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# Foreword

If you are a teacher, a principal, a curriculum leader, or an instructional coach, you are in for an educator's treat.

Lois Lanning's book, *Designing a Concept-Based Curriculum for English Language Arts*, is the most forward-thinking, cutting-edge treatment for the design of curriculum and instruction in this area on the market today. Here are the three major reasons that I say this:

1. Most books for English language arts instruction focus on teaching the "themes" of books as the first priority; the development of processes, skills, and instructional strategies seems to take a back seat.
2. Teachers want to use diverse materials, both fiction and nonfiction, in working with their students, but district curriculum too often mandates a particular text or list of texts that must be used for particular units of study.
3. English language arts curriculum generally continues to be driven by book titles and skill objectives that fail to reach deeper, conceptual understanding and the ability to transfer knowledge.

Lois alleviates these problems with a step-by-step description of how to design *concept-based* English language arts units that teach far more than the themes of individual works of fiction. Teachers learn how to design units that focus on developing an understanding of the conceptual ideas in content, processes, strategies, and skills so that students can transfer their learning across multiple types of literary material and genres. The materials are not the end point of instruction—they are the tools for developing deeper conceptual understandings of the *why*—why teach and learn these processes, skills, and strategies as they are employed across a diverse selection of text material?

When curricula are not concept-based, we tend to "cover" content and skill objectives mindlessly—checking off verbs and topics, or skills, with the satisfaction of knowing that we are "getting through the curriculum." But

there is a major problem with this outdated model—we “assume” that students have conceptual understanding of what they are learning. Four decades of experience have shown me clearly that we cannot make this assumption. If we want students to retain what they learn, and be able to transfer that knowledge to new situations, we must teach them to understand the relationships between the facts and processes and the conceptual levels of knowledge and understanding. We must provide instruction that builds an understanding of the overarching generalization or principle represented by a task. Students need to develop the conceptual language of the disciplines as they progress through school if they are to cogently explain their understandings. *Designing a Concept-Based Curriculum for English Language Arts* not only shows teachers a detailed plan for designing language arts units that support teaching beyond lists of discrete and disconnected skills, but is a book that explains clearly why curriculum and instruction must make this shift from assuming understanding to teaching *for* understanding.

One of the greatest thrills for a teacher is when a student goes on to become a teacher because of his or her impact during the student’s early education. I feel like that thrilled teacher when I see how Lois took my teaching and extended it, creating her own teaching, into her strong area of expertise in English language arts. Lois participated in one of my workshops 17 years ago. She came up to me at the end of the workshop, and I could tell she had that “fire in her belly” for concept-based curriculum and instruction. That workshop led to a working relationship and friendship that has continued to this day. If you have a colleague in your life with whom you can share a complex idea, and he or she is able to extend your thoughts without so much as even having a detailed explanation, you know what I mean.

I have a confession to make here. When I first met Lois, I did not think that processes had “concepts.” In fact, I think I even wrote in one of my early books (erroneously) that “concepts are only found in content—not in skills and processes.” But Lois kept nudging me gently to reconsider my position. I finally came to see that she was absolutely correct—processes *do* have concepts, and students need to understand the conceptual relationships within the English language arts standards if they are going to be able to transfer these expectations across situations.

I am especially thrilled that Lois has taken her learning and developed the ideas in this book that truly break out of old curriculum designs. You will love her graphic that shows the Structure of Process to balance the Structure of Knowledge shown in my books. To tell you the truth, I have always been uncomfortable when trying to explain how concept-based curriculum applies to the English language arts area. My Structure of Knowledge graphic never really explained how English language arts fit except through the content of thematic fiction studies. I knew there was a

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problem. How lucky we all are that Lois Lanning has written this valuable contribution to English language arts! She is my star pupil, my brilliant colleague, and my dear friend. I know you will enjoy her thinking and her teaching.

H. Lynn Erickson