

# Better Reading Now: 50 ready-to-use teaching strategies to engage students, deepen comprehension, and nurture a love of reading

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## *Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **Better Reading Now: 50 ready-to-use teaching strategies to engage students, deepen comprehension, and nurture a love of reading**

By Larry Swartz

Pembroke Publishers Limited, 2021, 158 pages

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#### **Reviewed by:**

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If you were to predict the premise of *Better Reading Now: 50 ready-to-use teaching strategies to engage students, deepen comprehension, and nurture a love of reading* by Larry Swartz, you would probably deduce that this book would include practical strategies for elementary teachers to help guide students through the reading process, deepen their comprehension, and develop critical, life-long readers, and you would be correct! Foundational thought for this book is based on Swartz's experiences as a teacher, professor, and classroom guest. He holds firm to transactional theory where meaning lies in the transaction and connection between reader, writer, and text (Rosenblatt, 1978). The focus of the book is to provide teachers with strategies to help students make sense and be critical of what they read so they can move into divergent, critical, and deeper levels of thinking, feeling, and learning.

This book offers a “grab bag of diverse classroom-tested activities to address the diverse needs of students” (p. 10). Within this context, teachers are invited to choose strategies that will address individual student and curriculum needs and explore how to explicitly teach the reading process. With explicit teaching becoming recognized as an essential part of helping students make sense of what they read, these strategies will fit well into current literacy classrooms (Spear-Swerling, 2019). It is apparent that Swartz is passionate about the inclusion of high-quality books as the foundation for developing competent and critical readers as he includes a plethora of current and accessible literature for each strategy and in the conclusion section.

This book begins with a one-page checklist of questions pertaining to the reader's current literacy program. This helps to target specific strengths of a teacher's current literacy practice and possible areas of needed growth. Six subsequent chapters are all prefaced with a positive "Let's": Let's Read, Let's Think, Let's Write, Let's Talk, Let's Create, and Let's Inquire. Each chapter begins by situating within academic literature to understand why the content is important to consider when aspiring to support and create critical, life-long readers. A section focusing on considerations for teachers to ponder is also included in this chapter introduction. These considerations provide essential ideas or thoughts on the chapter content in a concise manner. For example, in chapter five, Let's Create, Swartz reviews the six essential artistic modes that will form the underlying basis of the chapter.

Chapter one, Let's Read, focuses on the importance of students reading a wide variety of quality, student-chosen books to support meaning-making for these learners. Eight different teaching strategies are shared including one strategy focusing on examining a book title as an essential text feature. Chapter two, Let's Think, focuses on how to help students become independent readers who think carefully about what they read. Understanding how to make sense of the text through a variety of modes such as clarifying, modifying, revising, predicting, inferring, and extending are discussed. Chapters three and four, Let's Write and Let's Talk, reiterate the importance of the connection between reading and writing and situate talk as "thought out loud" (p. 76). A multitude of strategies such as quick-writes, graphic organizers, literature circles, choral dramatization, and reader's theater are shared as ways to extend students' ability to critically analyze text through writing and talking. Using varied artistic modes to teach comprehension is the focus of chapter five. Artistic expression and critical analysis skills are deepened when visual arts, music, drama, dance, and media are woven seamlessly into teaching reading comprehension. Eleven strategies are shared in this chapter including the use of tableau, video journaling, and makerspace to enliven the love of reading. Finally, chapter six, Let's Inquire, speaks to the importance of inquiry-based learning. When students are encouraged to inquire about something of interest, they become immersed in reading and writing experiences. Engaging in authentic inquiry, through such strategies as KWL charts or bibliography creation, creates better readers and writers along with capacity to create new knowledge.

From my point of view, the book's only weakness is that some instructional "strategies" are more like approaches. From my own teaching experience, when I tried to visualize how a given strategy would look in a classroom, some of Swartz's strategies would need to be included in several teacher-created lessons over the year while other strategies could be self-contained lessons. For example, judging a book by its cover (pp. 14-15) is an approach that will need to be included within several lessons, whereas a strategy like reader's theatre (pp. 98-100) leans towards being a self-contained set of lessons or a unit. A clarification between the two may help busy educators when trying to discern how to incorporate Swartz's suggestions in the classroom.

Nevertheless, the strengths of this teaching resource are plentiful. To begin, the strategies listed in each chapter are written in a consistent format which makes it easy to find the information and provides clarity on the essence of the strategy, why use it, and how to use it. A list of teaching tips with classroom exemplars solidify how to take the strategy into the classroom. Secondly, after reading the introduction, it became clear that it would not be detrimental to understanding if one chose only pertinent sections of the book to read as each chapter contains stand-alone content. For me, the most useful inclusion in this resource is the connection to literature. In almost every strategy throughout the book, Swartz lists current literature to use as a basis for teaching the concept. The suggested literature is current, diverse, and relevant to learners of today. On the heels of embedded literature suggestions in each chapter is the Dr. Larry Recommends literature list at the end of the book. Recognizing that such lists need constant revision, he shares his website name in this section. The website appears current and up to date. This easy to navigate online resource includes recommendations for fiction (ages 9-12), young adult, grown-up, Canadian, and picture books.

*Better Reading Now* is an asset to the world of teaching reading and writing. Teachers at all levels appreciate field-tested resources which include practical examples and evidence-based research. Swartz's book provides such a balance between academic research and practical suggestions on what each strategy will look like in an elementary classroom.

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