



Literacy Connects

A Content Literacy Newsletter from Regional Professional Development Program-Issue XLV



Sweet Beginnings: How to Start the School Year

The classroom climate you create the first few weeks of school often determines the entire year. Creating an environment where students learn (and you keep your sanity) depends on your ability to create a community—a family of learners who can work and grow together. Not only is it important to learn names and establish norms and procedures, but it is essential to collect baseline data through content specific pre-tests and modality and interest surveys. The following are suggestions to help you get started. (All newsletters and activities referenced in this issue are posted on RPDP.net.)

- Introductions and getting to know you activities are an important step towards building a safe and welcoming climate. The first week, play games that get kids up and moving, meeting each other, and sharing information (both personal and academic). See *Literacy Connects #30, Building Classroom Community*, for “Getting to Know You” activities.
- Establish norms (classroom rules) and procedures as soon as possible. Rather than telling students the rules, have them write down 4 – 6 classroom conditions they need to optimize their learning experiences. Tell them to base their responses on past learning experiences and what they know about their learning styles. Once individual student lists are done, in groups of 4 or 5, have students create a group list, eliminating duplicate answers and combining similar ones. Finally, create a whole class list and post where norms are fully visible to all members of the class. Discuss each item: why it is needed; how it can be achieved. Have students write learning and behavior goals based on modality surveys and classroom norms. See *Literacy Connect #31, Building Classroom Community, Part II* for more on procedures and norms.
- Administer pre-tests for your content area the second or third week of school. English teachers should consider giving students writing, reading and foundational skills pre-tests. Past state writing prompts and CRT tests work well. See RPDP.net for tests in math, science and elementary literacy. Past middle and high school state exams and writing prompts are posted under ELA-Middle/High School-State Writing/Reading Assessment. A basic grammar and reading assessment for middle and high school ELA is posted in the folder labeled Literacy Connect Resources.
- Along with content specific pre-assessments, have students complete interest and modality surveys. Afterwards discuss the results and teach students about learning styles and strategies specific to each. Discussing learning styles not only helps students understand more about how they learn and ways they can learn better, it also creates an awareness of others in the class and how they learn. Use the results to help create cooperative learning groups. Students’ personalities and interests are as important a consideration in the creation of effective cooperative learning groups as ability levels. Also use interest survey questions to create student scavenger hunts. After students have completed their surveys, ask them to find a classmate who has a similar answer. For example, ask students to find another classmate who has the same favorite movie; the next time, ask students to find someone else who has similar taste in music, and so on. This is a fun and easy way to get kids to talk about themselves. A variety of K- 12 student interest surveys are posted at RPDP.net- ELA-Newsletters-Literacy Connects- Literacy Connects Resources.

Taking the time early in the year to build a community of learners, where students feel welcome and understand classroom procedures and expectations, will facilitate learning and save time in the long run.

Visit the RPDP website (www.rpdp.net) for a complete selection of *Literacy Connects*.