



# DIVE INTO THE DEEP END

ANCHOR TEXTS BUILD UNDERSTANDING OF COMPLEX IDEAS

By Diane P. Zimmerman, Katrina M. Litzau, and Vicki L. Murray

The Internet has opened new avenues for professional learning design — especially the use of text and video to extend learning and create opportunities for the social construction of knowledge.

When text is paired with collaborative designs, participants engage in powerful learning, which provides quality time to think out loud together. Engaging adults in text invites them to be active interpreters of critical themes. When a reader knows that a social contribution is expected, she comes prepared to explain personal understandings.

In 2014, instructional coaches Katrina Litzau and Vicki Murray designed professional learning to support teachers and principals in developing a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes of leadership. Steeped in the Common Core State Standards and building on quality literacy instruction, they designed the professional learning based on anchor texts.

The anchor text process focuses learning on a central theme by using one text as an anchor and supplementing with other readings or video clips. For example, if an English teacher were to use the book *The Giver* as an anchor text, she might extend the learning by bringing in other readings that either support or challenge the ideas of community.

“The idea behind an anchor text is that it serves as a foundational text along with other texts that can be used to enhance complex thought around critical themes,” Litzau and Murray (2014) write.

Teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators from Adams 12 Five Star School District in Thornton, Colorado, participated in the professional learning, and it is their work that serves as the centerpiece for this article.

#### ANCHOR TEXT DESIGN

Litzau and Murray chose the book *Cognitive Capital: Investing in Teacher Quality*, by Costa, Garmston, and Zimmerman (2014), as the anchor text. They believed the ideas could serve as an anchor for the ongoing work of the instructional coaches in helping them better understand important thinking processes for leadership.

They defined an anchor text, when used with adults, as a pivotal text selected to anchor a complex set of ideas. When the anchor text is paired with short readings, the discourse among learners deepens understanding and moves theory into practice. Much like the anchor prevents a ship from drifting, an anchor text keeps the learner focused on complex ideas.

An anchor text becomes a reference point for other forms of interpretation, including other readings, visual representations, or real-life experiences. Collectively, the readings create a common structure for discourse and learning around a complex set of ideas. Situated in this way, anchor texts solidify learning and promote applications to practice.

Diane Zimmerman, a co-author of *Cognitive Capital*, established a website to capture and support this collaborative work. (See [www.cognitivecapital.org](http://www.cognitivecapital.org) for more detailed lesson planning.)

Over the past 30 years, a lexicon for teaching literacy has emerged as a set of central tenets about how to engage students in print. Those familiar with this student-centered genre of teaching (Graves, 1994; Calkins, 1994; Atwell, 1998) will recognize the terms: mentor texts, literature circles, guided reading, anchor texts, and others.

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SUMMARY OF WEEKLY PLANS				
Week	Cognitive capital focus	Supplemental text themes	Participatory structure	Reflection
1	Chapter 1: Defining cognitive capital Chapter 2: Building cognitive capital		Circle of viewpoints	How shall we invest so that collective capital grows and produces wealth in mind and spirit for our teachers and students?
2	Chapter 3: Valuing states of mind	"In the zone" engagement, creativity and the nine elements of flow	3-2-1 bridge	What patterns are we noticing about the authors' opinions?
3	Chapter 4: Mediative functions Chapter 5: Mediating conversations	Core theory of success	Word splash	Based on the influences of the texts, what beliefs have you become more aware of? What beliefs are emerging?
4	Chapter 6: Balancing the portfolio	Knowers and learners	Text to text	How might polarity inform our roles?
5	Chapter 7: The dividends of collective thinking		Systems thinking: Icebergs	What evidence of collective holonomy do we find in our mental models?
6	Chapter 8: Promoting systems accountability	<i>Multipliers</i> by Liz Wiseman chapter summary sections	Four A's Protocol	How do the texts influence our roles as leaders?
7	From study to action: Synthesizing our learning	Participant leadership action plans	Four C's	How do we invest so that cognitive capital grows and produces wealth in mind and spirit for our teachers and our students?

Johnston and Goatley (2014) recently cited this genre of teacher as researcher in the classroom as the most influential research for literacy and for changing classroom practices.

It makes sense that these literacy design principles ought to be applied to professional learning. This type of immersion in text, the active engagement in the process, not only provides a model of instruction, but also heightens the metacognitive understandings of the teacher learner.

As one teacher put it, "I had not fully realized the importance of background knowledge until I had the experience of not understanding part of a text. Another teacher filled in the missing pieces for me. I have found that by starting with the students, I can almost always find students who can fill in missing pieces, which builds in background knowledge."

For many adults, the act of reading has long become invisible. Adult readers do not fully understand how they come to comprehend. Furthermore, unless teachers are active members of a book club, they forget that reading is an interpretive act and understandings can vary widely.

And unless teachers have become experts in literacy instruction while on the job, most do not have a personal metacognitive map to guide them as they bring students to text. With the interpretation of complex text as a central tenet of the Common Core State Standards, teachers benefit from experiencing text-based immersive learning.

Without strategies, teachers often fall back on teacher-di-

rected instruction. In contrast, using anchor texts in a collaborative setting allows students to be active interpreters of text as they choose their own points of entry, with teachers facilitating, rather than directing, students' understanding.

We believe that designing professional development using this genre of self-directed learning design, paired with overt processing of the experience, is one of the best ways to deepen complex understanding about reading comprehension and help teachers build these internal maps.

Through this approach, teachers come to understand the fluidity of content knowledge and how to grapple with conflicting views, so it makes sense to model professional development on how the learner comes to understand text, and in particular, in community. Why not engage educators, just as we do students, in text-based learning using anchor texts, mentor texts, and literature circles?

### CONNECTING TO THE ANCHOR

The implementation of the Common Core State Standards was at the forefront of this work. Along with understanding the standards themselves, Litzau and Murray had new insight into the concept of "close reading" through the study of Lehman and Roberts' (2014) *Falling in Love With Close Reading*.

This work spurred them to look at professional development through book studies in a different light. They wondered: How can the learner find deeper meaning of a text? How can

**COLLABORATIVE LITERACY DESIGN STRATEGIES**

LISTED FROM MOST COLLECTIVE CAPACITY BUILDING TO THE LEAST

<b>Name of process</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Professional development purposes</b>	<b>Classroom applications</b>	<b>Application to professional learning</b>
ANCHOR TEXT	This process uses one text as the conceptual anchor and expands the knowledge base with additional links to parallel texts or videos.	Develops shared knowledge around key concepts. Invites deep thinking about key concepts over a period of time, from several months to a year.	Anchor texts strengthen key conceptual understandings. With Common Core, the emphasis on close reading of text highlights the use of this strategy.	Choose a central text that is essential to the group's learning. Find shorter texts, videos, or real experiences in which participants can link to the anchor text to expand knowledge.
MENTOR TEXT	A mentor text shows how to do something. The reader returns to it as a reference guide.	Develops shared skills in an area of need. Invites practice-based learning with collegial support. With print, the learner can return again and again to better understand the nuances. Creates a group understanding of practices and builds capacity.	Mentor texts were first identified as texts that served as a model for student writing. Any text that "shows how" would be applicable.	Choose a book that demonstrates how to do something. Learners can return to and reference it to improve their skills.
LITERATURE CIRCLES	Participants read different but similar themed texts and discuss the links between them to gain a deeper understanding.	Builds capacity for collaborative understanding. The group chooses a theme of interest, then each person chooses a book of interest to read and share with the group.	Literature circles grew out of the text sets as a way to build conceptual understanding. By providing students choices, this strategy increases engagement.	Choose an important theme and ask each person to choose a book that supports a deeper understanding of that theme. Conduct a collaborative discussion that maps key understandings that are emerging.
GUIDED READING	The facilitator provides direction and focus to the reader to build skills and knowledge. This is particularly useful for reading complex information such as a research article.	Builds capacity in a short time through selective reading of parts of a text, such as a research paper or selected readings from a longer text. The facilitator selects the text and designs meaningful activities for the collaborative review of the text.	In the classroom, guided reading is a small-group process in which the teacher provides focused instruction in decoding and comprehension of text. For adults, this definition is stretched to describe focused reading led by a facilitator.	The facilitator chooses important parts of texts for the group to read in the professional development session, then designs ways for the groups to generate collective meaning.
BOOK STUDY	Similar to the popular genre book club.	Builds small-group capacity. A group chooses a book of common interest, reads it, and then discusses.	While this can be applied to classrooms, it was not developed by teachers, whereas these other strategies were.	Teachers have often spontaneously formed their own self-guided studies about a book of common interest.
BOOK TALKS	Short oral summaries that focus on some aspect of a series of texts or as an introduction to a specific text.	Provides a quick introduction to a collection of books. This can be used to narrow down and select books that provide the most interest.	Teachers developed this strategy to model the ways that readers think in order to understand text and foster interest in a broad genre of reading opportunities.	Use this strategy as a quick way to review multiple texts and learn from them or as a way to choose one in which to go more in depth.

teachers create an environment where learners are driven beyond the surface of the words? How does the learning come alive in the work?

After reading *Cognitive Capital*, Litzau and Murray decided to create a shared experience where other educators would engage with the text. They invited leaders to sign up for a book study that met for seven weeks, with each session lasting 90 minutes.

In planning the professional learning, they searched inside and outside education for supplemental texts to support, refute, or challenge the central ideas. The key was to find the right supplemental texts to spark discourse among learners.

These texts needed to be compelling and short, yet meaty enough to engage the learners. They considered works by Senge on systems thinking, Wiseman on multipliers, and Csikszentmihalyi on flow, as well as others.

To design these collaborative sessions, they developed questions and organized structures for discourse. Participants read the identified chapters from the anchor text before each session and came prepared to engage in structured conversations. At the beginning of each session, participants read a parallel text, then discussed the key ideas in both readings.

Some structures — those frequently used in classrooms — were simple but powerful. Others were more complex, requiring participants to synthesize their own learning along with the learning of others. (See “Summary of weekly plans” on p. 42.) Particularly challenging were the structures designed to unearth mental models (systems thinking; iceberg) and those requiring participants to make connections with the diverse thinking in the room (circle of viewpoints).

Through reflection, processing, and debate, participants’ beliefs evolved. One participant said, “The structure provided multiple perspectives that shifted my thinking in the moment,

taking me deeper into the content.”

Over the course of the study, the routine provided a ritual that was important to developing new mental models and putting the learning into practice. Each participant ended the seven-week book study with a leadership action plan — an accountability plan to implement their new learning. The action plans focused on each person’s role as an instructional coach, principal, or central office leader.

### OTHER LITERACY STUDY DESIGNS

This experience inspired us to consider other ways to support adult learning using student-centered literacy designs. By using these design principles, teachers experience the processes just as their students would and learn how to apply these principles without having to participate in additional training. Through their own reading and collaboration with peers, teachers gain a deeper appreciation about drawing knowledge from text.

The chart on p. 43 illustrates other collaborative literacy designs that can be used for professional learning. The six literacy strategies are listed in the order of the greatest capacity for long-term learning, beginning with anchor and mentor texts.

When adult learners study and discuss texts over time, the learning community develops capacity by formulating and sharing a knowledge base. When adults share that knowledge base in their daily work, the learning becomes job-embedded, further strengthening its power.

### SET ASIDE TIME FOR REFLECTION

To make the learning about the literacy design processes explicit, participants need time to reflect on their own learning, the process, and any insights they might have about how to transfer this learning into the classroom. As the group reflected, they realized that not all supplemental resources were equally useful for extending understanding. Discussing their experience, the group developed criteria for choosing supplemental texts.

More than a year later, we have found that the key ideas

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have stayed with the participants and have become reference points for their professional work. Powerful texts have staying power. Add professional dialogue and collaboration, and the learning begins to shape a knowledge base.

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**Diane P. Zimmerman (dpzimmer@gmail.com)** is a retired superintendent and author of *Liberating Leadership Capacity: Pathways to Educational Wisdom* (Teachers College Press, 2016). **Katrina M. Litzau (katrina@litzau.net)** and **Vicki L. Murray (vickimurrayco@gmail.com)** are professional learning specialists and elementary and middle school instructional coaches. ■

Power plan