CUNY Start Reading and Writing — Core Values and Teaching Practices

CUNY Start teachers create the conditions for students to learn and write better through “cognitive apprenticeships” in which teachers make reading and writing processes visible. As teachers model these processes, they help students develop a metacognitive vocabulary to name what they do.

Although teachers play an active role in modeling thought processes and selecting sub-tasks which students can accomplish, the CUNY Start program also believes that students must be active in the classroom in order to learn most effectively. Accordingly, cognitive apprenticeship emphasizes “student talk” over “teacher talk,” providing numerous opportunities for students to practice, refine, and articulate their skills.

Learning to read and write better are ongoing efforts without endpoints. As a result, student progress and achievement will not be linear, and teachers will be less concerned with students reaching a “correct” interpretation of a text or writing a perfect essay than with teaching process and building students’ confidence and willingness to struggle. As students become aware of and begin to incorporate the processes of expert readers and writers, their own practices and outcomes become more proficient over time.

Elements of apprenticeship that are core to the curriculum and classroom practices:

**Modeling**
In a cognitive apprenticeship, students learn not by teachers (expert readers and writers) simply sharing an interpretation (“this is what the story is about”), but by students observing the strategies and processes that teachers use to arrive at those interpretations.

- Teachers model reading and writing strategies by **thinking aloud** about the thought processes that underlie “expert” reading and writing.

- Modeling allows students to see how texts are constructed by writers and understood by readers.

- Modeling helps students to learn and better anchor the language and moves used by “experts (i.e., terms such as “evidence”, “interpretation”, “authors point of view”, as well as conventional ways in which arguments are developed and presented). The language and moves are taught in context, while the teacher models how to interpret texts or construct written arguments.

**Scaffolding**
Scaffolding is the support that teachers provide to enable students to do a sub-task, even as they can see that task’s relation to the whole. As student apprentices grow in ability, they are able to take on increasingly difficult and sophisticated tasks.

- Scaffolding helps move expertise away from the sole provenance of the teacher by providing the student with “smart tools” that allow students some independence as they move towards...
greater mastery. For example, essay templates let students see a whole essay, while enabling them to practice (and gain confidence with) one small task, such as writing a personal example.

- Discussion procedures and question starters help students internalize the ways that master readers talk about academic texts.

- Pacing is another important aspect of scaffolding. CUNY Start teachers gauge what students are ready for, and provide multiple opportunities and contexts for students to engage in core activities.

- Repetition allows instructors to demand greater sophistication from students over time.

**Fading**
The expert slowly removes support, handing over more and more responsibility to the apprentice over time. Time to practice and make mistakes is critical for apprentices to take ownership over the process.

- CUNY Start classes provide significant in-class time for reading, writing, and processing information so that all students have the opportunity to participate and practice.

- Teachers create an environment in which students take ownership of their own learning by supporting plentiful opportunities for student talk and peer to peer learning.

- Teachers introduce students to and help them to internalize a metacognitive vocabulary related to reading and writing processes. Students become more aware of whether and how they use those processes, and as they increase control and flexibility, they gradually assume more responsibility for their own learning.

**Coaching**

- When coaching, the teacher uses a combination of suggestions, questions and examples to redirect students back to a reading, an essay in progress or a discussion with their peers for the purpose of gaining deeper understanding. Teachers provide extensive oral and written feedback to support and guide students through class activities.

- Coaching strategies are individualized and are based on deep knowledge of each student’s strengths and challenges.

**Classroom Culture and Community**
To successfully participate in a cognitive apprenticeship, students must take the risk to expose their own thought processes and mistakes. This is very difficult, especially students who have had negative school experiences. Therefore, CUNY Start teachers should:
• Model an attitude of tolerance, open-mindedness, and patience.

• Take steps to build a respectful and trusting community in the class.

• Recognize and praise students for taking risks and following reading/writing processes, rather than for getting “right answers.”

• Build student confidence through scaffolding – that is, creating tasks that allow students to succeed – while slowly increasing what is demanded from the students over time.