

Activating the Rigor in Your ELA Curriculum Through the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning



Pictured above: Students from partner school [William D. Moseley Elementary](#) actively engage in analyzing text and citing evidence.

By: [Meg Bowen](#)

Why High-Quality Curriculum Alone Isn't Enough for Student Success

After allocating considerable financial resources to purchase a cutting-edge, standards-based English Language Arts adopted curriculum, have you observed

little to no improvement in student achievement outcomes? If so, you're not alone. Many curriculum offices across the country are experiencing that same sense of disappointment and disillusionment. If investing in high-quality curriculum resources isn't the way to ensure all students receive rigorous core instruction, what is?

In my former role as a district-level curriculum director, I was faced with this same dilemma. While the adopted curriculum resources are part of the solution, they are not the entire answer. The key lies in combining **high-quality instructional materials with a research-based, student-led model of instruction.**

The Missing Link: Pairing Curriculum with Effective Pedagogy

Instructional Empowerment's [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#)[™] provides the methodology to maximize the impact of your English Language Arts curriculum. It equips teachers with the tools, resources, and support needed to make the shift from teacher-directed instruction to student-led team learning.

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning is not a curriculum, but instead an instructional approach that elevates any adopted curriculum resource, promoting critical thinking, inquiry, and student agency. Imagine walking into a classroom and hearing students engaged in academic discourse with their peers and debating the meaning of a text, rather than sitting disengaged and passively listening as the teacher tells students what the author was trying to convey.

Example: ELA Task in Teacher-Directed vs. Student-Led Team Learning

The same lesson from the same curriculum can result in a totally different student learning experience, depending on which model of instruction you implement.

Traditional Teacher-Directed Instruction: The teacher gives a lecture explaining the rhetorical strategies used in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, outlining how ethos, pathos, and logos are used to persuade the audience. Students then fill out a chart matching quotes to rhetorical devices to prove they understand the concept.

Student-Led Team Learning: The teacher gives an abbreviated overview, only introducing the rhetorical terms, then poses an open-ended question: "How does Martin Luther King Jr. use language to inspire hope and call for action in his audience?" Students work in teams, using resources on rhetorical strategies and analyzing the text to identify the strategies. They discuss how each strategy contributes to the speech's message, debating their interpretations with peers and supporting their ideas with evidence. They discover connections to past learning and the real world as they work within their teams, making the learning more memorable, rather than passively receiving the information from the teacher and recalling it on a chart.

Increasing All Students' Access to Your ELA Curriculum

How does the transformation into rigorous classrooms take place?

- **Helping Every Teacher Become a Critical Consumer:** Instead of following the scripted teacher's manual and using the adopted resource as the curriculum, educators learn how to become critical consumers of the adopted ELA resources through the [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#). Teachers develop the expert skills of selecting questions and tasks that will create the conditions for productive struggle as student teams tackle the task.
- **Developing Every Student as an Independent Critical Thinker:** Student teams access resources from the adopted materials to locate evidence, explore relevant texts, and apply their learning to new situations. The team structures and supports within the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

empower students to take an active role in their learning without needing to rely upon the teacher to suggest materials.

When the teacher is no longer the gatekeeper to student resources and team tasks are rigorous and engaging, **student agency and achievement soars**.

Elevating ELA Lesson Planning Through the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

Lesson planning becomes a collaborative learning experience for teachers as they view the adopted ELA resources through the lens of the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning. This process involves:

- **Lively Discussions in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):** The [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#) supports teachers in collaborating and identifying which tasks will render student evidence demonstrating mastery of the learning target.
- **Curating Content Resources:** Teachers learn strategies for selecting and organizing the content resources that student teams will use to complete the task.
- **Designing for Interdependence:** Teachers become experts at finding ways to ensure the task demands interdependence, requiring contributions from all team members to reach a solution. The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning includes structures to ensure equal participation of all students.

Aligning with Text-First Planning to Develop Students' Skills

Districts that have embraced text-first planning find the [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#) well-suited for that approach. The model provides the time and

structure needed to examine the depths of complex text through close reading coupled with rigorous tasks.

According to K-12 literacy experts Meredith Liben and Susan Pimental (2021), a text-centered approach develops students' reading comprehension skills by teaching them how to:

- Parse complex syntax
- Build content vocabulary
- Develop a standard of coherence (the expectation that what they read should make sense)
- Grow their general knowledge of the world

"I'm hearing fewer teachers saying 'my kids can't do that' because when you put students in teams with roles, it's amazing what they can do. Some kids are comfortable with verbalizing their ideas and thinking, but struggle with accessing the text or understanding what the task involves. The team can help them with that part. The kids are able to do rigorous work because of the teaming. I'm seeing teachers stepping out of the way. Kids are accountable to the team more than to the teacher; if the task is engaging and well designed, they want to do their part. I have seen kids who don't normally participate or are not as comfortable participating in a whole class setting, who will do their part for their team. That's always satisfying."

- Lisa Geist, ELA and Social Studies Instructional Coach, [Walnut Middle School](#)

Transformative ELA Outcomes for Teachers and Students Through the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

The teacher's role evolves from director, to facilitator, to coach, and eventually to an advisor/consultant in the ELA classroom as part of the [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#). Through this transformation, many educators rediscover the joy that initially drew them to this profession. The results of this instructional shift include:

- **Increased Student Engagement:** Students are no longer silently waiting for answers from the teacher. They are actively engaging with the ELA content resources, collaboratively analyzing text, and making connections between what they are reading and real-world issues.
- **Positive Student Behavior:** As students become deeply engaged in their learning and feel they are important members of their teams, they no longer exhibit challenging behaviors out of boredom.
- **Improved Test Preparedness:** State testing is no longer fraught with anxiety, as students have been reading challenging texts, citing evidence, and justifying responses every day in class.
- **Consistent Achievement Growth:** Student performance on assessments reflects the incredible gains teachers have observed over the course of the year. Scores are no longer unpredictable, but align with students' consistent growth in reading comprehension, critical thinking, and writing skills.

"I ultimately saw a big difference in my classroom as a community. I saw students that had never even interacted with each other, interacting. I saw students that had previously been quiet voice their opinions. It led to some really phenomenal higher-level thinking and additional questioning about the text and how the text related to their lives."

– [Morgan Zinni](#), Teacher, [Woonsocket High School](#)

Create Lasting Change in Every ELA Classroom, for Every Student

The positive outcomes described above are not solely the result of adopting a new ELA curriculum. Instead, the transformation comes from implementing the curriculum along with a pedagogical shift to the [Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning](#). Instructional Empowerment has years of experience implementing and supporting districts to adopt this approach and create a self-sustaining system. Together, we can ensure **ALL students** receive the rich, rigorous, and engaging ELA education that they deserve.

About the Author: Meg Bowen

Meg Bowen, M. Ed., has spent more than thirty years in the field of education serving students, teachers, and administrators in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and Florida. A graduate of the University of North Carolina Charlotte and James Madison University, Ms. Bowen completed doctoral coursework in curriculum at the University of Maryland.

Ms. Bowen has developed curriculum and supported its implementation in both elementary and secondary settings. After serving for several years as Assistant Principal and Principal, she became the Director of Elementary Curriculum for one of the nation's largest school districts. Ms. Bowen now serves as the Executive Director of Customer Experience and Growth at Instructional Empowerment (IE), where she works diligently to ensure districts value partnering with IE so much that they continue to collaborate with us even after they achieve their initial goals.

She encourages partner schools to reach and achieve model school status, where all students are engaged in rigorous learning activities and achieve their full potential.

References

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