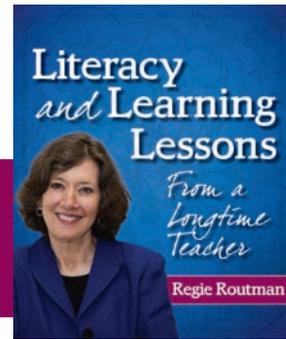


## Professional Guidance from a Master Teacher



**I**RA Publications is releasing a blockbuster book in time for the start of the new school year, a new work by the renowned author, teacher, and professional development provider, Regie Routman. Entitled *Literacy and Learning Lessons from a Longtime Teacher*, this compendium sets forth no less than 100 individual pieces on the essence of great literacy teaching.

Most of the pieces run one to two pages, and are set out in two parts: Routman reflects on a specific practice, mindset, method, strategy, or substantive issue of immediate significance to literacy professionals, and then marshals her vast experience and insight into specific recommendations set out under the heading “Take action.”

The impact this arrangement makes on the reader goes far deeper than the frequently encountered “teaching tips” type of book. Instead, a master-teacher’s wit, knowledge, experience, beliefs, concerns, hope, and above all, enthusiasm, is imparted in measured reflections that strike home, touch the heart, and inspire renewed commitment.

### Decades of Teaching Experience Distilled

What draws the reader into these pages is the personal touch of an extraordinary professional. Routman is known to teachers, reading specialists, and school administrators across the US and Canada as the author of many Heinemann titles on literacy instruction, and as a teacher who conducts weeklong residencies in diverse schools and classrooms. To replicate her ongoing work in many more schools and districts, she created *Regie Routman in Residence: Transforming Our Teaching* (Heinemann, 2008, 2009), a groundbreaking literacy-based video series for embedded professional development.



Literacy and Learning Lessons ©  
2012, 173 pages  
(Also available as an e-book)  
Nonmembers: \$24.95  
IRA Members: \$19.95  
Preview contents and sample  
lessons and order online at  
[www.reading.org/LiteracyLessons](http://www.reading.org/LiteracyLessons)  
or call toll free 800-336-7323  
(outside the U.S. and Canada,  
call 302-731-1600).

A longtime member of the International Reading Association, Routman sponsors a Teacher Recognition grant through the Association. She contributes content on practical teaching strategies for IRA’s “Members Only” web resource, and she is a regular presenter in the groundbreaking *Teaching Edge* series

offered at the annual IRA Convention. This is her first IRA book.

Routman has over four decades of experience in teaching, coaching, and leading school change, and this is what she has drawn from in creating the new book. As she states in the introduction, “After 45 years of teaching, leading, and coaching in diverse classrooms and schools, I have consolidated my thinking into what I believe to be the most significant lessons that lead to high success for all learners.”

Routman goes on to explain that “These 100 lessons have evolved from my ongoing teaching, assessing, planning, coaching, learning, collaborating, researching, studying, reflecting, innovating, and living my life. In short, the lessons reflect my best professional advice after a lifetime of teaching and learning.”

### Mindset, Strategy, and Methodology

More than half of the lessons zero in on the core components of the teaching process, namely the mindset in which effective teaching is undertaken, the strategic considerations which need to be at the fore of lesson planning, and the methods and techniques of presentation and interaction that produce the best results.

- **What’s the mindset of strong teaching?** Comb through Routman’s lessons and certain key themes emerge over and over. These include a celebratory approach to students and colleagues, an emphasis on relationships, a willingness to lead and be a team player, active listening, urgency, stamina, high expectations for students, abandoning assumptions, and the necessity of being an avid reader while taking time for continual reflection.
- **What are the most critical considerations that need to frame classroom strategy?** Routman elaborates on these with the fervor of someone who has been in the trenches and on the front line. She is keen on building a strong foundation and doing lots of frontloading. She points out why guided reading needs to be kept in perspective and why it is important to reduce the need for intervention. She advocates the use of excellent texts, as well as for keeping rubrics simple. She cautions against giving oral language development short shrift, and stresses student reading of non-fiction along with fiction. At the heart of her strategic reflection lies this overriding imperative: creating in all students a driving need to know.
- **What methods of classroom instruction generally drive the highest levels of student achievement?** Routman eschews

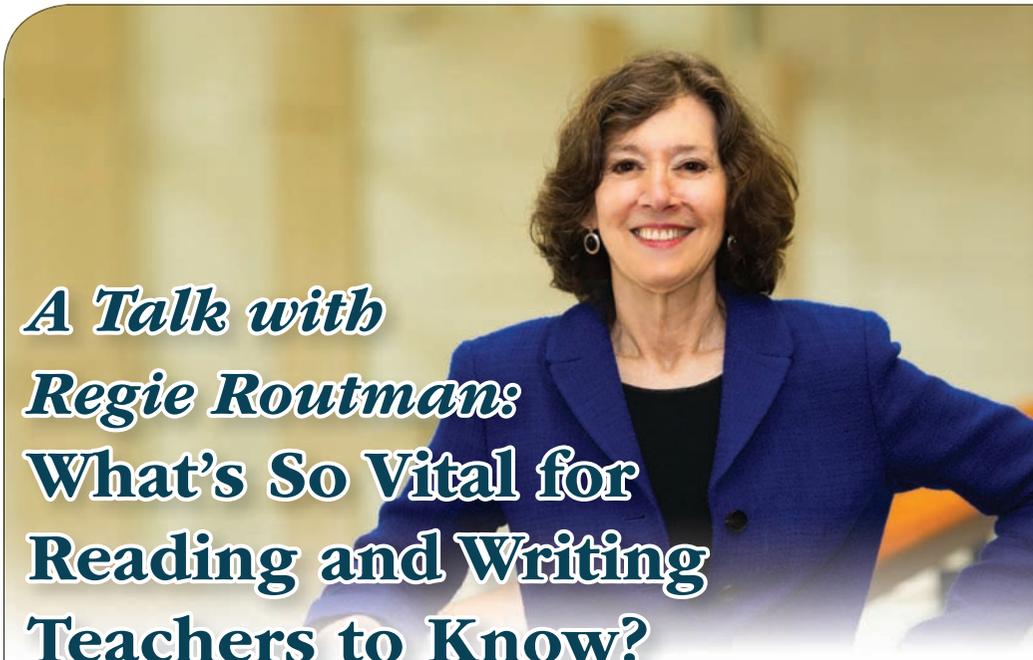
anything superficial and trendy, urging instead a persistent resort to asking vital questions, teaching with authenticity and relevant purpose, doing more demonstrations, providing choice to students within structure, teaching rereading, eliminating distractions, and establishing routines and rituals. She urges teachers to make sure that their students are engaged, and not just “on task.” She places the heaviest emphasis on “whole-part-whole” teaching and on one-to-one reading and writing conferences between teacher and student, which is where the most crucial literacy assessments often take place. As could be expected, Routman references her well known Optimal Learning Model, a four step process for developing independent learning skills.

### Wealth of Related Topics

In addition to these core issues, *Literacy and Learning Lessons* addresses a wealth of related topics, including homework, classroom environments and atmosphere, writing, and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). With respect to the latter, Routman is hopeful that the CCSS will help schools raise expectations for students. At the same time, she admonishes against a “teaching to the standards” mentality, and is very concerned about publisher-generated materials that purportedly “align” with the Common Core and create the impression of being cure-all resources.

### Versatile Volume with Many Uses

*Literacy and Learning Lessons* is a versatile resource with many uses. It can be read straight through, consulted randomly, and used as a ready desk reference for the next day’s lesson planning. It is ideal for self-directed professional development, as well as for facilitated study groups and schoolwide learning communities. It also makes an excellent course text for teacher education programs. It is a book to have and use, as well as a book to give and share. Above all it is a book to be consumed like a delicacy and savored time and again for the thoughts it imparts and the spirit it imbues. ■



## *A Talk with* **Regie Routman:** **What’s So Vital for** **Reading and Writing** **Teachers to Know?**

*Note: On the occasion of her new book release from IRA, prolific author and teacher Regie Routman agreed to talk with Reading Today about the vital things literacy teachers need to know to enhance their classroom skills and produce stronger learning among their students.*

### ***Is good classroom questioning by teachers a lost art?***

It’s not a lost art, as I’m not sure that it’s ever really been taught. About 75% of teachers rely on basals and core reading program materials that provide questions written by someone else. So naturally teachers’ questioning skills are limited. And I have a new worry concerning the text-dependent questions that are being driven by implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Those are likely to be written by publishers, not teachers. So in my work I find that high level questioning is not common and has to be demonstrated.

### ***What is the remedy?***

Teachers need to be avid readers and a lot of teachers are not. Wide reading helps us better understand and judge what outstanding content is, as well as what high quality writing is. This understanding drives more effective questioning.

### ***Why is rereading so critical?***

Kids need to be fluent in order to comprehend. They need to hear a story flow first, perhaps by reading with a partner, before they can focus on meaning. This often requires more than one go around, especially when reading nonfiction texts. In nonfiction texts the words and concepts are often hard, so students need to slow down, reread, and determine what specific words mean. Struggling students as a rule don’t reread. Unfortunately rereading never makes the list of six or seven strategies which researchers identify as key to comprehension.

### ***What makes the “whole-part-whole” teaching technique so central to your approach?***

It’s not so much a technique as it is a philosophy. When we teach students “part to whole” we’re showing them a piece of the jigsaw puzzle but not the picture on the box lid, as a colleague once explained to me. Think how hard it is to do a puzzle without that guiding frame. Other examples might be learning music note-by-note without ever hearing an entire composition played, or learning

how to hit a tennis ball without watching a game played between opponents. The mind works better from a grasp of the whole.

In one kindergarten classroom I was working in, we had fun with this reading and writing free verse poems. Even kindergartners were able to grasp and apply all the elements that make up a poem as a whole and, then, as needed, focus on the parts. Students became more conscious of things like word choice, line breaks, rhythm, and even white space. Eventually the parts came together again in one meaningful whole. Getting teachers to move from a part-to-whole to a whole-part-whole approach is probably the biggest shift I push for in my work today in schools.

***One-on-one writing and reading conferences between teacher and student get special emphasis in your book. Can you describe why they are so important?***

Certainly. We know from the research of Dick Allington and others that this type of interaction is a critical component of differentiated instruction. This is where important assessment takes place. In fact the word assessment comes from the Latin *assidere* which literally means “to sit by”.

I’ll start with writing conferences. I like to do public conferences where I engage one student for about 20 minutes and have the rest of the class listen in, as this is more practical than trying to do briefer conferences with the entire class. My focus is on the writer first and the writing second, because I want the child to be charged up and not deflated. So in reading the piece aloud, after the child has read it aloud first, I’ll take a celebratory tone noticing everything the child did and was trying to do. Students need to experience a good deal of encouragement before they become comfortable with suggestions. We want to get each one to the point where he or she is thinking “I’m a writer, I can do this.”

As for reading conferences, one-on-one attention is really the only way to sift out superficial reading from deeper comprehension. Consider that most in-school reading is done by students on their own and in silence. Too often “right answer” questions are used in comprehension assessments, and so the ability of students to probe character development, themes, and other aspects of deeper reading never really gets probed.

***Is the guided reading approach overused in literacy instruction?***

No, the problem I frequently encounter is a situation where guided reading is treated as an end in itself instead of as a means to an end. I don’t see enough checking by the teacher

to develop independent reading skills. Also, groups often tend to be fixed and homogenous and go on too long, with the teacher doing too much of the work.

***You note more than once that working on task is not the same thing as learning. Can you elaborate?***

Sure. Think of a student who is working on a workbook or worksheet covering spelling or some skill that’s not related to anything else the class is studying. This is the part-whole pedagogy I mentioned earlier, which has serious limitations. You see a kid doing work, but to what effect? We need to be able to spot kids who are just going through the motions. We need to engage students thoroughly in meaningful work and then assess them as we go.

***You advise teachers to put their energy where results are most likely. Is this an acknowledgment that some teachers and students just can’t be helped?***



No, not at all. I believe that everyone can get better. What I am saying is that there is only so much time available and to make the best use of it. There are some teachers who need lots of sustained attention to improve their teaching skills. During my school residencies, I could easily end up spending all of my time with them. So I have learned that if I spend more of my time with teachers who are already pretty effective, I can achieve a greater impact, as some of those teachers can, in turn, mentor their colleagues.

To me it’s just a matter of prudence and teaching smarter. We need to remember in working with students, for example, that it’s just as important to spend time with gifted students, as with those who are struggling. What we want to avoid is exhaustion leading to burnout. Prioritizing is the key to having greater impact. Moreover, we always want to be teaching with urgency, for example, not wasting time giving overlong directions.

***You suggest that low expectations present the most formidable academic challenge you have to confront. Can you elaborate on this topic?***

Yes. Let me start by observing that I have never been in a school where expectations for student achievement were too high. But I have frequently encountered situations where the expectations of the adults in a school were dismal, where nobody seems upset about the students' poor performance, where there's a total lack of urgency, and where the repeated refrain is something like "I'm doing the best that I can." The belief sets in that due to poverty or other circumstances the students in the school lack the potential to ever excel and go to college. And that's where the worst problems start, because if we don't think the kids can be smart, we dumb the lessons down, and then the students are really lost.

The resulting paralysis stems from what I refer to in the book as the "deficit mentality," the habit of focusing first

students with resources beyond technology. Handwriting, for example, is something worth spending more time on.

***You stress the need to make in-the-head thinking and problem solving visible. Is that the ultimate teaching moment?***

I think that the ultimate teaching moment is what I call in the book being in a state of "flow," that is, getting to moments where we and our students are so focused on a text and task and making so many connections and insights that we and they are losing consciousness of anything else while the moments last.

One way we can get there is by making in-the-head thinking visible, and I'll give you an example of what I mean. I often encounter teachers who work on a writing piece at home to get it just right to use as a model in class. But we really engage students by writing the piece in front of them to demonstrate that good writing is recursive and that editing and rephrasing are critical to good writing.

***You write that the proliferation of commercial materials being labeled as implementation cure-alls for the Common Core is most troubling. What would you say to publishers about this matter?***

I fear that things are moving quickly to a point where it seems that everything the commercial publishers are producing "aligns to the Common Core." This really worries me. We need to make sure that teachers do not become overly dependent on these resources. Moreover, we need to have teachers designing the text-dependent questions. The publishers need to be consulting with knowledgeable teachers to create these products. I'm also very concerned about what will happen when the Common Core testing starts.

***You write that "unequal educational opportunity for underserved students is the gravest civil rights issue of our time." Do you see a solution?***

I believe with my heart and soul that we as a society are not doing enough about this problem. We'll pay millions and millions for new sports stadiums but not for ensuring that we have the highest quality teachers and school facilities. We're not willing to invest our all in students in the worst schools, those that are often in poor urban areas where drug or gang culture may abound. Yet this is in everybody's best interest and should be in our national self-interest. Lack of education and low literacy skills have been correlated to crime and health issues that we are paying for anyway. This goes beyond low expectations; I fear we just don't have the national commitment to do better. Many students, especially students of color, will not have the future they deserve or be equipped to achieve unless this situation gets turned around.

Honestly, I really don't know how to solve it. I just try to do my little piece, focusing on one school, one teacher, and one child at a time. ■



on what children can't do instead of on what they can do. This perspective wipes all of the joy out of teaching. I think it may be culturally rooted, that too many people think that someone who lives in poverty cannot match our preconceptions of academic success.

To begin to remedy this situation requires a shift to an attitude of celebration. It is affirmation that gives students energy and will. If teachers are willing to shift their expectations, I'm right there with them. Believe me, I'm no Pollyanna. This will work; the long road back to a culture of achievement starts right there.

***Has technology dulled children's imagination?***

Well, it may be that more time on screen means less time thinking, but I think the educational potential of the new technology is vast. The real issue here is one of balance. All technologies from the printing press on have caused some level of cultural disconnect, and it is important to provide