Ask a RAT

(Pre-Editor's Note: Normally our Ask a RAT column appears on the back side of the newsletter, but this month’s question and answer are so important, we moved it to the front.)

If students can already read, why do I need to teach reading skills? Also, what makes WestEd’s Reading Apprenticeship® (RA) so special? What differentiates RA routines from any other method of teaching reading?

Reading is a complex process that takes practice, thinking, knowledge-building, and collaboration to master reading content-specific text in any field. In Reading Apprenticeship® (RA), instructors are the content area experts; they understand and utilize the nuances and specialized terms and structures that are unique to the texts in their field. Yet, with this level of expertise, faculty may be blind to what the students do not see—or the “invisible”.

RA helps to make the invisible, visible by using routines to assist students to learn how to approach and read text like a content-area expert.

This is accomplished by blending subject-area knowledge with insights into how readers acquire and master the unique aspects of the text by engaging the text through discussion and inquiry. RA practitioners do this by:

- Helping students engage the text to see what may, at first, seem invisible
- Allowing for collaborative discourse about how and why the text is arranged in a given manner
- Modeling reading early and often with RA routines like Think Alouds and Talking to the Text
- Providing lots of guided practice, encouraging classroom discussion of students’ access, thinking, and reading processes.

RA allows students the time and opportunities to learn how to think and read like a subject expert. By listening to student discussions, faculty are given a bird’s eye view of their students’ thinking as they try to decode and make sense of their textbooks. Faculty gain insight into how and where students face challenges in reading the text.

A reading routine alone does not make reading tasks RA. The key in a RA classroom is the classroom social dynamic of modeling, inquiring, reviewing the evidence, reflecting and discussing—all of which helps promote a rich metacognitive conversation about reading.

For more information about WestEd’s Reading Apprenticeship®’s framework for improving reading comprehension in subject-area content, visit these sites:

- http://tinyurl.com/6jd3ko
- http://tinyurl.com/pgbrav
- http://tinyurl.com/r67uuk
**RAT-ab-u-lous Year at RTC!**

We have accomplished many activities with Reading Apprenticeship® (RA) and RATs this past academic year including:
- Gave presentations about RA and RATs
- Established a RATs website and blog
- Created/published a monthly newsletter
- Added RA/reading materials to RTC Library
- Held monthly workshops about RA routines
- Held monthly breakfasts to discuss RA
- Established an RTC Foundation RATs Fund
- Began campus dialog about reading and RA
- Incorporated RA in several classrooms
- Proposed adding RA in more classrooms
- Grew RATs membership to 48 members.

Jenna Pollock noted that “Our students aren’t skilled readers. I spent a lot of time helping students find other ways to get the content. RA opened my eyes. Not only should I be connecting students to content in multiple ways, but I should also be helping them learn to comprehend difficult text. It’s a disservice to our students to not give them the literacy skills they need in work and life.”

Ardene Niemer reports great success with using two column notes as a scaffold between the textbook and the worksheet.

Debbie Crumb is putting RA to work in her library workshops. “I try to make my own thinking visible by talking aloud to students when I am demonstrating how to search an online database or evaluate a website. Students can then see what I’m thinking as I go through the process. I also ask a lot more questions in my teaching—trying to lead students to finding answers by themselves.”

Michele Lesmeister notes that RA effectively provides scaffolding for emerging skills that our students are in the process of developing, and it is the metacognitive conversations around the reading of text that allow students and faculty alike to engage with the reading in new and deeper ways.

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**RTC Library’s Item of Month**

The RTC Library has materials to support and help improve student reading and comprehension. For more info, contact the Library at 235-2331 or via email at librarian@RTC.edu.

**Bellanca, James A. A Guide to Graphic Organizers: Helping Students Organize and Process Content for Deeper Learning.**

RTC Library Call Number 371.33 BELLANC 2007

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**RATs Calendar**

**Wed. June 10, 7:00 AM in Culinaire Room**—Our last RATs Breakfast for this school year.

**Mon. June 15, 2:45—3:45 PM in Library**—Michele Lesmeister will conduct a workshop on Year One RATs Wrap Up.

**Special Note:** There aren’t any RATs workshops scheduled in July or August. In addition, there aren’t any RATs Breakfasts scheduled for the months of July, August or September.

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**Join the RATs!**

RATs (Reading Apprenticeship Teachers and supporters) is the RTC support group for those who want to use Reading Apprenticeship® (RA) with their students. Become a RAT and learn how to help improve your students’ reading skills. The RAT Pack is the training, planning and coordinating team to help get you started. Contact one of them today for more info about RA or RATs:
- Debbie Crumb
- Michele Lesmeister
- Ardene Niemer
- Jenna Pollock.

For more info about RA at RTC, scurry over to our RATs website and blog!