What Should Schools and Districts Look for in an ELA Curriculum to Help Engage Students?

The key to engagement is relatability. Get students to relate to content with a curriculum that provides teachers with the tools to teach the way students like to learn—through rich, multimedia experiences and social media, along with meaningful points of entry. Students tend to do well when curricula provide attractive entry points.

Educators seeking a core 6–12 ELA curriculum should look for a program with lesson components that make the learning relevant. These include:

- Videos and movie-like trailers that bring core, classic, and contemporary texts to life and build excitement for reading
- A library of thousands of texts, ever-expanding, to include classics and build on their foundations with the continuous addition of new texts and excerpts that add breadth to the literature
- Hundreds of full-length works from which students can browse and make their own novel selection, including a variety of Spanish-language titles and authentic literature from diverse cultures
- Modeling of academic discussion to build critical-thinking skills
- Social media-style writing assignments that encourage students to form and share fact-based opinions in a safe environment

StudySync, an engaging and literature-rich 6–12 ELA core curriculum, developed in partnership with McGraw-Hill Education, was designed to help teachers provide points of entry to which Romano refers, and generate the curiosity necessary to create truly engaged students.

Lynsay Mills, 9th grade writing teacher and Dean of English at Sci Academy, founding school of Collegiate Academies, Recovery School District of Louisiana, says, “The Blasts (social media-style writing assignments) have helped students greatly with making the read-write connection on timely, relevant, and real-world issues. With these assignments, students are challenged to think critically and voice informed opinions on topics that matter.”

The purpose of this eBook is to answer educators’ questions about how to find the right curriculum to engage students and achieve higher ELA proficiency.
What Types of Instructional Formats Should an ELA Curriculum Provide to Ensure Students Relate to Content?

Seek a curriculum that gives students the same multimedia access they experience in their everyday lives.

Educators should look for curriculum, like StudySync, with content formats that:

- Use video with student presenters as a dominant means of engaging and modeling
- Can be accessed on any device and include downloadable apps for offline access to assignments
- Provide full print support for low-tech environments, including teachers’ editions and consumable student reading and writing companions
- Offer access to paperback novels for low-tech environments, in addition to digital texts
- Provide a variety of writing opportunities including short, social media-like writing assignments and peer reviews
- Offer podcasts and other audio content to support speaking and listening skills

According to Nancy Hoppe, 9th, 10th, and 11th-grade ELA teacher, Lincoln High School, Lincoln, CA, podcasting has proven an extremely engaging way to get students to relate to content and help them become more effective readers, writers, listeners, and speakers.

StudySync’s podcasts were introduced at the perfect time for Hoppe, modeling for students what makes an effective podcast. Here are six strategies Hoppe shared for guiding students in developing podcasts:

1. Identify topics by brainstorming
2. Challenge students to think outside of the box
3. Find the right platform
4. Write the story before recording the podcast
5. Tailor the podcast to the audience
6. Remind students to appeal to the ear

StudySync’s scripts for the “School of Thought” podcasts have become the model for Hoppe’s 9th and 10th grade ELA students in developing both their own writing and audio prompts.

A few examples of podcasts that Hoppe’s students have developed include: Is Football a Safe Sport?, The Mindset of a Runner, and Thoughts on Racial Discrimination.

Kate Hertz, English teacher, Geneva High School, Geneva, IL had been looking for digital solutions that would encourage more engaging student discussions and began piloting StudySync. She reports, “I’ve used StudySync with AP® students, struggling students, and everything in between, and I find that it gives all of them more control over their reading and writing skills.”

According to Hertz, the key is her students’ abilities to give authentic feedback through the anonymous peer reviews and the social media-like Blasts that encourage students to form and share opinions.

Similarly, Shannon Diven, 6th grade teacher, West View Elementary School, Pittsburgh, PA also found StudySync offered points of entry for students learning how to better have classroom discussions.

According to Diven, one feature of the curriculum that has been particularly impactful is StudySync® TV, with its high-quality videos modeling student collaboration and discussion. Diven said, “It changed the climate of my classroom discussions so much, because kids don’t necessarily know how to have an academic discussion. That needs to be taught.”

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What Differentiation Tools Should a 6–12 ELA Curriculum Offer to Help Teachers Reach Every Student?

Look for a curriculum with planning and teaching tools that help teachers to more efficiently and effectively differentiate instruction. Find a program, like StudySync, that includes:

- Content and activities that enable students to learn in the ways most comfortable to them, ranging from student consumables to personal devices
- A library containing diverse authors and content, searchable by Lexile®-level, grade level, standards, and more
- Targeted text selections to help differentiate learning while building the strength and stamina students need to tackle increasingly complex texts
- Digital text selections with embedded audio and video enhancement to ensure all students are equally engaged with rigorous content
- Leveled texts in units to support Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced English learners (ELs)
- Structured, leveled lessons with differentiated instruction to engage and support struggling readers and ELs
- Native Spanish fiction and non-fiction texts
- Audio playback of text with audio highlighting of text with tempo control, for students to see and hear how syntax and grammar shape language
- Interactive vocabulary instruction
- Lexile®-leveled, social media-like writing assignments, connecting students to current events

Doug Fisher, PhD and Dean of Faculty Affairs, Health Sciences High and Middle College, San Diego, CA, said, “When I ask teachers about StudySync, they say, ‘It’s easy,’ which is important to me. What they need is a resource that is not scripted, but helps them design amazing experiences for students. I was a little surprised. I thought it (StudySync) was good. I didn’t know it was going to be this great.”

Lynsay Mills, Sci Academy, explains how StudySync with all of its resources and tools, helps her accomplish differentiated learning goals in her 9th grade writing classes. She says, “StudySync has enabled me to do more quickly what the best educator in me wants to do. I am able to plan with more ease, which frees up my time so that I can focus on my instruction and work with my scholars individually to meet their learning needs.”

Catlin Tucker, English language arts teacher, Windsor High School, Windsor, CA discusses the benefits of blended learning models, like StudySync, to differentiate and personalize instruction. With blended learning models, she says, “Students have online resources at their disposal. If I connect them with a resource online, they can revisit that resource as many times as they need to be successful.”

She continues, “It gives them the time and the space to make sense of the information. And I can use online tools to personalize the practice they’re doing for where they are in their skill level, which is an incredible thing to be able to do. StudySync is one of Tucker’s go-to online resources.”
What Foundational Strategies Should Be the Basis for Building a Curriculum for Improved Student Performance?

Students perform better in a world they understand. Performance, like engagement, hinges on making material relevant to students and helping them take ownership of their learning.

Look for a curriculum, like StudySync, that:

- Meets students where they are, making them comfortable to ask questions, but challenging them to meet high expectations so they are less likely to be bored and disengaged.
- Provides extensive student collaboration opportunities and academic discussion that make the learning relevant, with:
  - Video (StudySync® TV and SkillsTV)
  - Current events assignments (Blasts)
  - Online anonymous peer reviews
  - Collaborative writing and research projects
- Includes multimedia tools that inspire students to learn on a deeper level

Lynsay Mills, Sci Academy, notes, “The students are finding the instant peer reviews extremely helpful. They can type in their assignments and collaborate in real time with their classmates. This engagement reinforces understanding and confidence when diving into complex texts. My students also love that the reviews are anonymous. This eases any apprehensions about writing authentic reviews.”

According to Director of Literacy for Collegiate Academies, Lisa Shea, the school looked to StudySync for tools to engage and inspire students with relatable and diverse resources. Efforts paid off.

Elizabeth Ellison, Robert C. Fisler School, emphasizes, that students, “have read and re-read such a great selection of texts and have become so confident in their abilities. They use literary terms and apply them because they have seen it modeled so well in StudySync by students they can relate to.”

Dr. Jeff Taylor, assistant superintendent for curriculum, assessment, and elementary education for North Hills School District, Pittsburgh, PA where 6th grade teacher, Shannon Diven, piloted StudySync, says, “We wanted to see if we could better engage students in ELA. I feel that we have.”

Taylor continues, “Before the pilot year, students in her (Diven’s) class were scoring at about 69 percent on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. After we implemented StudySync, it was about 90 percent, which is phenomenal in one year to see that much growth.” Diven continues to use and have success with the program.

Because students perform better in a world they understand, McGraw-Hill Education and StudySync have partnered to help teachers teach the way 6–12 ELA students like to learn.

See how StudySync can work in your classroom, school, or district.

Contact Your Rep
References

1 Romano, R. (2014, December 5). Personal interview.


mheonline.com/studysync