Introduction

All learners, whether they are teachers or students, must be willing to live their learning in public so that it is a source of demonstration for others.
                    —Kathy Short and Carolyn Burke

REASONS WE READ

We read to explore the world, to make connections between descriptive information and our own experience. We read to be informed because we are curious about so many things, and text resources both stimulate and satisfy that drive. We read because it is empowering; we ask our own questions and seek our own answers. And we read to share the adventures of others; as we become more knowledgeable about the world—present and past—we come to understand ourselves in relation to it. Reading confirms and expands who we are and who we might become. Reading validates our views and alters them.

This book is based on this philosophical and practical sense of purpose for becoming a reader. It is not about sounding out words, memorization, regurgitation, or skimming the surface of a story. Rather it treats reading as a process that produces connection, discovery, and deep understanding. To be literate is to be thoughtful and to engage thoughtfully as a reader, writer, listener, and speaker. This book offers methods, ideas, and strategies intended to create literate human beings, not just skillful readers.

Inside, you will find ideas generated from discussions with teachers from the United States and Canada, visits to their classrooms, and observations of their interactions with students. This book is designed for educators making their maiden voyage into the land of learner-centered instruction; those who are actively engaged in exploring; and those long-time residents who are continually seeking to expand their horizons. The book is meant to encourage, support, stimulate, facilitate, provoke, and provide.

The book is divided into six sections, each containing ideas for the following:

1. Designing a literate environment
2. Orchestrating student interaction
3. Developing strategies for fluency
4. Nurturing lifelong learners
5. Assessing student growth
6. Leading learning-focused conversations

In each section, there are strategies that take little preparation and provide a risk-free way of initiating beginning experiences with learner-centered instruction, strategies that take a little more effort and require additional planning, and strategies that require extensive preparation and a readjustment or reprioritization of instructional time.

Although the sections are organized from the least to the most complex strategies, there is no intended better or worse, right or wrong, or embedded goal to reorchestrate the classroom. All of the strategies described in this volume are for teachers who want to provide rich literacy learning for their students and whose classrooms and instructional methods reflect the principles of learner-centered instruction at any level.

New in this second edition is a special supplement for literacy specialists, with practical tips and specific strategies for collaboratively building and sharing expertise in practice. Based on Lipton and Wellman's learning-focused continuum (2003), this section focuses on patterns and practices for adult-to-adult interactions.

LEARNER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION:
A PHILOSOPHY, NOT AN INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL

A learner-centered *approach* to instruction is an attitude, not a method. It is about the joy of learning together and self-confidently pursuing new discoveries. Learner-centered *instruction* is built on learners' questions, reflections, and experimentations as they engage in meaningful and relevant activities. The learner-centered *curriculum* exists as an outgrowth of those experiences.

In a natural environment, language is used for self-expression, to share and process experiences, and to make sense of the world. Students should be exposed to the purposes of language in school as well. To support students' developing control over the conventions of language, an environment that encourages and supports risk taking and experimentation must be established. Opportunities for practicing and integrating new learning are structured, successful attempts are applauded, and temporary failures are constructively examined and integrated.

Learner-centered instruction is the expression of the way in which teachers create learning opportunities for their students and themselves. The ideas in this book are designed to support those endeavors.

SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

The activities and strategies explored in this book are based on seven key principles of literacy development. These principles have been extrapolated from current research and practice in reading instruction and cognitive science.

1. Making Meaning Is Always the Goal of Communication

Simply put, learners construct meaning while reading and listening, and express meaning while speaking and writing.

Making meaning is always the goal. Although this principle seems straightforward, teachers often send conflicting messages to children about reading, writing, listening, and speaking. If making meaning is always the goal, teaching contextual and semantic cues becomes more important than sounding out a word. Accepting temporary or invented spelling allows freedom of expression without constraining young writers to using only the words they can spell correctly.

2. Children Learn Language Conventions by Learning Language

We don't learn language by watching it; we learn it by actively using it. The reading process is best learned by using complete forms of written language, not by learning isolated skills. Activities should be structured in purposeful, authentic tasks, and ample opportunities for children to listen, speak, read, and write should be provided. As students engage in these processes, they develop the capacity to solve new problems by using increasingly familiar strategies and cues. They begin to notice new things about words and the conventions of language and to link these discoveries to previously learned information and procedures. These discoveries become reference points for future learning.

3. A Learner's Experience Is a Key Factor in the Construction of Meaning

Reading is an interaction between the print on a page and the knowledge of the reader. Readers construct meaning during reading by using their prior knowledge and experience. Imagine this newspaper headline: "Vikings Slaughter Dolphins." Most people in the United States would automatically think of a football game. However, for someone who knows nothing about football, the headline might elicit a description of a historical event.

The foundations of children's literacy are in their home environments. Capitalizing on the language experiences children bring to school is critical to their success as learners.

4. Choice Encourages Commitment to Learning

When students are allowed to choose their learning options, they develop a greater sense of commitment to their own learning, ownership of their work, and a higher level of responsibility. Knowledge of an individual student's needs and interests as well as sound professional judgment guide teachers in providing each student with some choice in reading and writing activities.

5. Error Reduction, Not Error Elimination, Is the Aim of Instruction

Learners gain as much from making mistakes as they do from being correct—maybe more! Therefore, it is important to offer an environment in which language is cultivated through experience and experimentation with specific feedback and sound learning strategies.

6. The Language Arts Are Integrated With Each Other and the Content Areas

Language is never context free. Effective literacy instruction keeps language whole and connected to a purpose. Literacy includes thinking, reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These cannot be separated into isolated skills in which students are drilled for mastery. Providing contextual experiences that connect children's lives to the world around them is vital. Further, functional communication on relevant topics includes information and interest in content areas. Content area instruction is a fertile place for students' developing literacy.

7. Assessment Is Learner Referenced, Providing Direction for Future Learning

Assessment in the learner-centered classroom is formative, developmental, and descriptive. Data about both the product and process of each student is gathered by the teacher through observation and short-cycle assessments. These data are interpreted to ascertain each child's growing repertoire of skills and strategies. There is a growth orientation, rather than a remedial one, and teachers look at what a child can do, as well as determine what she or he cannot do yet.

CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT: CONDITIONS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

A fundamental premise of learner-centered instruction is that language learning is a natural process. It is rare to encounter the parents of a six-month-old baby, for example, who express concern that their child may never learn to speak. They recognize that oral language is a process that develops over time. They intuitively know that, given daily oral interaction, this child will learn to speak—without ever having a worksheet! They respond with delight to all attempts at speech that the child makes; parents never say, "It's not *baba*; it's *blanket*." Instead, they praise the child and provide the appropriate modeling: "You want your blanket? What a clever girl you are to ask for it!" With continuous modeling and feedback, the child's oral language will become more and more sophisticated. Literacy learning follows a similar natural process. Yet, traditional reading programs have dissected the process into a sequence of isolated skills to be mastered before children are expected to be fluent readers and writers.

Learner-centered teachers strive to provide conditions for learning that echo those in which children learn to speak. To create the appropriate environment, the teacher organizes

and structures experiences, demonstrates and models the conventions of language, and clarifies complex processes and information. The teacher is a reflective learner and colearner, a conference partner, a supportive coach.

Based on the work of Cambourne (1988) and others, we offer three key characteristics that should be consciously orchestrated by teachers committed to developing language learning, providing optimal literacy experiences, and ensuring student success. This book is designed to provide a plethora of ideas for creating these qualities in the learner-centered classroom.

High Expectations for All Learners

Learners are influenced, either enabled or limited, by the expectations of those around them, particularly respected adults and their peers. It is critical to convey to students the expectation that they will succeed at their learning tasks. Subtle messages that reading is difficult or complex can be daunting to young learners. Be conscious about conveying positive and high expectations to students.

Toward that end, error reduction, not error avoidance, is the goal of instruction. In fact, students learn a great deal from reflecting on their mistakes and developing strategies for not repeating them. Approximation, or process of trial and error as students strive for excellence, allows students to take risks and work confidently in struggling to meet learning challenges. Skillful teachers help students to learn from their errors, as well as their successes.

Developing self-reliant, self-regulating students is a key goal. Learners grow in these areas when they make their own choices and decisions about the when, how, and what of their learning tasks. Choices might include what to read or where, when, or how much; which new vocabulary words to focus on; whom to choose as a learning partner; and so on.

Learning-focused teachers build as much choice as possible into their instructional program.

Real-Life Reading in a Print-Rich Environment

Students need to be surrounded by a wide range of print and print materials. These materials might include labels, lists, charts, books, dictated stories, songs, and displays. Students should have access to print resources and a variety of reading materials, including trade books, magazines, newspapers, and advertising flyers. It is particularly beneficial when the classroom is filled with print that is based on students' shared experiences and relevant to students' needs and interests.

Clear, Purposeful Models With Rich Practice Opportunities and Relevant Feedback

Demonstrations are models of the conventional mechanics and usage of language. Teachers provide demonstrations whenever they write on the board, read aloud, or post messages. Demonstrations provide contextual models that enable learners to experience the conventions of language and language use in print and speech. Be explicit and think aloud so students can observe process as well as product.

Rich, diverse, and motivating activities offer students an opportunity to practice their developing control over their language learning. Rather than skill and drill, organize authentic, purposeful tasks in which students must exercise their expanding knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Learners are encouraged and supported by specific, meaningful feedback that constructively guides them toward improvement. The aim is for learners to recognize areas for change, establish learning goals, and internalize the criteria for excellence.

Use rubrics developed with students to clarify expectations and give students clear standards. In this way, they learn to do their own gap analysis and set their own learning goals.

Overview of the Book

More Than 100 Ways to Learner-Centered Literacy is full of practical instructional ideas that can be modified for K–6 use. Although many of the ideas lend themselves especially well to a language arts curriculum, the activities and strategies are highly adaptable for use across content areas. After all, in every subject, the focus should be on the learners. Successful implementation of the ideas in this book is context dependent. We have included tips throughout the text to spark individual teachers' creativity.

Each section of the book provides strategies designed to fulfill one of five critical components of learner-centered education. Section 1, "Designing a Literate Environment," addresses design, structure, and climate. A literate environment is full of language and activity relevant and meaningful to the students—often in sharp contrast to the sterile surroundings of a traditional classroom.

Section 2, "Orchestrating Student Interaction," provides multiple examples of activities intended to promote collaborative work among students. Resting on current research supporting the social nature of learning, these activities enable learners of all ages to maximize one another's strengths and gain experience in working cooperatively—as the real world demands.

Section 3, "Developing Comprehension Fluency," incorporates the recommendations of the National Reading Panel (2000) for both explicit and blended strategy instruction. It includes classroom ideas that promote various thinking skills. Creative and critical thinking can be bolstered in any classroom when students are encouraged to continually make and confirm predictions, are involved in extended reading experiences, and are immersed in integrated thematic instruction.

Section 4 is titled "Nurturing Lifelong Learners." Even though from a global perspective the United States has a relatively high literacy rate, there is an alarmingly high rate of aliterate people: those persons who can read and write but

never choose to do so. Learner-centered education uncovers the joy of learning, so education becomes a lifelong, personal quest—initiated by the learner! Activities in Section 4 have been successful in launching this love for literacy and learning. The teacher nurtures this lifelong love rather than coaxes students to complete their schoolwork.

Section 5, "Strategies for Assessing Student Growth," focuses on strategies for teachers rather than on activities for the classroom. It offers educators valid alternatives to traditional, standardized assessment. As teachers implement the activities described in Sections 1–4, it quickly becomes apparent that "fill-in-the-bubbles" tests can no longer adequately measure what students know and what they are capable of doing. Learner-centered teachers view assessment and instruction as a virtual cycle: One cannot occur without the other. This final instructional section discusses multiple strategies for implementing assessment techniques that naturally inform future instruction. Individual student achievement is of the highest importance, and this chapter is full of ideas for such measurement.

As a whole, these five sections provide a base for creating a learner-centered classroom. It is our hope that educators will read the text with their own students in mind and adapt the activities and strategies accordingly. We believe that in doing so, educators will transform the school experience for the learners of today and tomorrow.

New in this second edition, Section 6, "Leading Learning-Focused Conversations," provides tips and tools for leading the professional one-to-one and small-group work that focuses on the continual improvement of literacy teaching and learning. Strategies and practical suggestions are offered for working with both novice and experienced colleagues.