

Preface

Literacy educators have been in search of “what works” for decades. As a group, we’ve dedicated ourselves to students’ reading and writing (and speaking, listening, and viewing) development because we know that literacy can change lives. Our collective search for better ways to reach students and ensure that they develop literacy knowledge and skills has resulted in thousands and thousands of books, hundreds of thousands of research articles, and countless websites. So why another one?

For us, the answer is simple. Nearly all the things teachers do work when we ask what improves student achievement. But only a few things work at ensuring that students gain a full year’s worth of growth for a year of enrollment in school, and we think it’s time we focused on what works, what doesn’t work, and what can’t hurt. And we’ve turned to *Visible Learning* (Hattie, 2009) for help.

In part, this has been a personal journey. We (Nancy and Doug) engaged in literacy instruction in a wide range of settings, including preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools, for many years before we read *Visible Learning*. We have taught students who live in poverty, a wide range of English learners, students who are highly engaged in their own learning, students who are homeless, students with disabilities, students who grasp concepts almost instantly, and students who are not so motivated to be in school. Over the years, our classrooms have been wonderfully diverse and complex places for learning to occur. And we did a reasonably good job with developing students’ literacy.

Of course, we made mistakes as well, but all teachers do. Doug wishes he could find Anthony, a ninth grader from 2009, who just never got good

enough writing instruction to pass his classes. Today, Doug would do a better job. Nancy remembers a particular first grader who would only work on his onset and rime cards if Nancy played background music. Whatever it takes—that's the job of the teacher. We tried just about any instructional strategy that we could find to engage students in learning.

But then, along came *Visible Learning*. We've read the research, and we knew, for example, that vocabulary instruction works to improve student learning. We read the book and were pleased to see that many of the literacy approaches we recommended were included in this list of "what works best." We congratulated ourselves on knowing the research literature and trying to translate that into classroom practice. The list of effect sizes was useful in making the case that literacy educators can have a powerful impact on students' learning when they engage in specific actions. And it was useful to know that a great deal of students' learning was under the control of the teacher (so that we could help teachers take responsibility and reduce finger-pointing).

We started focusing on influences on student learning that had a reasonable impact. But we didn't have them organized in any particular way. As a result, we noticed that not all of these approaches worked equally well. We thought it had to be us because the research was there to support each of the routines we used. We weren't sure what to do, so we kept at it, engaging students in the best learning opportunities we could. We shared responsibility with them and guided their learning, such that more and more of our students became their own teachers, which is one of the major lessons learned from *Visible Learning*.

A chance encounter with John Hattie took us to the next level. John talked about the value of matching specific instructional routines, procedures, or strategies with the appropriate phase of students' learning. Of course, we knew about Bloom's taxonomy and Webb's depth of knowledge. But this was a bit different. John said that students have to develop surface-level learning if they are ever going to go deep. And we know that deep learning can facilitate transfer, which has been our goal all along.