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Feature

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Reciprocal teaching: an update on a core teaching and learning strategy

Julia Westera is an educational psychologist and co-author of the Best Evidence Synthesis Exemplar 4: Reciprocal Teaching. Following on from the article appearing in *Education Gazette* last year, Julia fields more questions on key updates to the reciprocal teaching strategy.

Educational psychologist and teacher Julia Westera continues to be a passionate advocate for reciprocal teaching.

Julia's 2002 doctorate was on the use of reciprocal teaching as an inclusive schoolwide strategy; more recently she co-authored BES Exemplar 4 on the same theme. This year Julia presented at the EARLI conference in Cyprus. At this leading European biennial conference her paper was ranked in the top 15 per cent in terms of relevance.

This article provides a followup on the Q & A session with Janina Gaudin, reported in *Education Gazette* on 14 April 2014. Julia responds to some further FAQs on reciprocal teaching.



1) RECIPROCAL TEACHING HAS BEEN AROUND FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS. IS IT STILL RELEVANT AND IMPORTANT?

It still is a 'Number One' tool for teachers for many reasons.

First, reciprocal teaching is one of the most powerful evidence-based teaching strategies we have today.

Second, reciprocal teaching can be used very dynamically to accelerate learning and empower learners. Reciprocal teaching changes how teachers teach, how students learn, and how schools can mobilise in a way that empowers and engenders inclusivity, so that all our tamariki are more likely to succeed at school and enjoy life-long learning.

Third, anyone who has seen RT3T© (Reciprocal Teaching – Three Track) – the newly refined reciprocal teaching tools – the modernised version, in action, can see reciprocal teaching is more relevant than ever. RT3T© really works for our 21st century students, teachers and schools. And when done correctly, our students love it and keep wanting more.

Fourth, if used in a deliberate schoolwide strategy, reciprocal teaching clearly aligns with all our priorities and directions. Teachers are saying: 'it touches so many bases so quickly'.

2) I HEARD YOU HAVE BEEN UPDATING RECIPROCAL TEACHING. SO WHAT'S NEW?

Over the last two years I have been developing RT3T©, a modernised version of reciprocal teaching, to more consistently deliver high- impact results for our New Zealand schools and communities of schools.

I have done quite a revamp, with unique, new prototypes.

One of these, initially developed with Pasifika students, is designed to generate a quick buy-in as well as excitement, rapid learning and strong outcomes for students and their teachers.

A second is the new RT3T©. RT3T© is a new schoolwide and cluster-wide strategy to deliver high impact results for all students. The strategy raises both the capability of teachers to effectively apply reciprocal teaching, and enhances the schools' capability to effectively implement a sustainable, schoolwide strategy.

3) DOES IT WORK?

It sure does. We now have documented results of implementing the first phase of RT3T© in a low-decile, Pasifika primary school (Westera & Alton-Lee, 2014) and a large Pasifika secondary school. Results from both schools replicated those of a large scale study with New Zealand secondary schools (see BES Exemplar 4).

All these studies used an adapted version of reciprocal teaching with trained teaching teams and demonstrate acceleration on e-asTTle (especially deep feature) scores for all students, irrespective of gender, ethnicity and prior achievement levels. That is, RT3T© is working for top band as well as middle and low band classes. We now also have some robust results that show the efficacy of the first phase of RT3T© in primary and secondary schools where the vast majority of students are Māori.

This year I have been working collaboratively with four primary and three secondary schools in three clusters. All these schools are positioned to further build up and embed a schoolwide strategy.

In summary, there's buy-in, there's data, and there's progress towards sustainability.

And there's also thinking big. For example, one of our secondary school principals wrote: 'Reciprocal Teaching has been identified as a key teaching/learning strategy for 2015 and beyond. A significant initiative in the junior school has included over 70 per cent of all year 9/10 students. In order to improve literacy progression, it is envisaged that all students in years 9 and 10 will be involved in 2016.'

4) WHAT ARE PEOPLE SAYING ABOUT THIS NEW VERSION?

Primary teachers: 'By the way, it's brilliant'; 'The new Reciprocal Teaching is so different from Reciprocal Reading'; 'Great teaching strategy that makes students' thinking and questions about learning more explicit'.

Secondary teachers: 'Reciprocal teaching has completely changed the way I teach'; 'It's like gold'.

Students: 'I love this modern reading'; 'Where did you get this idea? Because I really love reciprocal teaching. It is amazing'.

Principals and senior staff are perhaps most amazed when their most disengaged students get hooked into deeper learning and see the results on e-asTTle and/or PROBE scores.

Can we develop these students to think more deeply, collaboratively and trustingly with adults, whānau and peers at school and in other settings? If so, we may well have removed (or at least punctured) their glass ceiling to a successful pathway through school and into their future.

5) WHY DID YOU MODERNISE RECIPROCAL TEACHING?

For many reasons. The first would be that I believe it is high time we make sure we get worthwhile results with reciprocal teaching. For more than a decade now it has been clear that key factors which make reciprocal teaching effective are neither deeply understood nor widely applied in New Zealand and internationally. Problems identified by researchers and teachers include the use of 'lethal mutations', misinformation, misuse, dabbling and pepperpotting. These concerns are also common with other powerful, evidence-based practices.

Second, reciprocal teaching needed some updating. Even since the BES was written four years ago, there has been further research and development, not only with reciprocal teaching but also to cross-culturally and within cognitive/metacognitive, behavioural and implementation science.

Third, reciprocal teaching is not learnt through a one-off learning experience. Reciprocal teaching is more complex and subtle than it first appears. One secondary principal, whose school has over 80 per cent Māori students, was excited with the impact of the new version. He compared reciprocal teaching with rugby, in which you can just learn to kick a ball, or you can take it so much further. Here is my attempt at a comparison.

Training for rapid learning of complex skills, such as those required in either reciprocal teaching or rugby, has similarities. With both, students require frequent, deep and flexible cognitive support and coaching. With both, the trainer needs not only to be able to play the 'game', but also to have the skills and motivation to build each players' physical, focus, strategic, and team skills, during practice and in 'matches'. With both the trainer needs to put in effort, momentum, challenge.

6) WHAT'S INVOLVED IF WE WANT TO GET WORTHWHILE RESULTS FOR OUR SCHOOL?

Robust and high-impact results for all students are clearly connected with reciprocal teaching tools conforming to a well-designed process and the usage of these tools being effectively implemented as a schoolwide strategy.

Basics would be having well-trained lead teachers, at least one in each school, and employing a team approach. Planning well ahead is also an essential, as leaders will need to mobilise their staff, resources, and timetabling differently. The investment of time and effort is largely at the front end – for initial professional development. Additional teacher/s and other resources are likely to be needed in order to continue to develop teacher skills and for the ongoing use of the small group intensive coaching component.

Further, schools will need external expert facilitators, particularly in the updated professional development and start-up stages, and also to maintain momentum in working collaboratively towards a high-impact, quality and sustainable strategy specifically for the school. The new Reciprocal Teaching 3 Track© (RT3T©) is a new development which will further assist schools to inform their design.

Julia is continuing to work at developing lead schools alongside extending towards working in various parts of New Zealand and training facilitators to support a country-wide deployment plan.

You can visit the RTeach website for more information.

By Julia Westera

RECIPROCAL TEACHING IS A MULTI-STRATEGY PACKAGE FOR CROSS-CURRICULAR USE AT ALL AGES. STUDENTS BECOME EMPOWERED LEARNERS AND IMPROVE IN:

- * accessing and understanding challenging text in any learning area
- * deeper thinking skills
- * content learning
- * face-to-face collaborative reasoning skills
- * leadership

These skills are central to success throughout school and tertiary education, and for life-long learning.

Reciprocal Teaching is ranked as the third highest in impact out of 49 effective teaching strategies by Professor John Hattie, in his book, *Visible Learning* (2009).

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