

Knowledge Matters Campaign

Knowledge Matters Podcast • Season 1 Study Guide for PLCs and Discussion Groups

This study guide was created by Natalie Wexler, host of the [Knowledge Matters Podcast's first season, Reading Comprehension Revisited](#). It was created in response to requests from scores of educators across the country who have been using the podcast as a catalyst for discussions and collaborative learning about the important role that content knowledge plays in literacy.

The list of questions for each episode is robust and we do not anticipate that all will be used. Study group leaders should select questions that will prompt the most fruitful discussion and provide the greatest opportunity for meaningful collaboration. Where educators are in their learning about the importance of content-knowledge to reading comprehension will obviously impact these choices.

We encourage those using this study guide to share your work with it in social media using the #KnowledgeMatters hashtag, and to post your insights in the [Knowledge Matters Facebook group](#).

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Episode 1 - “Kids were bored to death”

1. “So we would do that same story all week, and it would be modified for each group in their little readers. But we would teach the same comprehension skill for a week.” That’s former first-grade teacher Deloris Fowler describing how she used to teach reading comprehension. Is that approach similar to the one used at your school? If not, how does your school’s approach differ?
2. One educator featured in the episode, Laura Salazar, says that she’s come to realize that as a classroom teacher she didn’t know much about current research in the field of literacy. Do you feel you know enough about that kind of research? Do you agree with Laura that it should be easier for teachers to get access to it?
3. In this episode, Natalie identifies three kinds of knowledge that are important to reading comprehension: knowledge of the topic; general academic knowledge and vocabulary; and familiarity with complex sentence structure. Have you noticed that your students sometimes have trouble understanding text because they lack one or more of these kinds of knowledge? Do the assessments you give enable you to easily identify which kind of knowledge a student may be lacking?
4. Natalie explains that the various knowledge-building curricula have at least two things in common: First, they’re organized by topic, spending several weeks on each one. Second, they give all students in the classroom access to complex text, regardless of their individual decoding ability. Does that describe the curriculum used in your school? If not, how is it different?
5. Administrator Melanie Beaver talks about how it was difficult for some teachers in her district to embrace a curriculum that emphasized read-alouds of complex text because they worried children weren’t getting enough time with “books in hands.” Did that concern resonate with you? What changes did teachers see in their students that convinced them the read-alouds were worthwhile?
6. Janet Schimank, an early literacy coordinator, says she’s found that teachers appreciate being able to dig into a text instead of “starting with that skill and trying to wrestle up a conversation” about it. Have you ever found it difficult to engage students in discussions that focus on comprehension skills? Do you think your students would prefer digging deeply into the content of a text? Would you?



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7. Janet's school doesn't have a content-rich curriculum, but they've made their state's science and social studies standards the "driving force" of reading instruction. If your school is in a similar situation, is that something you feel it could or should do?
8. Some of the voices in this episode say that good phonics instruction is crucial to reading success, but it's not enough to ensure all students become fully literate. Do you agree? If so, based on what you heard in the episode, what more do you think schools need to do?

Episode 2 - "A simple way of looking at a complex problem"

1. Natalie predicted that what teachers would hear about comprehension in this episode would be very different from what they learned about it during their training. Was that your experience? During your training, did you learn that building students' knowledge was important?
2. When Hugh Catts was part of a team of researchers studying reading comprehension, he found that "the kids learned what we taught," including vocabulary and comprehension-monitoring. But, he says, "what didn't change was their ability on standardized tests of comprehension." Based on what you heard in the episode, why do you think students' comprehension test scores didn't improve?
3. How can students acquire the general academic vocabulary that enables them to understand passages on topics they don't already know something about? Does what you heard about vocabulary acquisition in this episode align with your school's approach to vocabulary instruction?
4. What happened in the "wug study"? What does the study tell us about the role of knowledge — and socioeconomic status — in children's comprehension ability?
5. In general, what have studies told us about the benefits of prior knowledge for the ability to do things like make predictions about and retain information from a text?
6. According to Hugh Catts, why do infographics like the Five Pillars of Early Literacy and the Simple View of Reading sometimes lead to misunderstandings about the complexity of reading comprehension?



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7. Natalie says the evidence for reading comprehension instruction doesn't actually support most of what goes on in American classrooms. What are some differences between the conditions in the studies and the typical approach to comprehension instruction?
8. Hugh Catts says we shouldn't abandon the idea of comprehension skills and strategies. Why does he believe they have value? How does he think they should be used?

Episode 3 - "That cloud looks like an anvil"

1. All three teachers in this episode were initially skeptical when they were told they would be using a knowledge-building curriculum. What were their reasons? Have you heard similar doubts from other teachers, or have you had them yourself?
2. Each of the three teachers works in a different kind of setting. One teaches at a school in a medium-sized city that serves many multi-language learners, another at a school in a small city that serves a mostly affluent population, and another at an inner-city school that serves African-American students from low-income families. Which of these settings does your school most resemble? Given the teachers' stories, do you think that any of these settings is more or less appropriate for a knowledge-building curriculum, or can such a curriculum work well in any setting?
3. Abby Boruff says the assessments she used to determine her first graders' reading levels weren't always accurate. What were some of the reasons for that inaccuracy? Have you had similar experiences with reading level assessments?
4. How did Abby's students' ability to do things like make inferences change after they were able to listen to complex texts they couldn't yet decode themselves and spend more time diving deeply into topics?
5. Deloris Fowler and other teachers in her district initially had trouble implementing the curriculum because, she says, they weren't "given any direction on why [we are] going this way." What could her district have done to make the transition easier?
6. How did Deloris come to realize that the curriculum was important for students from lower-income families? What about students from higher-income families?



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7. How did a comprehensive literacy curriculum — one that covered foundational skills, comprehension, vocabulary and writing — make Kyair Butts' job as a teacher easier? Have you had to juggle different programs aimed at different aspects of literacy?
8. What did Kyair notice about his students that helped convince him the curriculum was right for them? Why did he come to feel that, instead of limiting his autonomy in the classroom, the curriculum was “actually really freeing”?

Episode 4 - “Now they had something to write about”

1. Natalie observes that the standard approach to writing instruction has been to have students respond to writing prompts that have nothing to do with what they've been reading or learning about. Is that the approach your school has taken? If so, have your students found it difficult, as Kyair's students did?
2. Abby recalls that the writing programs she used in the past didn't explicitly teach writing conventions or sentence formation but essentially directed students to “just go and do all this writing.” Have you had that experience? If so, do you feel your students would have benefited from more explicit instruction?
3. Abby says that while she gives her students opportunities to write about personal experience, like a visit to Grandma's house, that's not the focus of her writing instruction because “I don't know what [the student] did at Grandma's house, I can't help her with that.” Does it make sense to you that teachers would be better able to help students if they're writing about topics that have been covered in the curriculum?
4. Deloris says that when she used to have students write about topics like “my favorite vacation,” some students didn't have much to say because they hadn't had the same kinds of experiences as others. Have you observed anything similar with students in your classroom?
5. Some of Deloris's students were off and running as writers once they had rich content to write about, while others were still apprehensive. Why do you think that was the case? What does Deloris feel students need in order to express their thoughts well in writing?
6. Cassidy Burns says that to the extent she got training in teaching writing, “it was just really like a hodgepodge.” What kind of training did you get in writing instruction? Was it adequate?



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7. Cassidy argues that before students can write full essays or even paragraphs, they need to learn to construct “beautiful, complete, moving-into-complex sentences.” Do you agree? Have your students had difficulty constructing sentences without explicit instruction?
8. Even though Cassidy’s writing instruction is grounded in the content of the curriculum, she feels it helps prepare her students to respond to prompts on state tests that relate to texts they’ve never read before. What evidence does she have that that’s the case?
9. If a school isn’t using a knowledge-building curriculum, what are some things teachers can do to help build students’ knowledge? Why are individual teachers nevertheless limited in their ability to build knowledge?

Episode 5 - “Everything was in silos”

1. Why is strong leadership crucial in shifting from a skills-focused approach to comprehension to a knowledge-building approach? What obstacles to change might school and district leaders encounter?
2. Both Brent Conway and LaTonya Goffney were spurred to action by data. How did each of them use data to argue that change was needed?
3. When Brent started moving his school in the direction of building knowledge, there weren’t yet any knowledge-building curricula available. What did he and his colleagues do instead? If your school doesn’t have a knowledge-building curriculum, could you do something similar?
4. Brent says that when he came to Pentucket and showed teachers the “Reading Rope” to illustrate the various components of reading, noting “we had a lot of teachers trying very hard to do what the Reading Rope outlined, but everything was in silos.” What do you think that looked like in the classroom? How does it relate to what Hugh Catts said in Episode 2 about the limitations of infographics?
5. What does Brent mean by “the balanced literacy hangover”? What measures did he take as an administrator to address it?



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6. How did LaTonya Goffney's childhood experiences affect her perspective as an educator? How did she come to understand the ways in which reading ability can affect a person's life trajectory?
7. Neither Brent nor LaTonya has yet seen a significant increase in standardized test scores as a result of the new curriculum, but each is convinced the knowledge-building curriculum they're using is working for students in their districts. What are they basing that belief on?

Episode 6 - "Think what a better society we'll have"

1. It's been suggested that "reading" should be redefined to just mean decoding. What might be the advantages of redefining it that way? Do you see any possible disadvantages?
2. In the early 20th century, the American high school population exploded. What did that phenomenon have to do with the development of reading comprehension tests? What were those tests originally designed to measure? How does that differ from what they're used for now?
3. Reading textbooks originally had comprehension questions that were related to the reading passages in the textbooks themselves. Then publishers developed workbooks with passages on topics that were different from those in the textbooks, with questions targeted at specific comprehension skills. Why was that change significant?
4. The Whole Language movement rejected the idea of teaching reading comprehension skills. But the Balanced Literacy movement, which borrowed many of its ideas from Whole Language, came to embrace comprehension skills. How did that happen?
5. How did the passage of No Child Left Behind contribute to the focus on teaching reading comprehension skills in the abstract? Has the emphasis on testing influenced the way you or your school has approached reading comprehension?
6. Why does Hugh Catts say that standardized reading tests are "unfair for the student, unfair for the teacher, and unfair for the school system"? Do you agree?
7. Why does it sometimes take a long time for the results of knowledge-building curricula to show up on standardized tests? What do studies tell us about how long it might take?



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8. What does the evidence say about the reliability of tests like those used to monitor students' progress in reading comprehension? What might be a better way of monitoring progress?
9. What could states do to make their reading tests fairer and more accurate? How might that kind of change influence curriculum and instruction?
10. Do teachers have to choose between building knowledge and teaching comprehension skills and strategies? How do knowledge-building curricula incorporate skills and strategies?
11. Why is it important to start building knowledge while teaching foundational reading skills? How does the failure to build knowledge of subjects like history in the early grades affect learning later on?
12. LaTonya Goffney says that despite the multiple challenges schools face, it's essential to focus on improving reading instruction — including building the knowledge that kids need to understand text. But she also cautions that change will take time and that “we’ve really got to get it right.” What possible problems does she foresee? What do teachers and administrators need to “get it right”?

