**Helping Struggling Readers to Improve Comprehension**

*Course Syllabus*

**Catalog Description**
This workshop focuses specifically on supporting the academic development of students who are competent decoders but who struggle to understand the meaning of what they read. Participants will explore the different types of comprehension difficulties students may face and will introduce a number of research-based strategies to improve comprehension skills. Instructional strategies will focus on building vocabulary skills, using teacher modeling, having students work collaboratively, and building comprehension monitoring skills. As a final project, participants will design and implement a lesson plan focused on improving students’ reading comprehension.

**Prerequisites**
This is an introductory course for teachers, technology specialists, curriculum specialists, professional development specialists, or other school personnel. Participants are expected to have regular access to computers. In addition, participants should be proficient with using email, browsing the Internet, and navigating to computer files.

**Goals**
This workshop will enable participants to:

- Identify the different kinds of comprehension difficulties students may experience
- Learn engaging strategies for teaching vocabulary to struggling readers through indirect and direct instruction
- Understand and apply techniques for improving student comprehension through teacher modeling, peer-to-peer work, and independent reading
- Explore strategies for helping struggling readers to become more engaged with text, more independent as readers, and more proficient at finding ways to monitor their reading

**Assessment and Course Requirements**
Each session includes readings, an activity, and a discussion assignment, which participants are required to complete.

**Course Products**
As a final product, participants will create a lesson plan for struggling readers using the knowledge they have gained from the sessions.

**Discussion Participation**
Participants will be evaluated on the frequency and quality of their discussion board participation. Participants are required to post a minimum of two substantial postings each session, including one that begins a new thread and one that responds to an existing thread. Postings that begin new threads will be reviewed based on their relevance, demonstrated understanding of course concepts, examples cited, and overall quality. Postings that respond to other participants will be evaluated on relevance, degree to which they extend the discussion, and tone.

**Required Readings, Activities and Assignments**

**Session One: Comprehension and Struggling Students**
In this session, participants will define comprehension and consider the different types of comprehension difficulties students may have.

Participants will read:
• A brief excerpt on Comprehension from the Alliance of Excellent Education report, Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century by Michael Kamil. (http://www.edtechleaders.org/documents/StrugglingReader/KamilExcerpt.doc)
• An excerpt from the book I Read it, But I Don’t Get it by Cris Tovani (2000), which introduces the concept of fake reading. (http://www.stenhouse.com/pdfs/0089ch01.pdf)

As an activity, students will view the Madison Metropolitan School District’s Middle School Reading Task Force Report and read through Figure 1: Characteristics of Struggling and Strong Readers. They will print out, read and reflect on the three charts that describe characteristics that their students exhibit before, during, and after reading. Then participants will jot down the names of students (current or past) who exemplify some of the characteristics of struggling readers while thinking about how their reading challenges might affect the teaching and learning process. (http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/tnl/langarts/msread.htm#fig1)

Session Two: Building Vocabulary to Strengthen Comprehension
In this session participants will focus on the importance of building vocabulary to improve reading comprehension. Participants will also learn specific strategies for teaching vocabulary.

Participants will read:
• The Clarifying Routine: Elaborating Vocabulary Instruction by Edwin S. Ellis. This article reviews the elaboration technique that has been found to facilitate comprehension and memory of new terms. (http://www.ldonline.org/article.php?max=20&special_grouping=&id=492&loc=51)
• A Case and Strategies for Vocabulary Instruction by Renee L. Donohue. This article includes topics such as the need for vocabulary instruction, necessary components of good instruction, instructional strategies, and vocabulary activities. (http://www.buddies.org/articles/Voc1.html)

As an activity, participants will read from Southwest Educational Development Laboratory’s comprehensive document called Building Reading Proficiency at the Secondary Level: A Guide to Resources. In Part II: Resources, there is a section devoted to strategies (http://www.sedl.org/pubs/reading16/12.html).

Participants will read about the following three strategies:
• Generative Vocabulary Strategies
• Vocabulary and Concept Mapping Strategies
• Word Analysis Strategies

Participants will then be asked to decide how they might use one of the strategies to support a reading comprehension task.

Session Three: Using Modeling Strategies to Improve Comprehension
In this session, participants will explore and discuss teacher modeling strategies that can enhance students’ reading comprehension. In particular, they will learn to use Think Alouds and Reciprocal Teaching.

Participants will read:
• Think Alouds from Florida Department of Education’s FOR-PD project. This article provides a good overview of the Think Aloud technique, describes its use as an instructional tool, and explains how it can be used for assessment. (http://www.itrc.ucf.edu/forpd/strategies/stratthinkaloud.html)
As an activity, participants will practice the Think Aloud technique using Isaac Asimov’s short story “The Fun They Had” or the Shel Silverstein poem “The Unicorn.”

**Session Four: Collaborative Comprehension Strategies**

In this session, participants will investigate strategies for building reading comprehension through peer collaboration. In particular, participants will focus on two approaches: Think, Pair, Share and Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR).

Participants will read:

- **Strategies for Reading to Learn: Think, Pair, Share**, which provides an overview of the technique and describes the procedures for carrying it out.

- **Using Collaborative Strategic Reading**, by Janette K. Klingner and Sharon Vaughn. This article defines CSR and provides detailed steps for each phase of instruction.

As an activity, participants will go to the description of the Clock Buddies strategy shared by Penny Juggins of Fairfax County, VA. They will read through the description and download and print out the Clock Buddies Chart provided at the bottom of the page. Then they will think about how they could modify the graphic to fit their students’ needs. Lastly, they will create their own version of Clock Buddies that can be used with either Think Pair or Share and Collaborative Strategic Reading.

**Session Five: Independent Reading Strategies**

In this session, participants will read about and discuss independent reading strategies, or techniques that readers can learn to use on their own to engage more fully with the text and to monitor their understanding.

Participants will read:

- **Flow Chart of Comprehension Monitoring Behaviors**, which gives a step-by-step overview of the comprehension monitoring process

- **Teaching Adolescents with Learning Disabilities Strategies and Methods (excerpt)**, by Edwin S. Ellis. This article focuses on the features of good learning strategies in terms of content, design, and usefulness. It then describes the PASS reading comprehension strategy.

As an activity, participants will go to the Questioning the Author website, (http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/readquest/strat/qta.html) which provides a summary of this protocol for inquiry and provides a sample text to use for practicing it. They will print out the text and focus on the chart with its questions for the author. Then they will select a short piece of text to use with students (e.g., essay article, short story) and practice using the strategy using the questions in the chart as a guide.

**Session Six: Creating a Reading Comprehension Lesson Plan**

In this session, participants will create and share reading comprehension lesson plans, and review the essential concepts of the workshop.

Participants will visit the website Read-Write-Think (http://www.readwritethink.org/index.asp) which contains excellent examples of lesson plans. They will use the search button found in the top navigation bar to browse for topics covered in the course such as Think, Pair, Share or Read Alouds.
As an activity, participants will download the Final Lesson Plan Template (http://www.edtechleaders.org/documents/StrugglingReader/LessonPlan.doc) to design a lesson that teaches one or more comprehension strategies and then they will post the template to share in the discussion board.