachers in the upper primary and junior secondary years. Since the initial research project in 2003, the program has evolved into a comprehensive, interactive and multi-modal professional learning course consisting of workshops, audiovisual resources, lesson plans and exemplars (Rose 2010). Working in partnership with teachers in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, the CEOM has made a significant contribution to these developments.

Since 2008, the CEOM has offered Reading to Learn as a two-year professional learning program, which is part of a purposeful and strategic plan to build sustainable improvement and leadership capacity. The focus in the first year is on building a community of practice in Reading to Learn through developing teachers’ pedagogical, textual and linguistic knowledge and skills. The focus of the second year is on further refining teachers’ expertise as classroom practitioners, on building their capacity to mentor colleagues and on completing the requirements for formal accreditation in Reading to Learn.

“I am an experienced literacy educator; however, this is the best literacy professional development I’ve ever done and it has had a significant impact on my teaching practice.” TEACHER

Focus on Years 5–8
Reading to Learn is part of a system response to the significant body of national and international research highlighting the need to scaffold students’ literacy development in the critical transition from primary to secondary schooling. The program was initially selected for its capacity to promote continuity and to bridge a number of potential ‘divides’ impacting on middle years literacy: the divide between primary and secondary schools in their structure and curriculum orientations; the divide between mainstream and intervention literacy pedagogies; and the divide between socio-cultural and skills-based models of literacy development.

In targeting underachieving adolescent learners through Reading to Learn, the CEOM endorses a literacy pedagogy based on principles of equity, social justice and high expectations, as distinct from deficit views of literacy underachievement. Central to the theory and principles of Reading to Learn is explicit teaching of the literacy demands and learning expectations of the mainstream curriculum and scaffolding all students in reading and writing texts appropriate to their age and stage of schooling.
The 2003–2004 research project, *Reading to Learn*, measured its impact as a literacy pedagogy for learners identified as at-risk in the middle years of schooling. The research revealed that average literacy gains for these students were double the expected rate of literacy development and, in some cases, up to four times the expected rate (Culican 2005).

“I have seen non-readers achieving through this project, which other methods have not achieved.” TEACHER

A further finding was that the pedagogy also accelerated the literacy development of higher-achieving students. Based on these positive results, the CEOM continues to offer *Reading to Learn* to middle years teachers and a growing number of primary and secondary schools anchor the theory and practice of *Reading to Learn* within their literacy provision by training teams of teachers over time.

**Theoretical Underpinnings and Key Features**

*Reading to Learn* combines three theoretical frameworks:

1. The theory of learning and teaching described as ‘scaffolding’ (Vygotsky 1978; Bruner 1986)

*Reading to Learn* builds on educational concepts from each of these theoretical bases to create a sequence of carefully designed strategies for scaffolding students’ reading and writing of narrative and factual texts from across curriculum learning areas.

Key features of *Reading to Learn* are:

- selection of quality, challenging and age-appropriate texts from across subject disciplines as models for student reading and writing
- teaching writing using skills and knowledge learned from reading, including grammar, spelling and punctuation
- highly structured classroom dialogue and interaction around texts.

“It is best described as effective pedagogy rather than a ‘program’. It is the type of training that should be part of all teachers’ pre-service training.” PRINCIPAL

Participants in *Reading to Learn* typically work with a class or group of students several times per week using specific strategies from a scaffolding teaching cycle. The cycle consists of the following three levels of support for developing students’ reading and writing skills:

**Level 1** prepares a class for reading and comprehending curriculum texts, then uses these readings as models for guided and independent writing activities. These strategies can be used as a teaching method in any curriculum unit.

**Level 2** deepens students’ understanding of selected written texts and supports the use of specific information and language patterns from the reading in their own writing. These detailed strategies can be applied regularly with selected passages from curriculum texts.

**Level 3** provides higher support for students with low literacy or who are inexperienced with English to manipulate language patterns in selected sentences, and to practise spelling, letter-sound correspondences and fluent writing.

The three levels of teaching cycles and their relation to the curriculum are shown in Figure 1.

Each level of the *Reading to Learn* scaffolding teaching cycle can be applied to whole curriculum units, to activities within a lesson and to teacher–student interactions around written texts in the classroom. Each level draws on knowledge about the structures and language patterns of curriculum texts, on scaffolding as a learning and teaching strategy and on the significance of the structuring of classroom talk. Teacher talk plays a key role in scaffolding learning: ‘Scaffolding is a process, mediated by spoken language, that moves students from everyday understandings into more technical and more conceptually complex understandings’ (CEOM 2010, p. 3). *Reading to Learn* proposes a highly structured pattern of classroom interaction, which enables teachers to work purposefully and collaboratively with students to build shared knowledge about language, structure and meaning in curriculum texts. This knowledge is then used to guide students’ writing.

“It has helped me to write better and it definitely helped my reading because I used to hate books, but now I am reading a lot more.” STUDENT

The Professional Learning Program

The *Reading to Learn* professional learning program comprises a series of intensive training workshops, with study, classroom practice and evaluation between workshops. The program has four key components:

1. **Knowledge about language and pedagogy**

Planning, implementing and evaluating the *Reading to Learn* strategies requires high-level skills in text analysis and classroom teaching. In the workshops and subsequent classroom practice,
teachers build knowledge about language patterns and structures along with skills in explicit teaching of reading and writing.

“It allows the teaching of grammar and sentence/word level within the context of reading and links beautifully with genre.” TEACHER

2. Careful planning of lessons
The teaching strategies involve detailed planning of classroom interactions to ensure that all students are able to participate actively at a high level. The program provides guided practice in each of the three levels of support, along with explicit instruction on the process of planning and presenting Reading to Learn lessons. This enables students to engage with the text, respond successfully and participate in discussion of three levels of meaning: literal, inferred and interpretive.

“This program has been a highlight in our school and one we want to embed into our curriculum. It gives students success and therefore the confidence to take control of their learning. This, of course, then flows into all other areas of the curriculum.” PRINCIPAL

3. Regular implementation in the classroom
Implementing Reading to Learn at the classroom level requires time for planning and teaching in a new way. The program demonstrates how to integrate Reading to Learn at three levels of curriculum and program planning – within a curriculum unit, within a lesson sequence of several lessons and/or within a sequence of a few lessons. Teachers are encouraged to complete two or three Reading to Learn teaching cycles per term and, where possible, to use both the story and the factual lesson sequences.

“It has notably improved the quality of writing for our students but has also increased teacher confidence. There has been reciprocal viewing and feedback of lessons between teachers followed by rich professional discussion around moderation of student work using the criteria.” PRINCIPAL

4. Assessment of students’ growth
The program provides opportunities for ongoing assessment of student progress and achievement in reading and writing using criteria closely aligned with the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). These criteria are designed to show exactly what language resources students are using and to assign a score, so that their development as writers can be tracked throughout the year. Through analysing and interpreting writing exemplars and assessment rubrics for each school stage, teachers build familiarity with the assessment criteria then apply this knowledge in ongoing assessment of their own students’ work.

“It has provided purposeful and enriching professional learning for our staff, enabling a common approach to be developed as well as a common language. There has been an improvement in results in NAPLAN – with a raising of the tail in achievement outcomes.” PRINCIPAL

Figure 1: The three levels of the Reading to Learn scaffolding teaching cycle. (Adapted from Rose 2010)
CEOM Program Design, Expectations and Support

The CEOM Reading to Learn program requires new participants to attend eight days of professional learning in the first year and four days in the second year. To ensure maximum support for teachers in schools new to Reading to Learn, school leaders are encouraged to enrol two teachers in their initial program. School visits to new teachers provide individualised support to assist them with classroom implementation, text selection, lesson planning and writing assessment.

All Reading to Learn teachers have access to online information, including classroom resources, lesson plans, conferences, research reports and academic papers. To enable teachers to work collaboratively, schools are requested to allocate specific time for teachers to access and use these online resources.

A significant component of the CEOM Reading to Learn program is the focus on assessment of student progress and achievement through ongoing data collection and analysis. Teachers monitor the reading progress of a small number of target students at the start and end of each year. Assessment of target-student writing occurs at regular intervals throughout the year. Teachers and schools are encouraged to analyse and use the data to inform curriculum development, teaching and learning. This is consistent with the Literacy Strategy goal to build teachers’ capacity to effectively use a variety of evidence-based assessments to align teaching and learning to the needs of students. School, teacher and target-student data are also submitted to the CEOM to facilitate program evaluation.

“\"It is great to have positive results and examples to show parents of students who have always struggled with literacy, but also to see the more able students improve.\"” TEACHER

Teachers are encouraged to attend selected professional learning sessions after the initial two years as a means of ensuring ongoing refinement of their expertise, along with access to the latest materials and resources. This builds a community of practice among ‘new’ and ‘continuing’ teachers within and across schools and ensures that a high standard of professional practice in Reading to Learn is maintained. Where continuing teachers take up a professional development or mentoring role with colleagues, CEOM personnel provide consultancy support.

Teachers who complete the Reading to Learn professional learning program and submit a folio of work are eligible for a certificate of accreditation issued by Dr David Rose as Director of Reading to Learn.

References


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