

Foreword

Often when I walk into Lowes Home Center or Home Depot I mentally hyper-ventilate. My heart skips a beat, and my creative muse goes into happy shock: All those tools and ideas! “Look at those wrenches,” I exclaim to my wife. “I bet they could fix a lot of things in our house. And hey, imagine what we could do with that jigsaw over there! Have you ever seen so many pliers in one place?”

My imagination launches a rocket of opportunity, and I’m strapped to the tail fin, wondering where my mind should go first, second, and beyond. It’s always a 3:1 ratio at these stores: I buy three additional items for every one item on my original list; I get three new ideas for every one idea I had prior to entering.

That’s darn close to the feeling I had as I read *Stuck in the Middle: Helping Adolescents Read and Write in the Content Areas* by Donna Topping and Roberta McManus. Wow, so many tools! So many ways to make learning come alive for struggling students and help teachers in their cause! Clear a path—I’m stuffing my shopping cart with all that I see.

As I read these pages, I was reminded of teachers, including myself from time to time, who too quickly blame students for failing to learn, rather than taking on the more difficult task of questioning and building our own instruction. We think we’re trying every strategy known to mankind when really we’re just exhausting our limited imagination. It’s easy to run out of creative teaching juice, particularly when facing diverse needs in our classrooms and mounting district mandates. During these times, we desperately seek an I.V. full of instructional catalysts. Topping and McManus provide this exact stimulus with these innovative and proven strategies from their decades of teaching experience in multiple grade levels. With this book, we will not lack for ideas.

In fact, Topping and McManus not only lay out a plentiful harvest of terrific reading, writing, and vocabulary strategies—they improve upon them. Old chestnuts like SQ3R and QAR are explained well, but each long-standing strategy receives new polish and innovative application. The authors don’t settle for simply using ideas from the teacher’s copy of the basal text, for example. They show us how to modify them to differentiate instruction, how to ratchet up the complexity or tune it down, how to push students to stand on their mental tip-toes or provide stepping stones to on-grade level proficiencies.

Woven in with these shiny retoolings are brand new strategies for today's students. I can't wait to try "Skim Sandwich," "Text Box and Text Brackets," "Sticking Points," "Vocabulary Circles," and the "WHMS Radio Call-in Show," among many others. The impact of the strategies here is contagious; students unwilling to participate will have a difficult time remaining on the sidelines when they're used.

Drawing upon the wisdom of Rief, Daniels, Lane, Pink, Popham, and many others, Topping and McManus present the latest thinking and pedagogy, and apply it deftly in real classrooms. The book begins with clear standards for teaching excellence. Thankfully, these principles include how to best prepare students' minds for learning—an important aspect of teaching that receives far too little focus in most classrooms. There are powerful twenty-first-century skills promoted here, too, such as teaching students to encapsulate, synthesize ideas, determine salience, think metaphorically, analyze data, and draw upon background information to create new learning. All the while, the authors are mindful of the unique nature of students' development. They show us how to flex strategies to scaffold instruction for specific individual and class needs. What a joy it is to see so many helpful ideas made transparent so that others can implement them as well!

One of the strongest elements of *Stuck in the Middle* is the license the authors give us to teach outside our comfort zone. In several places, the authors humble themselves, sharing experiences in which they knew little about a topic and invited their students to teach them about it instead. Many teachers find themselves in this position, relying on student expertise to figure out ever-changing classroom technology. Here, the authors embrace failure as one of the great teaching tools it is. While a teacher's stumbling with some aspect of teaching, technology, or content can create genuine empathy on the part of their students, it can also convey a simple but powerful truth: if you want to learn something, teach it to another. The authors' students grew as they taught their teachers. A high-five to Topping and McManus for opening themselves to revision like this in front of their students! All students need clear models of how *not* to know something--and handle it with grace.

We all need to laugh at ourselves and with others, and the authors' quick and easy sense of humor is another great strength of this book. Readers will laugh at how one student responded when McManus pointed to her stomach and asked what it was, and at another student's mnemonic devise for remembering the difference between two elements on the Periodic Table,

Silver (Ag) and Gold (Au). Woven in with this humor are plenty of fun poems, graphics, dramatic interpretations, and instructional games that will undoubtedly become the highlight of many students' school day.

Thoroughly vetted in their own classrooms, these strategies are for all content teachers, not just teachers of reading and writing. In fact, the book inoculates us against that dreaded disease, *Literacimonodominopathy*, the illness (*pathy*) that some educators suffer that declares reading, writing, and vocabulary instruction (*literaci*) as the exclusive domain (*domin*) of just one (*mono*) educator, the English teacher. We've evolved as a profession beyond this antiquated thinking; we are all reading, writing, and vocabulary teachers. It is not hyperbole to declare that proficiency in these three areas opens – or slams – more doors for students than anything else taught, K–12. Because Topping and McManus are so content-driven, this book provides practical literacy strategies that are usable in all disciplines. They know how to move teachers from simple classroom survival to creating productive, thriving students.

Teachers can be invited or mandated to use literacy strategies in content areas, but we all know the former is more effective than the latter. Through personable writing, experienced insight, and clear directions, Topping and McManus make reading and writing instruction in content areas inviting, effective, and even fun.

Just as we walk through that home improvement store and the ideas start flowing, as we read this book we're reminded: How about some new light bulbs? Here, they are.

—Rick Wormeli
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