

Florida Center for Reading Research

Voyager U

What is Voyager U?

Voyager U is a new professional development program for K-3 teachers using a web-based curriculum and two tiers of coaching support. It is structured as a Reading Academy to provide teachers with: 1) content material on-line from scientifically based reading research, 2) training that is extended across time, and 3) layers of support that include district and building level coaches, collaborative work with peer teachers, and telephone, e-mail or instant messaging support. *Voyager U* consultants train district level coaches, who in turn are responsible for training the building level coaches using the same two-day program on reading content, the use of Blackboard (a tool for web-based communication and instruction), the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment measures, and the role of a coach. In turn, the building level coaches train the teachers in the use of this web-based curriculum. The building level coaches provide feedback and support to the teachers as they apply and evaluate their newly learned skills throughout the nine months of training. The program focuses on developing a collaborative environment for teachers to learn new knowledge and assimilate it into their classroom instruction.

The Reading Academy consists of 8 ten-hour modules; seven hours of each module are designed for independent work using interactive, on-line instruction, the development of classroom activities to implement the core concepts, and reflection surveys. The other three hours of each module are for coach-led group discussions that may include, among other things, a review of the activities the teachers implemented in their classroom. Typically, the modules follow sequentially, although there is some flexibility based on the decisions made by the building coach. If the teachers express less interest or a greater knowledge base in some area, the coach may choose to move more quickly in a given module. By choosing one of several activities to complete, teachers reflect on their personal experiences throughout the professional development. In addition to this, the teachers are expected to apply their understanding of the content material by completing a multiple choice/short answer test consisting of challenges typically found in classrooms. Currently under development are an end of the course assessment and a principal's guide to assist with classroom observations. In this way, gains in teacher knowledge and practice can be studied in relation to the effectiveness of the professional development course. Discussing the answers becomes the basis for the final group meeting.

The 8 modules cover the following content areas: Introduction, Phonemic Awareness, Alphabetic Principle and Phonics, Word Study, Fluency, Vocabulary, Comprehension I, and Comprehension II. Each module has a self-paced format divided into three units. Unit 1 is the 'Big Idea' where content is presented in depth, Unit 2 is 'Student Monitoring' techniques using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment tool to determine a student's skills in the particular area, and Unit 3 is 'Effective Instruction,' which models and then guides the teachers in designing and implementing an activity to develop the skills with their students. Each unit has a list of topics but a comprehensive design that includes the



program's goals and objectives is not included. After an initial survey to assess the teacher's understanding of the content area, each unit describes the subject area and related research, and then gives a case scenario where the concepts are applied. While these activities would be very helpful at all grades, they are limited to the first grade level. Upper level teachers who choose to study these case scenarios instead of implementing one of their own classroom activities would benefit from examples at the appropriate grade level. Throughout this process teachers are guided in terms of how much instructional time is needed, how to group students based on assessments, how to construct dialogues to use during instruction, and how to select activities. Separate videotapes are available for demonstrations of successful teaching methods although they are not an integral part of the web-based curriculum. Each unit ends with the expectation that the teachers will prepare activities for their own classrooms.

How is Voyager U aligned with Reading First?

Voyager U's Reading Academy includes a module on each of the five critical components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. While the modules are divided by content area, it is clear how the different skills are interrelated by the connections provided in each module.

The Module on Phonemic Awareness gives an overview of language development in young children. It then describes phonemic awareness and how to develop and assess specific phonemic awareness skills. The developmental hierarchy of phonological skills is listed and many examples of each skill are provided.

The Module on the Alphabetic Principle and Phonics begins with an interesting history of the alphabetic principle and current research on phonics including theories of how the brain functions during the process of recognizing words. Teachers become familiar with the terminology of the field and well versed in how phonics affects a child's success with reading.

In the Vocabulary Module, teachers learn about the correlation between word knowledge and comprehension. Activities that are most effective for developing vocabulary skills and techniques for assessing these skills are described. Teachers learn how to administer the Word Use Fluency test from the DIBELS and how to use the results to guide instruction. A case study using a first grade classroom demonstrates how to develop lessons incorporating indirect and direct vocabulary instruction. Its anecdotal format would benefit from more specific examples of the direct instruction mentioned and other strategies for teaching vocabulary such as semantic mapping as well as instruction in comparisons, analogies, synonyms and antonyms. While the introductory manual suggests that teachers will construct a lesson using morphologically related words, this is not included in the on-line course work. The recommendation for this lesson is for teachers to reflect on how to include vocabulary instruction into the daily routine. More specifically, teachers are instructed to "introduce 1 or 2 new interesting vocabulary words that describe the story concepts each day". As part of a professional training program it would be appropriate to have a more explicit framework for the teachers to use in planning this lesson.

The Module on Fluency begins with research on how reading quickly, accurately and with proper expression affects the child's ability to comprehend. This part also includes an activity that lets teachers experience the impact of automaticity and prosody on reading comprehension. Within this module there is an example of a daily oral reading routine that implements different strategies for increasing fluency. They

model the use of partner reading, choral reading and audiotape assisted reading along with suggestions on structuring the student activities to include teacher feedback and guidance. The focus is on using the DIBLES Oral Reading Fluency and Retell Fluency measures to assess the student' needs then selecting one of the six instructional techniques described in the unit to develop fluency.

The Academy expects to have two Modules on Comprehension although there is currently only one available. This module reviews the sequential process involved in learning to read up to the final stage of drawing meaning from text. The discussion emphasizes that comprehension not only requires a set of discrete skills, but also that children must acquire "metacognitive" flexibility in regulating and applying these skills. *Voyager U* recognizes that "there are a definable number of thinking strategies that proficient readers use consistently in the process of interacting with text and constructing meaning". These thinking strategies are modeled and taught in addition to the more traditional comprehension skills.

As a professional development program, *Voyager U* supports the development of expertise in reading content while applying the newly learned skills to the classroom. The fidelity of content delivery at the school level is maintained through its web-based format and the expectation that selected coaches have a reading specialization, computer literacy skills, professional leadership skills, and knowledge of classroom teaching, district procedures and operations. Schools are encouraged to use local expertise in selecting their building level coach and creating a group according to the needs and interest of the teaching staff. There is no requirement for school wide participation.

Teachers use self-evaluation through journal writing and survey tests to motivate and guide their learning process throughout the school year. Upon completion of the course, participants are given a paper copy of the content material. Implementing specific activities and a final assessment provide evidence of teacher learning. The teachers are taught to use student assessment data to inform instruction but this is not used to determine if the professional development course has affected teacher practices. Further support comes from the developers of the program who are actively engaged in supporting the coaches and responding to the needs of teachers. While a matrix that crosswalks the program's components with the Florida Reading Competencies does not exist, the developers would provide this upon request. For schools with technical problems, *Voyager U* has developed a CD for the on-line materials and packaged a hard copy of all printable forms from the program.

Research Support for Voyager U



There is no research available at this time; however, *Voyager U* is currently being implemented in New York, Georgia, Pennsylvania and Arizona. While evidence of efficacy through experimental studies has not been established, the content of the program is consistent with current reading research and the process and the context for professional development is based on the Learning First Alliance's report: *Every Child Reading: A Professional Development Guide*.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Voyager U*:

- By using technology, consistency of content material that is not dependent on the varying knowledge base of trainers and ease of access are provided to everyone in the training.
- The format allows for self-pacing, the ability to review material at the teacher's convenience and opportunities to apply their new knowledge throughout the training process.
- To reinforce learning immediate feedback is given on the survey quizzes.
- Modules 3 and 4 are available in printable form although the hyperlinks are not accessible online when the print version is used.

Weaknesses of *Voyager U*:

- Teachers have the choice of saving or deleting the information they record on the journal entries. If the information were saved, it could be part of an on-going professional development plan.

Which Florida districts have schools that implement Voyager U?

This program is not currently used in Florida.

For More Information

www.voyagerlearning.com

References

Learning First Alliance. 2000. Every Child Reading: A Professional Development Guide. Online: <http://www.learningfirst.org/readingguide.pdf>

Lead Reviewer: Mary Van Sciver, M.S.
Date Posted: August, 2003

Important Note: FCRR Reports are prepared in response to requests from Florida school districts for review of specific reading programs. The reports are intended to be a source of information about programs that will help teachers, principals, and district personnel in their choice of materials that can be used by skilled teachers to provide effective instruction. Whether or not a program has been reviewed does **not** constitute endorsement or lack of endorsement by the FCRR.

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