A Balanced Literacy Classroom: What Does It Look and Sound Like?

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Introduction

Balanced literacy is not new in education. However, in the era of more rigorous standards for English Language Arts and Reading, and expectations for 21st century college and career ready students, many educators are questioning their current instructional strategies and practices. Questions that educators frequently need to address include the following: What does effective 21st century literacy learning look and sound like? How do we prepare students to be college- and career-ready? What existing practices should remain in the classroom and what needs to change with the times?

Although some adjustment must be made to meet new global economy expectations, the foundation of the balanced literacy model remains solid in preparing students for reading success in school, college, and career.

In a balanced approach to literacy instruction, teachers strategically and consistently integrate instruction with authentic reading and writing on a daily basis, so that students learn how to apply and utilize the literacy strategies and skills they are learning. In Literacy for the 21st Century: A Balanced Approach, Gail Tompkins (2013) explains there is noticeable “increased emphasis on developing strategic readers and writers” in recent years (p. 10). A balanced approach to instructional literacy practices is grounded in the belief that ownership of literacy is central to students’ lifelong success and this ownership of literacy motivates students to continue reading even when reading becomes challenging. In an era of increased emphasis on accessing complex texts, a balanced literacy instructional approach ensures students are becoming proficient readers by providing multiple opportunities for modeled instruction as well as guided, collaborative, and independent practice.

The Many Names and Faces of Balanced Literacy

Multiple opinions exist as to what the word “balanced” actually means in the term balanced literacy. At any time, in any number of school districts and classrooms across this country, various labels are used or what appears to be, in essence, the same overall balanced approach, or at least an approach that has the same basic framework and goals.
In Ann Arbor, Michigan, Ann Arbor Public Schools has a district publication, “Balanced Literacy in the Ann Arbor Public Schools,” that outlines a framework for balanced literacy instruction. The publication defines balanced literacy as “a set of instructional literacy practices, which encompass methods for teaching to the whole class, small groups, and individuals according to need and interest” (Hatt, Anderson, Madden, & Dickinson, 2008, p. 3).

Further, the district publication references “the inclusion of instruction in reading, writing, and word study,” (Hatt et. al., 2008, p. 3) in its definition of balanced literacy. The “understanding of balance also applies to the gradual release of support from the teacher to the learner as skills become more proficient and the learner becomes more independent” (Hatt et al., 2008, p. 3).

Similarly, literature produced in Branchburg Township School District in Branchburg, New Jersey defines their district’s balanced literacy instruction as a comprehensive approach to language arts instruction that “contains all of the components necessary for students to master written and oral communication” (Porowski, 2009, p. 4).

Branchburg’s balanced literacy components are listed as follows:

- **Read-alouds**: Teacher Modeled Reading
- **Independent Reading Workshop**: Daily Independent Reading
- **Guided Reading Workshop**: Guided Instruction in Developmentally Appropriate Books
- **Write Alouds**: Teacher Modeled Writing
- **Independent Writing Workshop**: Daily Independent Writing
- **Guided Writing Workshop**: Guided Instruction in Developmentally Appropriate Writing
- **Word Study**: Guided and Independent Phonics, Spelling, and Etymology

Another balanced approach is the Four-Blocks® Literacy Model. It incorporates four different approaches each day to teach children to read and write. Patricia Cunningham and Dorothy Hall developed this model. It includes:

- **Guided Reading**
- **Working with Words**
- **Self-Selected Reading**
- **Writing**

Another example of a balanced approach is a model created by teachers Gail Boushey and Joan Moser, known as “The Daily 5.” It is based on their own classroom teaching experiences, research, and methods they have developed for accelerating literacy and learning. This approach includes the following components:

- **Read to Self**
- **Read to Someone**
■ Work on Writing
■ Listen to Reading
■ Word Work

Whether it is called Daily 5, Four-Blocks™, reading or writing workshop, or balanced literacy, all the approaches are based on providing the best instruction possible in whole-group and small-group and then providing students with opportunities to work independently after a gradual release of responsibility.

A Balanced Literacy Framework Supports A Successful 21st Century Classroom

We have seen that different approaches to balanced literacy share a pattern of common components. When considering increased 21st century college and career requirements, the common best-practice instructional components of balanced literacy not only hold up as viable approaches in response to the demands of more rigorous standards and expectations, but provide a balanced, scaffolded framework for helping students prepare for critical thinking, collaboration and becoming college- and career-ready.

Balanced literacy includes three levels of instruction:

■ Whole-group (whole-class) instruction
■ Differentiated small-group instruction
■ Independent student work

Another tenet of balanced literacy that supports our new era of literacy instruction is the focus on progressive lessons in reading, writing, and vocabulary—or word study—that use a gradual release of responsibility approach. This balanced literacy lesson progression generally includes the following:

■ Modeled Interactive Read-Alouds/ Modeled Writing (whole-group)
■ Shared Reading and Writing (whole-group)
■ Guided Reading and Writing (small-group)
■ Independent Reading and Writing (small-group/individual)
■ Word Study (whole-group and small-group, integrated with reading and writing)

In Neenah, Wisconsin, Neenah Joint School District is among those embracing the balanced literacy model as their chosen approach to meet the new college- and career-ready requirements.

In defining their 2014–15 plan for Elementary Universal Instruction, Neenah Joint School District states that they have “embraced the balanced literacy framework for instruction because it provides emerging readers and writers with opportunities to read and write every day in a variety of ways” (2014).

Neenah’s balanced literacy plan gives teachers time in their first quarter for building routines to ensure a successful program that engages students in reading, writing, and speaking and listening. They also place emphasis on “community and stamina building” (2014). This demonstrates a focus on preparing students to be collaborative and college and career ready.
21st Century College and Career Ready Inspired Shifts in Balanced Literacy

Although the main components of balanced literacy have remained constant, 21st century college and career requirements have called for some important shifts in the implementation of these components.

1. **Gradual Release and Collaboration**

   One example is a shift in the gradual release model of instruction. During gradual release, the teacher scaffolds each lesson to first introduce a concept or skill (I Do), then gradually releases to students the responsibility of practicing that skill, first with the teacher (We Do), then independently (You Do). In balanced literacy, this model is followed not only through the scaffolded progression of lessons (modeled, shared, guided, independent) but is also followed within the steps of each individual lesson.


   - Focused Instruction: I Do
   - Guided Instruction: We Do
   - Collaborative Learning: You Do Together
   - Independent Learning: You Do Independently

   This is also reflective of the increased importance of collaborative conversations in the classroom with a direct link from collaboration to nurturing deeper comprehension. Teachers and students share a balance of equal opportunities to participate in the classroom during explicit instruction, engaged discussions, and productive group work either in whole-group or small-group activities (Archer and Hughes, 2011; Frey, Fisher, and Everlove, 2009). More rigorous demands for critical communication and collaboration in the 21st century workplace initiates the need for more intentional and consistent teacher-student and student-student communication than most classrooms experienced previously.

2. **Text Complexity, Close Reading, and Informational Text**

   Another shift in balanced literacy instruction has occurred in the complexity of the text and the approach to reading during the shared reading lesson. Shared reading must now be done with more-complex texts alongside a protocol of close listening and reading, with a focus on text-dependent questioning and citing text evidence.

   The increased text complexity of the shared read increases the importance of the read-aloud lesson that precedes it. In the read aloud, students receive modeled instruction for addressing these more complex texts.
The current focus on informational text also calls for the inclusion, in all reading lessons, of a balance of content-rich informational texts and literature selections that are read to students, with students, and by students.

Workshop teachers who use *Wonders* have access to a cutting-edge, rigorous curriculum that contains a strategic and rich balance of texts, resources, and instructional supports teachers need to embrace balanced literacy and prepare students to be college- and career-ready.

*Wonders* provides teachers with texts and resources for working with students in whole-group, small-group, as well as individually, while addressing more rigorous requirements and expectations for students.

**Assessment in a Balanced Literacy Classroom**

Assessment provides data about students’ performance that can and should be used to drive instruction. Teachers need to have multiple assessments in place to identify a student’s strengths and determine what instruction the student needs next.

Assessment is a critical component of the decision-making process within balanced literacy. To support teachers in their decision-making process, data are collected systematically. The goal of this data collection is to document change over time (Clay, 2001), as well as gather evidence of learning (Shea, Murray, & Harlin, 2005).

In a balanced literacy classroom, informal and ongoing assessments play a key role in monitoring student progress. Examples of these include anecdotal notes of teacher observations, running records and miscue analysis, retells and recounts, fluency checks, student journals and portfolios, writing samples, and student interviews.

Teacher observations of their students at work in whole groups, small groups, and independently in the classroom is one of the most valuable information sources for guiding their instructional decisions on a daily basis. Anecdotal notes enable a teacher to identify a student’s learning behavior and document authentic performance to guide next steps. It is recommended that teachers “have a clipboard with you at all times so you can document students’ literacy behaviors. Putting sticky notes on the clipboard is another way to keep observations” (Poliastro & McTague, 2015, p. 24).

In today’s classroom, the core principles of the balanced literacy model of instruction are not only viable but are an effective set of instructional approaches for student reading success in school, college, and career. The reading, writing, and word study components of *Wonders* support teaching a balanced literacy framework, while guiding students to truly be college- and career-ready for the world in which they will be living and working upon graduation from high school.
References


