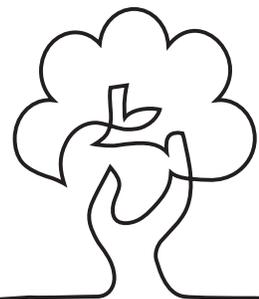


Amplify^{ELA}



Seven Strategies for Engaging Middle-Schoolers in Complex Texts



Amplify.

Most of us remember our middle school years vividly (if not fondly): filled with physical, social and emotional surprises that lurked behind every corner, waiting to distract us from things like schoolwork.

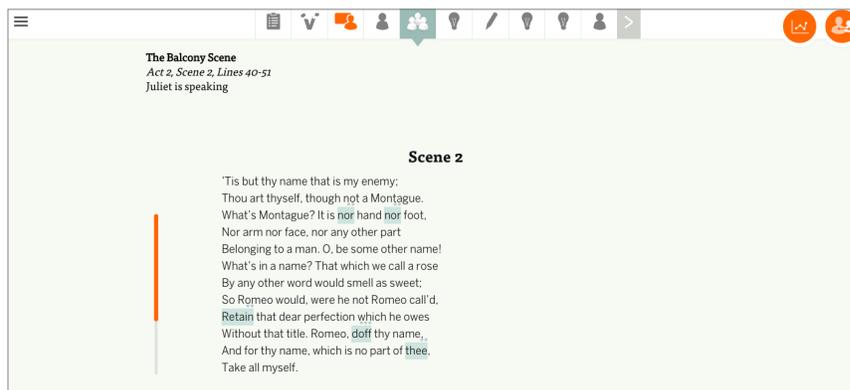
For today's middle-schoolers, there's also a whole new world of distractions: the constant influx of digital information and social media, begging to be consumed now.

That's a lot for English teachers to compete with, as they attempt to teach their students the skills required by new college- and career-readiness standards. With all that's going on in middle-schoolers' lives, what are the best ways to keep them engaged and focused, and to help them develop strong analytical, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills?

At the heart of the new standards is the activity of close reading: digging deeply into texts, analyzing every detail, and grasping both literal and inferential meanings. Here are seven principles to consider when engaging today's middle school students in the close reading of complex texts.

1. Dive deeply into excerpts, instead of tackling an overwhelmingly long block of text.

Whether it's "Hamlet" or the Declaration of Independence, complex texts can seem impenetrable to a middle-schooler and also, for that matter, a teacher. In the case of a Shakespeare play, a teacher can spend an inordinate amount of time getting the students through all the text and working through the plot and the sub-plots, leaving no time to go deep into the language and the drama of one compelling moment.



The screenshot shows a digital reading interface for a scene from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The title is "The Balcony Scene" with the subtitle "Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 40-51" and "Juliet is speaking". The scene is titled "Scene 2" and the text reads: "Tis but thy name that is my enemy: Thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What's Montague? It is nor hand nor foot, Nor arm nor face, nor any other part Belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other word would smell as sweet: So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd. Retain that dear perfection which he owes Without that title, Romeo, doff thy name, And for thy name, which is no part of thee, Take all myself."

"Reading an entire Shakespeare play isn't as important as giving students the tools and familiarity they need to gain confidence in Shakespeare's language," says Heather White, English professor at the University of Alabama and senior scholar at Amplify. "Choose

a handful of excerpts that contain the richest language, and include some of the play's most famous lines and scenes. Make sure they're not too long, maybe 40 lines or less each, and read them in class together; don't assign the reading as homework."

By keeping excerpts short, the teacher and students can put the language under a microscope, and can attend to how the language shapes the characters, and how the characters shape the scene. They might even notice, for example, that Romeo and Juliet in Act 1, Scene 5 are flirting their way to the completion of their own little sonnet, tucked into the larger play.

2. Give all students access to the same complex text, but vary the scaffolding support.

Rather than assigning different texts to students based on their abilities, make every effort to show all students that they can tackle the same excerpts from the same texts. Providing easier texts to struggling students can keep them from rising above reading level, says Deborah Sabin, senior director of instructional design at Amplify and key contributor to the Amplify ELA all-digital core curriculum for grades 6-8. “Spare nothing at the expense of authentic original texts, but offer extensive scaffolding along the way.”

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That scaffolding can be dialed up or down depending on each student’s need. So, for example, a struggling student could be given additional text clues to help emphasize important parts of the language, or audio files to aid in digesting the excerpts.

The key is to offer various scaffolded paths, says Judy Willis, neurologist and former middle school teacher.

“Every student should know that scaffolding lowers the barriers, not the bar,” Willis says, “and that there are multiple ways of achieving mastery, not just one way.” Note that a digital

curriculum can provide these differentiated scaffolds more discreetly than a paper curriculum can — instead of the teacher handing visibly different resources to different students, the software can provide the scaffolding just when it is needed, without anyone else needing to know.

3. Give students opportunities to represent the text in a variety of ways.

Sometimes words on paper, or words on a tablet, don’t mean much the first time through. But when those words are explored in different ways, such as through student role-playing, dramatizations by professional actors, memorization, visualization, graphical organization or paraphrasing, suddenly the meaning of the text, or a richer analysis of it, comes to light.

“Many of us have the experience of reading a play on a page and not following it, and then we see a performance of those same lines and think, ‘Now I totally get it,’” White says. “Once a live person says it, it just clicks.”

That’s why Amplify partnered with WordPlay Shakespeare for its seventh-grade ELA unit on “Romeo and Juliet.” WordPlay’s classically trained Shakespearean actors

perform each of the excerpts right alongside the text on students' screens as they are reading them, so there is no need to leave the curriculum platform to view the performance.

Students gain new perspectives on the language through these dramatizations, White says; the choices an actor makes in his or her performance can shade the meaning of the language, and students enjoy studying and debating these nuances.

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in pray'r.

ROMEO
100 O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do,
They pray—grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET
Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO
Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.

Students can also explore the meaning of text in other ways, too, by creating artwork of it, for example, or producing a video of it, Willis says.

“Knowledge of something has to be deep in order to be able to symbolize it,” she says. “And the cool thing is, each time you experience an idea through a different

sensory modality, it is stored in a different part of your cortex, but they're all connected — so when you retrieve one memory, like the way you performed a concept in a skit, suddenly the way you heard that concept, wrote about it, recorded it, it all comes together to give you a deeper understanding.”

4. Provide game-like activities to help students translate the text.

ROMEO
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To reinforce what students are learning about a text, relevant games that tackle related vocabulary or syntax are always fun and rewarding options.

The Amplify ELA all-digital curriculum includes game-like activities that are embedded in specific lesson units, such as an activity called “Fill in the Bard” in its “Romeo and Juliet” unit. In this activity, students must come up with synonyms to words they’ve just studied in the play. For example, while studying

Act 3, Scene 1, students might replace Romeo’s underlined words in this excerpt with synonyms such as these found in parentheses:

“This gentleman, the prince’s near ally, (supporter)
My very friend, hath got his mortal (fatal) hurt
In my behalf (as my representative); my reputation stain’d (dishonored)
With Tybalt’s slander

Once they've mastered this, they must then paraphrase lines and whole passages they have read, and must explain their strategies and build arguments for their choices.

Games give students incentives to raise the bar, sometimes without even realizing it.

“Our brains are programmed to continue to exert effort when we get feedback that achievement is made, even the smallest amount,” Willis says. “That’s what learning games can help do. “They provide encouragement, and also allow students to progress at their own levels.”

5. Give students opportunities to self-direct.

During the middle school years, students begin to enjoy becoming independent, self-directed learners. Project-based learning allows students to take more control of their learning, and with that often comes more ownership and motivation.

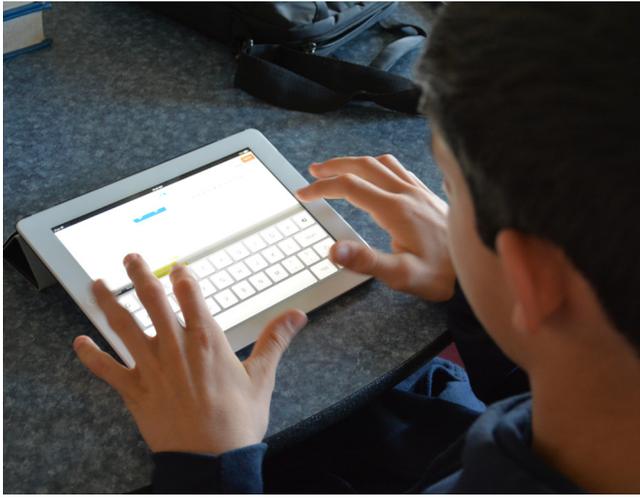


An example of a project-based activity is Amplify’s Quests for the Core, in which students are grouped into teams that are charged with solving a problem or mystery, reading and analyzing complex texts to help them achieve their goal. For example, in the Edgar Allan Poe quest, students are placed at the scene of a fictional murder mystery. Through careful sleuthing they must figure out: Who killed Poe? Each team member is assigned a character in the story and must study his or her anthology, as well as reports, photos and other materials surrounding Poe’s death. After close analysis of all the information before them, they then work to solve the mystery, citing evidence and formulating arguments to make their case.

6. Have students write and write, and write some more throughout the unit.

“A growing body of research shows that the understanding of reading develops in the act of writing about the text,” Sabin says.

Writing assignments can take on many different forms. Low-stakes responses, in short form, can be written by students as they're reading the text, allowing them to relearn and interpret the text in their own words. These responses also provide teachers with an informal assessment, allowing them to gauge each student's level of critical thinking.



Long-form essays can be used to help students learn to make a claim and support it with textual evidence; to learn to revise and write an introduction; and to write and edit a conclusion.

7. Keep the feedback flowing, and make sure it's constructive.

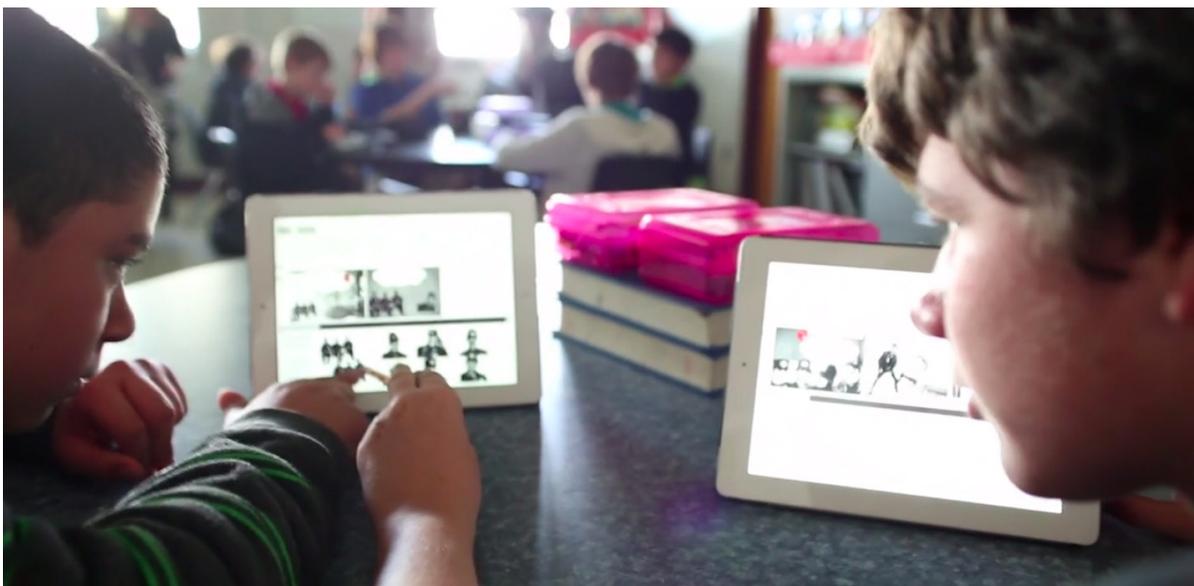
Because of where middle-schoolers are developmentally, long-term goals can be a challenge. Their focus is on the here and now, so a teacher's constant, targeted feedback can

keep students engaged and motivated to keep trying.

"The feedback doesn't have to be extensive, or cover a piece of writing they've been working on for a whole week," Sabin says. "Rather, zero in on a specific skill you've been teaching and how the student used it in an effective way."

Instead of posting one student's whole essay on the bulletin board, Sabin suggests keeping a constantly rotating wall of various students' work — just two to five sentences that are exemplary of the skills they are currently practicing in class. And rather than scheduling 30-minute conferences to review students' completed essays, teachers might opt for 30-second, over-the-shoulder powwows while the students are writing, she says.

Peer feedback and collaboration also can be effective, particularly for middle-schoolers, but only if carefully guided, Sabin says. In their stage of social-emotional development, their peers often have more influence than their parents or teachers.



“To hear a peer say, ‘You did something that made an impact on me,’ that’s super motivating, probably more so in middle school than at any other time in life,” Sabin says. “So you should harness that engagement with peers, but make sure it’s a supportive, inclusive environment. It can be so powerful to them, but also so devastating if done the wrong way.”

Amplify ELA establishes clear guidelines for peer feedback. For example, students are given “response starters” (e.g. “You created a clear picture in my mind when you wrote ____” or “I saw what you meant about ____ when you wrote ____”) to help them stay on point, and to be constructive.

“You want the kids to really feel they’re in an environment where they can discuss their ideas and argue them and defend them,” Sabin says. “That has to happen in a place where they won’t feel attacked or belittled, or continually judged for their ideas.”

About Amplify ELA

Amplify ELA is an all-digital core curriculum for grades 6-8 that combines the rigor of college- and career-readiness standards with rich media and activities designed for the digital native. Our groundbreaking program inspires today’s students to read more critically and write more vividly.

The Amplify ELA program is a departure from the dusty old textbooks of the past. Our curriculum is all digital, which means that both teacher and students are using devices and interact with each other on a shared platform during class. As a Web-based program, teaching and learning can occur across a wide variety of devices, including tablets, laptops and desktops.

Our carefully sequenced digital lessons provide a year’s worth of instruction and include not only reading complex texts and challenging writing assignments, but also many important features made possible only by technology:

- **Robust engagement tools**, including rich media featuring stars of stage and screen, embedded apps, games and a virtual library.
- **Classroom orchestration tools** that allow teachers to manage a class full of devices, interact with students while they’re engaged in silent reading and capture student work in the moment.
- **Feedback tools** that allow teachers to provide targeted and immediate support to improve students’ skill development in real time.
- **Integrated assessments**, including embedded progress monitoring, formative and summative assessments.



To learn more, go to
www.amplify.com/curriculum/amplifyela