



DAVID DIDAU

5: LITERACY



EVERY TEACHER IS A TEACHER OF LITERACY, SAYS DAVID DIDAU, SO WE'D BETTER START TEACHING IT WELL...

As well-educated, literate professionals we have an instinctive grasp for how to read, write, speak and listen. Reading is an incredibly complex skill that takes time to master but once mastered, like for instance driving, we don't notice we're doing it. We make incredibly complex decisions at the speed of thought without ever really being conscious of what we're doing. Some of the children we teach can also do this. And some can't.

Unsurprisingly, it's the most marginalised, least privileged children we teach that struggle most. If you're from a 'verbally enriched' social background you'll move quickly from learning to read to reading to learn and you'll hang out with other people who share the same interests. You'll be exposed to vocabulary that doesn't tend to feature in spoken language but occurs frequently in written language. You will, in short, become fluent in the academic language of the classroom.

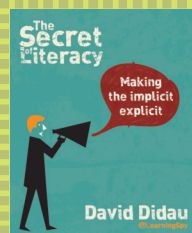
But reading is difficult to master. If you don't recognise most of the words in a text your ability to comprehend it very quickly breaks down. If you're not encouraged to read, you're unlikely to encounter the very words you need to be able to read. Hey presto! A vicious circle. The students that most need support are least likely to get it. If schools and teachers don't do something to level the playing field, no one else will. It's up to us.

Literacy is one of those tedious, onerous chores that teachers are routinely berated with. We know we *should* do something about it but, goddammit, we've got content to teach. We haven't got time to cram in a bolt-on literacy starter in amongst all the other fatuous initiatives schools are forever burdening us with. But here's the kicker: if you teach in the medium of English then you're teaching English. Every time you open your mouth you're modelling how to speak; every time you ask students to write something down you're teaching them something about how to write, and every time you stick some reading material in front of a class you're giving them important messages about what to think about reading. In short, if you're a teacher the only choice you have about teaching literacy is whether to do it badly or well.

There is, you'll be pleased to hear, some good news in amongst all this doom and gloom. An explicit focus on teaching the language of your subject is by far the best way to teach your subject content. I've seen all sorts of well intentioned but potentially damaging examples of literacy in lessons, which actually makes students less literate. For example, in a lesson I observed last year, a science teacher had taught her Year 8 class about Marie Curie and her discovery of radium. In order to check they had understood, she asked them to write a letter to Madame Curie informing her of how her discovery had changed the world. As this was a science lesson the teacher had, quite rightly, not spent any time teaching her students how to write letters. The



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result was, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the pupils produced dreadfully written letters with numerous grammatical and spelling mistakes. OK, not great, but it was at least an opportunity to identify and correct their mistakes. But no: the teacher then festooned these letters with ticks and 'well dones'. Why? Because they had understood the content. But what had they learned about writing?

Very rarely do scientists write letters to other, dead scientists. When I asked the teacher why she'd chosen this exercise, she explained that she had thought it would be a nice opportunity to develop her pupils' literacy. But this well-intentioned task actively *undermined* her pupils' ability to write well by inadvertently teaching them that it is only the content that matters.

So stop trying to shoe-horn in irrelevant bolt-on activities and focus instead on showing how students need to think, speak and write within your subject domain. How does an artist think? How does a scientist speak? How does a historian write? The only way to narrow the gap between 'word-rich' and 'word-poor' students is to teach the academic language they need to be successful in school. Not only will this make students more literate, it'll also make them better at the subject you teach.

What do I mean by explicit teaching? Well, if we want students to be able to approach reading and writing like we do, we have to show them what that goes on in our heads when we speak, read and write. For instance, as busy professionals we skim read all the time, quickly establishing whether, say, an email is relevant and important, or can be instantly deleted. When we give students a page of text to read we might assume that everyone understands that this is a normal, everyday, straightforward process. Some of the students we teach will, others won't. So if we explain that expert readers skim read and give them an explicit instruction to read the first sentence of each paragraph because that's likely to be a topic sentence, we're giving them powerful knowledge about how the world works. This isn't in addition to teaching your subject, it *is* teaching your subject.

These then are the three most important things you need to know about teaching literacy:

1. We all teach English all the time, but that doesn't mean we're doing it well.
2. We need to explicitly teach students the academic literacy they need to be successful in school
3. Investing time in explicitly teaching the language of your subject not only improves their literacy, it also makes them better able to think like a subject specialist.

To read a review of David Didau's latest book, *The Secret of Literacy*, as well as an interview with the author, turn to pages 76 and 77 of this issue...