



RESEARCH for *ACTION*

A VIEW FROM THE INSIDE:
Teachers' Perceptions
and Use of the LDC Framework

October • 2011

Special thank you to practitioners

This research would not have been possible without the participation of teachers and other educators, who shared their experiences with the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) initiative with Research for Action (RFA) staff.

The following school districts and networks of schools participated in this research: Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District (NC), Elizabethtown Area School District (PA), Forsyth County Schools (GA), Hillsborough County Public Schools (FL), Kenton County School District (KY), Lebanon School District (PA), Worcester Public Schools (MA), and New Tech Network. Teachers in all sites were invited to complete the survey, while a smaller sample participated in site visits.

Fifty-nine teachers, instructional coaches, special education teachers, and other educators in four school districts participated in RFA's site visits, which included interviews, some observations of module instruction, and professional development. They generously opened their classrooms and gave of their planning periods, lunch breaks, and afterschool time to share their experiences with RFA staff.

Ninety-six English/language arts (ELA), science, and social studies teachers in seven school districts and one school network took time out of their busy, end-of-the-school-year schedules to complete RFA's teacher survey.

Many district and school administrators also participated in this study and helped to organize fieldwork. Their participation was invaluable.

RFA would like to thank all educators who participated in this study. We hope that you find some value in this guide; it was produced with you in mind.



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Introduction

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has invested in the development and dissemination of instructional tools to support teachers' incorporation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) into their classroom instruction. Literacy experts have developed a framework and a set of templates that teachers and other educators can use to develop content area modules focused on high-quality writing tasks closely tied to subject area texts.

The Foundation has asked RFA to study the early adoption of the framework, focusing particularly on teachers' response to and use of the framework. The framework was piloted in urban, rural and suburban school districts in six states and two national networks of schools/teachers during the 2010-11 school year.

How to read this booklet

This booklet is a synthesis of what we learned from practitioners over the course of the first pilot year, 2010-11. It highlights how LDC worked in schools, including what to expect when using the framework and promising practices, as well as teachers' early impressions about LDC's impact on their teaching and student learning. We hope that this information will better prepare other teachers as they seek to use the LDC framework. We hope, too, that this booklet will generate questions and comments and serve as a catalyst for discussion within your school.

What can you expect in using the LDC tools?

Last year, teachers said:

They were enthusiastic about their work with LDC. When asked if participation in the LDC initiative had been worth the time and effort involved, all teachers said yes, with a small number qualifying their 'yes' response with suggestions for improvement or concerns. As a result of their participation, teachers reported a positive impact on their instruction, early indicators of increased student learning, and the development of robust professional learning communities that sometimes cut across content areas and grade levels. The small group that expressed concerns named teacher autonomy and LDC's alignment with their state test when they responded to this interview question.



Definitely, I've learned a lot about the writing process and students, and using resources.

— middle school ELA teacher

Yes, I think it was worth it. I was hoodwinked when they told me this would be easy [and] it won't take any time [but] I think it was well worth the time and effort.

— middle school social studies teacher

Their beliefs about teaching literacy were aligned with the goals of LDC.

- 99% of survey respondents agreed that content area teachers (e.g., ELA, science and social studies) need to also teach literacy.
- 99% of survey respondents agreed that writing assignments can help their students develop deeper understanding of important concepts across content areas.

The LDC framework has become an important component of their instructional repertoire.

But there is still room for growth in terms of deep integration of LDC into teachers' practice.

They were committed to using the LDC framework in the 2011-12 school year.

- Almost all of the teachers surveyed (96%) said that they planned to make improvements in how they use modules next year.
- More than three-quarters say they look forward to teaching and developing modules next year.

They reevaluated their beliefs about what students can accomplish and increased their expectations of students' writing. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of teachers reported that using modules has raised their expectations for students' writing.

They benefited from a range of supports from a variety of sources. Support included formal professional development with the LDC design team or district project lead, informal meetings with colleagues and district/regional leaders, and encouragement and structural support from school leaders. Some district/school leaders also observed classes during module instruction and provided teachers with feedback. All sources of support were instrumental in developing teachers' understanding of the framework and how to develop and/or teach a module. The chart below shows the range of key players who visited teachers' classrooms during module instruction or provided teachers with feedback.



I never realized that they would actually be able to write a decent paper. In the past, telling them to do it [write a paper], you wouldn't get very many to do it... I actually got really quality pieces from [the modules].

— high school social studies teacher

I was surprised at their ability to independently read something. I'm hesitant to trust them to read and comprehend independently. So, I was surprised that a lot were able to highlight what they needed in an article. I was also surprised at their ability to research independently.

— middle school ELA teacher

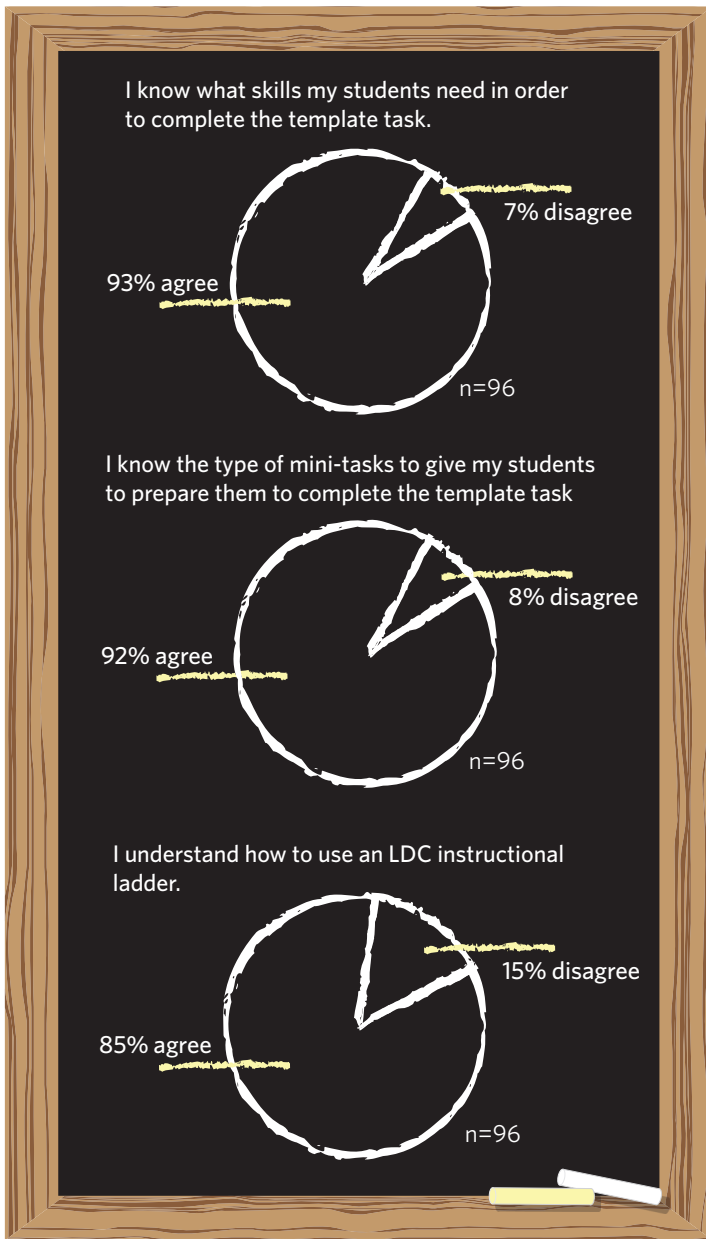
Key player	Visited during module instruction	Offered feedback about teaching a module
District/regional LDC project lead	22%	13%
Principal	21%	13%
Instructional coach	16%	19%
LDC technical assistance provider	14%	17%

n=96

Developing and using LDC modules

What to expect

Collaborating with colleagues is key. Teachers said that collaboration was important in making the LDC work successfully; many called it the most useful aspect of professional development. One district administrator said, “We have seen teachers develop collaborative communities across disciplines...We speak the same language now [through LDC] and we can work more systematically.”



Learning to develop and use modules takes time.

Teachers had a better sense of pacing for the modules, as well as how to select appropriate reading materials, how to use the module’s instructional ladder, and how to differentiate instruction as the year progressed. As teachers developed modules, it became easier and less

time-consuming. Implementing modules also became easier; teachers made adjustments based on their earlier experiences, students knew what to expect, and they were more willing to engage in the writing process.

Comfort levels about using the LDC framework increased over time. In the first part of the year, many teachers had questions about how to use the ladder and said they found the template difficult to navigate. (Note: the module template has since been revised.) Teachers became more knowledgeable about providing scaffolding for students to complete the template task, which included developing an instructional ladder and appropriate mini-tasks.

Promising practices

Developing modules helped to build a strong understanding of framework.

When teachers new to LDC taught modules that they did not develop, implementation was more challenging. They experienced more difficulty adjusting the pacing and assignments to meet their students’ needs. Future research will investigate whether a strong understanding of the framework can also be built through professional development.

Teachers used a variety of methods to differentiate module instruction to better meet student needs:

- Using the levels (L1, L2 and L3) present in most template tasks to allow students to tackle writing assignments with varying levels of complexity.

- Providing students with different readings, including giving advanced students additional and more complex readings and struggling readers fewer, easier-to-read texts. Some teachers gave English Language Learners (ELLs) access to texts in their native language.
- Assigning struggling literacy learners to write shorter pieces than more advanced classmates.
- Providing some students extended time to complete the writing.
- Pairing or grouping students for reading, discussion, and in-class tasks so that stronger readers and writers could support weaker ones.
- Providing more scaffolding (e.g., sentence starters and feedback for struggling students).
- Working with a special education or ELL teacher to provide additional support for special education students and ELL students.

What to watch for

Two aspects of module development posed ongoing challenges:

- **Selecting the template task focus and question.** Teachers noted that the template task question needs to be engaging, related to course content and researchable.
- **Finding appropriate readings.** Finding readings that are at the right level for students and also are content-rich can be a challenge. For an argumentative essay task, it can be challenging to find readings that relate to both sides of an argument.

There was some tension between covering curriculum content and teaching modules.

Thirty-eight (38%) of teachers surveyed said that teaching modules takes too much time away from covering required curriculum topics. At the same time, many teachers were convinced that student learning in the modules justified spending the time, but they needed assistance in balancing these

competing demands. In two sites, some teachers began experimenting with co-teaching modules with a peer. For example, students would conduct research in an ELA classroom, and then bring that information to science class to use in their science writing task.

Time pressure was an obstacle to integrating module instruction with existing curriculum.

- One-quarter of survey respondents said that science and social studies teachers did not have time to teach reading and writing.
- Three-quarters of teachers surveyed agreed that it is difficult to find time to respond to student writing.
- Many teachers felt that their lack of experience with the first module caused them to spend additional time (e.g., 3-4 weeks) completing the module, putting them behind for much of the year.

There was still some confusion about using the LDC ladder template at the end of the school year.

In an open-ended survey question asking teachers what additional supports and training would be useful for using the LDC framework, 21% of teachers who responded (11 out of 53) named problems with the module template. Sample responses:

The template or "ladder" to create the modules is difficult to use. I think it needs to be simplified a bit more and made more user friendly.

When introducing the ladder template to new LDC members, give teachers examples of work that are cross-curricular and span the grades the teachers have in front of them. The electronic ladder template was difficult for me to manipulate and it led to me wasting much time before finally recreating the ladder to something that was more beneficial for me.

Teaching writing in the LDC initiative

What to expect

Sites approached scoring LDC student work in multiple ways. In some sites, most teachers used rubrics to review and score student writing. Some teachers relied on the LDC rubric alone, while others combined existing district or school rubrics with the LDC rubric. Scoring the LDC student work was initially a challenge, but most teachers made progress over the course of the school year.

Promising practices

Having other writing programs in place provided teachers with complementary support for LDC. Teachers were able to successfully incorporate strategies from other, district-adopted programs into LDC. For example, these programs provided mini-tasks to integrate into the instructional ladder, as well as strategies for scoring writing.

Participating in LDC helped teachers integrate more writing into their practice.

More than 80% of teachers surveyed said that using modules helped them develop new ways to teach literacy skills in their content area, and that using modules helped them to provide students with more detailed feedback (e.g., about their writing).

Our research indicated that science and social studies teachers experienced a significant increase in their degree of confidence and knowledge about teaching and responding to student writing.

I kind of shied away from assigning research papers because, not being specifically trained in ELA, I wasn't sure how to grade them... Understanding the LDC rubric, going through the first to the second module, I've grown as a teacher on teaching kids how to research and [I] know more about how to score it and know a well written paper.

— middle school social studies teacher

I feel like I've gotten stronger [teaching content writing] - different ways to organize, different strategies that work...I really learned how to break it down step by step.

— middle school science teacher

What to watch for

At the end of Year 1, some teachers still felt that they lacked sufficient knowledge about teaching writing. Forty-three percent (43%) of teachers were unsure about how best to give productive feedback about student writing. While many teachers said they were getting better at teaching and responding to writing, they still found it to be challenging. They wanted further support and professional development focused on how to help students improve their writing.

LDC's influence on teacher practice

Teachers provided early examples of how the initiative influenced their practice.

What to expect

LDC catalyzed new knowledge and changed practice. Teachers felt that LDC:

- Enhanced their ability to engage students;
- Created higher expectations for student learning;
- Increased knowledge and skills for module implementation;
- Supported effective instruction of both writing and content; and
- Increased use of formative assessment and knowledge about students' literacy skills.

Modules provided teachers with new and effective strategies for teaching subject content. A high school social studies teacher noted, "It [module instruction] deepened their [students'] learning of content. We're spending much more time reading instead of me giving notes. It's not them just listening, they're actually doing."

Mini-tasks within the module can be effective formative assessments. Teachers internalized the criteria for different levels of writing mastery and communicated them to students.

One middle school social studies teacher stated:

At first my colleague and I said, these final papers aren't that much better than the first ones. But then we realized a lot of the 'not yet's' were very close to 'meets expectations' whereas before it was very apparent they were 'not yet's.' And a lot of the 'meets expectations' were close to 'advanced.' I was writing a lot of comments on student papers that said, could be...[the next level] if... [you did this/this were different].

Modules contributed to teachers developing deeper knowledge about students as readers and writers.

At least three-quarters of teachers surveyed said that using modules helped them:

- Learn new ways to include formative assessment in their classes (75%).
- Learn detailed information about their students' literacy strengths and weaknesses (88%).

Future research will look at how teachers are using formative information about students gained from the modules to inform instruction.

What to expect

Modules enhance teachers' ability to engage students with a range of literacy abilities.

A majority of teachers surveyed (80%) reported that modules helped them actively engage students with different literacy abilities, as well as special education students (65%) and students who tend to be disengaged (68%).

Teachers pointed to module topic, argumentative tasks, the scaffolding of the instructional ladder and selection of reading materials as factors that promote student engagement.

Factors that promote student engagement

High Interest Module Topics

Definition

- Often controversial societal issues or areas related to students' interests.
- Examples: global warming, the dangers of cell phones, when the U.S. should enter foreign wars (social studies and science); child labor, technology, women's roles in two short stories (ELA).

Teacher's quote

These last two modules, my kids are really liking what they're doing. They don't like that they have to write, but they like the topics. They're doing the argumentative piece and I've given them controversial topics.

— middle school social studies teacher

Argumentative Tasks

Definition

- Students take a stand based on their own opinion, backed up with points from readings.
- Incorporating debates or Socratic seminars worked well with these units.
- Many of these tasks focused on high interest topics.

Teacher's quote

They loved it. They got to be opinionated. They have strong opinions...I knew one or two males were chauvinistic and knew the girls would come right back at them [in discussing women's roles]. It made for a good debate; the topic worked well.

— high school ELA teacher

Instructional Ladder Scaffolding

Definition

- Knowing the template task from the beginning and having scaffolding and mini-tasks to provide support for the writing task helped students understand the purpose of their work.
- Students could see that individual tasks were moving them towards that larger goal.

Teacher's quote

In the first module, students felt that a lot of mini tasks [were boring]. They didn't understand the connection to the larger task. The second time, they were more engaged in what we were doing as a class and understood that the small steps would help with the final product.

— middle school ELA teacher

Text Selection

Definition

- Teachers noted specific kinds of texts that engaged their students. For example, primary source documents (social studies) and novels more than articles (English).
- There was no consensus that any one type of reading material was most engaging.

Teacher's quote

Primary source use – that generally generates more interest. Makes it less textbook like; makes it more human.

— high school social studies teacher

LDC's role in student learning

Teachers provided these early examples of how the initiative affected student learning.

What to expect

Modules led to meaningful improvements in student writing. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of teachers surveyed said that the use of modules had resulted in higher quality student writing.

Description of writing improvement

Students write more fluently and with greater confidence and independence. They generate longer pieces of writing than in the past and teachers see this carrying over into non-LDC writing, including assessments.

Student writing is of better quality. Eighty-eight percent of teachers surveyed agreed that the use of the modules has resulted in higher quality student writing. Teachers reported seeing significant growth in student writing from one module to the next.

Students are gaining skill at incorporating readings into writing. They are interacting with readings differently and making better connections between reading and writing.

Module structure made it easier for teachers to teach writing. Some also believed that the structure, including the ladder and knowing the template tasks in advance, played an important role in helping students improve their writing.

Teachers' quotes

Even on the short answer tests, they're writing something. I used to have 10 blank tests. Now I don't have any blank tests.
— middle school science teacher

I'm really impressed with what kids are writing. Unique, not cookie cutter, thinking, using primary source documents. It's much better than anything I've had them write before.
— middle school social studies teacher

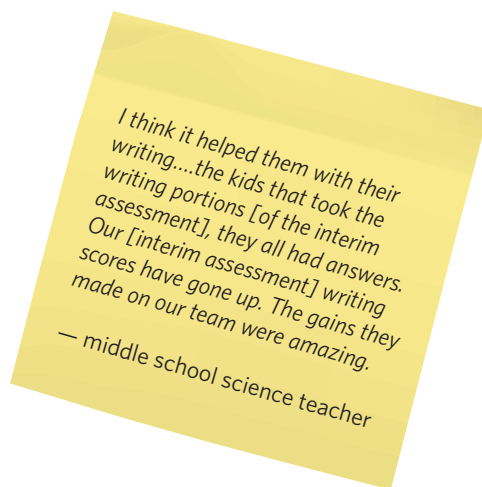
In the later modules [I saw] more evidence of the readings in their papers, which showed understanding. It was required that they include research, but when you saw them incorporate it successfully...
— high school ELA teacher

I felt like they were some of the best writing tasks that were produced by my kids. Because that ladder built them....First drafts were much stronger than first drafts I'd seen in the past. [I] attribute that to the structure of it.
— high school ELA teacher

Modules helped science and social studies students learn content more deeply. A middle school social studies teacher noted that students learned content more deeply in the modules because “they have to know exactly what’s going on. It’s not just true/false.”

Modules could enhance students’ ability to perform well on standardized assessments.

Three-quarters (76%) of teachers agreed that modules helped prepare their students for current state assessments. Teachers noted that students’ increased writing fluency and ability to incorporate ideas into their writing should also help. A small number cited evidence, i.e., from interim assessments, that students were moving closer to proficiency on state assessments.



Modules could help students become better prepared for the postsecondary arena.

Almost all teachers surveyed (91%) agreed that the LDC framework will prepare their students for postsecondary success.

What to watch for

Structure activities to ensure that content remains central. Some science teachers noted that students sometimes got so engaged in arguing a hot topic that they did not always make enough science connections in their writing. This school year (2011-12), teachers plan to create instructional activities that keep the focus on science, even during heated and engaging debates.

Teachers’ perceptions of alignment are important. Some teachers in one site perceived a lack of alignment between the modules and their state assessments. This may be due to the fact that they reported that their previous instructional strategies were well-aligned to their state assessments. District administrators and school leaders in this site are revising modules to ensure that the alignment is more evident to teachers.

Questions for teachers to consider

As you make strides toward incorporating the LDC framework into your curriculum, we pose a few questions for you to consider. You can use these questions and this booklet as a tool for your own reflection or as a starting point for dialogue about the LDC initiative and how it is working for you, your colleagues, and your students.

1. What have you learned as a result of participating in the LDC initiative that you would like to share with a teacher who is new to the initiative?
2. How might teachers who are not involved in creating modules develop a deep understanding of the LDC framework and the concept of an instructional ladder?
3. How can your colleagues best support your use of the LDC framework? How can you support your colleagues?
4. What has been your strategy for finding reading materials at your students' reading level that also include the appropriate content?
5. What has been your strategy for giving feedback on student work? Do you involve students in a peer-review process?

6. How are you using formative information from modules about students' content mastery and literacy skills to guide your instruction?

7. How are your students engaged when you are teaching a module?

8. Have you noticed any evidence of student learning as a result of modules? Did your students retain the content of that particular lesson or demonstrate increased reading and writing skills over time?

9. What challenges have you experienced during your participation in the LDC initiative? What solutions have you found?

10. Are the LDC instructional strategies an important component of your instructional repertoire? Why or why not?

11. What are the three most important things your district and school leaders can do to better support your use of the LDC framework?

If you and your colleagues have additional comments about your involvement in the LDC initiative that you would like to share with us, LDC tool developers, or professional development providers, please send them to:

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For 20 years, Research for Action has provided rigorous research and analysis designed to raise important questions about the quality of education available to disadvantaged students, and the effects of educational reform on students, schools, and communities.



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