

Praise for *The Secret of Literacy*

This book needed writing. Literacy, the quoin of education, has frequently been assumed, glossed over or ignored. Threaded through our personal and professional lives, it takes a brave soul to unpick it, unpack it and sort it. And that's what David Didau has done.

I was talking to my daughter about why I was so impressed with this book. I was telling her about how, when he has asked his students to write, Didau writes too. 'Wow, that's amazing. Really powerful!' was her reply. And indeed it is. And that's what characterises this book. Beyond the sensible critiques of theory, the detailed examples for making literacy work at every level, is a man walking the talk.

One example: he makes the case that finished work often doesn't show the blood, sweat and tears that have gone into it. And he describes some of the blood, sweat and tears that have made him the master practitioner he is. Less than helpful feedback from an observation, his response to it and his nuanced practice in relation to, for example, teacher talk. Another example in this vein: a group of NQTs observing one of his lessons where students are responding and challenging one another. And he is on the sidelines, with just the odd bat thrown in. Otherwise, they are just getting on with it. High quality conversations about their learning. But, as he says, this was not particularly helpful for the NQTs because they had not seen the struggles and the practice to get the students to this place. The point about this is that there are no easy, off-the-shelf answers. What there is, is practice, on the right things, continually refined.

Another example: modelling. Students critique his work alongside theirs. And in a mixed ability group how does he make sure that lower attaining students are getting the most out of it? Beautifully. He has them working alongside him as teacher's assistant. He also manages to get the reluctant to get involved too. Not by forcing them. But cracking on with it anyway.

There is so much here. He makes the case for difficult, compelling texts, brimming with knowledge. And these are opened up through scaffolding and skilful questioning. There's an incisive critique of low level scaffolding tasks. And this sets the scene for learning, which is characterised by high impact and low threat, and gets to grips with stuff that really makes a difference to the acquisition and love of language. It is sophisticated stuff, but it is also elegantly simple. Anyone reading this book and using any one of the things Didau discusses, would become a better practitioner.

One of the most powerful things for me was the realisation that some of our students who have pupil premium funding actually need some of the additional intervention and rich support which is now provided to EAL students on the best programmes.

And all of this is referenced against some serious thinkers and bloggers: Vygotsky, Dweck, Berger, Willingham, Hirsch, Robinson, Curtis, Kirby.

And he makes the case for the lower profile aspects of literacy – there's a very good summary of Robin Alexander's distinction between social and cognitive talk. And that means high quality talk from the teacher. There is a beautiful example of the pose, pause, pounce and bounce. If every teacher, in every school, across the country read page 77 and did this once a week, then progress,

achievement, motivation, love of learning, all the clichés would increase. Guaranteed. How could they not? Really important that he paused on the pause and reminded us of the importance of thinking first before getting those ideas out.

And he holds us to account, too, in terms of the contribution our own language has on expectations. Shifting from clauses that include 'but' and replacing them with 'and'. I'm not going to say more, because it's important people read the book for the impact this shift has. At its heart, our role as professionals must be to open the door to academic games (in the Wittgensteinian sense), not dodging the difficult. And he shows how to embrace etymology. If this sounds daunting, in Didau's hands it isn't. There's the potential for masses of play here. In my experience all students of all abilities and backgrounds love this aspect of language development. Light years away from peeling posters of technical vocab on the wall.

It was good to see that he had also included the importance of high quality school libraries. There's only one aspect which I think could be developed further and that is the accuracy dimension of literacy. The poorest of poor relations. He does explore it, but I think there is the potential for more. But given the man's genius at unpacking the rest of this essential entitlement for all students, it would have been a corker. In fact he's probably got another book in him about this.

The bottom line is that this book not only makes literacy explicit, it brings it to life in all its spirited messiness. My father, dour Scot, head of English in Peckham, word-monger of the first order, would have loved it. Can't think of higher praise.

Mary Myatt advises, writes and inspects, www.marymyatt.com

As an avid reader of David's brilliant blog I was really excited to read his new book. I wasn't disappointed! In his inimitable style, David manages to enliven and illuminate literacy, making what is a potentially tricky topic accessible and downright intriguing. He distils a shed-full of research and combines this with practical pedagogy.

David puts the compelling argument that literacy is not a bolt-on job for English teachers, but it is, rather, a fundamental aspect of great teaching in every lesson for all teachers. He dispels some enduring myths and establishes a clear, usable methodology that all teachers can instantly understand and apply in the classroom. There is a fantastic array of practical ideas and sharp insights which will mean this book is a great addition to the library of all teachers.

Every teacher should pick up this book – just watch out if you are a PE teacher!

Alex Quigley, subject leader of English and
assistant head teacher, Huntington School, York

The Secret of Literacy is an essential book for all teachers and school leaders. It is not just another literacy book. David Didau provides a crystal clear rationale for all teachers taking responsibility for developing literacy in their specialist areas, with lots of very practical ideas, drawing on a range of sources from blogs and the latest literature on the issue. Anyone familiar with David's own superb

Learning Spy blog will immediately recognise some of his most powerful ideas and his inimitable style: it is witty and accessible, grounded in the reality of everyday classrooms, but also conveys a sense of urgency. This is a serious business and, as David highlights, too much of what we do in the name of literacy isn't literacy at all. The book is challenging us to do better and shows us how. 'Making the implicit explicit' captures the key message, but *The Secret of Literacy* is more than a set of tools; it is a call to arms!

Tom Sherrington, head teacher, King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford

David Didau's book is everything a book about the work of teaching should be: clear-eyed, lively, wise and funny. Written by a front-line practitioner of the craft. And best of all, reading it will make you better.

Doug Lemov, managing director, Teach Like a Champion Team

The Secret of Literacy

Making
the implicit
explicit



David Didau

@LearningSpy

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For Rosie – the star to my wand'ring bark.



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Introduction

For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

This is not a book (just) for literacy coordinators or school leaders; it is a book written with every teacher in mind. In many ways, this is much more a book about teaching than it is a book about literacy and I very much hope that whatever and whoever you teach, you will find something useful within. But that said, I make no claims that it contains ‘the answer’ to teaching, or teaching literacy or anything else, merely that it contains some possible answers. It’s important to keep in mind there’s nothing that’s always going to work for every teacher in every context. Having said that, everything that I’ve included has been road-tested either in my own teaching or that of my colleagues and, to that extent, can be said to ‘work’. But don’t take my word for it: find out for yourself. Teachers are inundated with ‘how to’ manuals and this leads us to forget the importance of *why*. Whatever you decide to use, I’d urge you to think carefully about the why. What do you hope to achieve? Because there are no magic bullets. As long as you have approached what you plan to do with sufficient thought, it will probably work. If you haven’t, it probably won’t.

And therein lies a problem: a lot of literacy teaching is done unthinkingly. Perhaps the biggest barrier to teaching literacy well is the word itself. ‘Literacy’ is a bit off-putting, isn’t it? Yes, of course we all know what it means, it just sounds a bit too solemn and scientific. Primary schools were forced to get cosy with it after the introduction of the Literacy Hour back in the 1990s. Kids suddenly started having literacy lessons and you might think that this would have solved

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the problem of what exactly the word means, but as far as I can tell it's only muddied the already murky waters. My own daughters are currently in Years 4 and 5 and appear to be taught a confusing combination of literacy, phonics and grammar. Quite how literacy has become distinct from phonics and grammar I have no idea, but it's certainly the case that the very mention of the word stirs up anxiety about our lack of grammatical knowledge, and sounds unutterably and appallingly tedious. Few words demand demystification as much as this one. The problem, in a nutshell, is that 'literacy' sounds like it's someone else's problem.

One way to deal with the problem of the word is not to use it. Maybe we could stop thinking about embedding the teaching of *literacy* in our lessons. We could try calling it language, or maybe just plain old teaching and learning instead. Because it isn't an optional extra. Developing reading, writing and oracy are (or should be) absolutely fundamental to every teacher's approach to pedagogy; teaching pupils to read, write and communicate is not something special that you need to do on top of your job. It is your job! But more than that, the subject you teach, whether it's science, geography, maths or, dare I say it, PE, has its own language. Your pupils will primarily understand your subject through reading or listening and primarily demonstrate their understanding through writing or speaking.

But that's not really the secret I want to share with you. The *real* Secret of Literacy was unearthed by head teacher and literacy guru, Geoff Barton, after long years of tireless study and patient experimentation.¹ He's been generous enough to share it with me and, in turn, I want to entrust it to you because this secret is something rare and precious; once you know it, it will change everything. Your teaching will, quite simply, never be the same again.

The Secret of Literacy is ... making the implicit explicit.

I can almost hear the groans of disappointment. It's what?

Having waded through our degrees, we teachers are a fairly literate lot. Even you PE teachers have to write a dissertation, don't you? (It's not all running and

¹ Geoff Barton, *Don't Call It Literacy! What Every Teacher Needs to Know about Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing* (London: Routledge/David Fulton, 2013).

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catching, you know!) This means that, whether we know it or not, we have an implicit understanding of how to communicate successfully. We know how to speak in a variety of different social situations and we don't ever have to think too much about how we actually do it, we just do it. But because we've never really had to think about *how* we communicate, this means that we're often not very good at explaining to the uninitiated how to go about doing what we find (relatively) easy to do. Our problem is that we don't always know how to make our knowledge explicit, so that others can do what we can do.

That, my friends, is where I come in. The greater part of this book is about providing you with simple, straightforward strategies which will enable you to make the implicit explicit, so that your pupils will have a greater chance of succeeding in a world where the ability to communicate in a variety of media is becoming more important.

The good news is that, as far as schools and teachers are concerned, there's no such thing as literacy. Yes, you heard me. In a book on the subject, I'm contending that literacy is a meaningless chimera and should be consigned to the hell occupied by such evils as SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) and PLTS (Personal Learning and Thinking Skills). Just saying this is a wonderful catharsis. There is no such thing as literacy. There is just good teaching and learning.

This does, however, make the job of the literacy coordinator somewhat problematic because most teachers are crying out to know what it is they're supposed to be doing, and just telling them it doesn't exist is unlikely to go down well. This book is an attempt to show that 'literacy as a thing' is a bankrupt concept and ought to be avoided at all costs. The pernicious but worryingly prevalent idea of the bolt-on literacy objective and the content-free literacy activity needs to be taken out and shot at dawn. Instead, the secret I want to share with you is that teaching literacy cannot be usefully separated from teaching subjects. What that means is the knowledge of a subject is the language of the subject.

It's useful to remind ourselves that beating our heads against a desk to produce resources which, if anyone ever bothers to use them, will make very little impact on pupils' ability to communicate better, is an exercise in pointlessness. Instead, my approach to literacy is that it should have high impact on pupils but require low effort in terms of planning and implementation. Or, to put it another way, we

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should do the bare minimum required for all teachers to understand and be able to discharge their responsibilities as teachers of English.

What's that you say? All teachers? Teachers of English? Nah, mate, you've got the wrong bloke. I teach [*insert subject here*], I do. You won't catch me mucking around with no literacy in me lessons. That's what the English department's for, innit?

Well, I'm here to tell you that, contrary to some of the opinion bubbling in shadowy staffroom corners, improving pupils' literacy is part of the professional responsibility of every teacher: 'If you're a teacher *in* English, you're a teacher of English. We cannot give a lesson in any subject without helping or neglecting the English of our pupils.'²

The bad news for dissenters is that this simple piece of homespun wisdom is now enshrined in the Teachers' Standards which clearly state that all teachers must, and I quote, 'demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher's specialist subject.'³

So that's that. You've gotta do it. The Department for Education has fashioned a huge stick to beat teachers about the head and neck with. You *will* teach literacy, or else!

Despite the rumours, I'm not all about wanton bullying and striking fear into the hearts of PE teachers. (Before we proceed any further, I feel it's important to make clear that PE teachers tend to take literacy teaching very seriously and are amongst the most enthusiastic, if not downright competitive, of all teachers in their desire to raise literacy standards. That said, they're an easy target and I will continue to make cheap jokes at their expense.)

No, I see my mission as inspiring folk to understand why they should want to embrace the challenges of improving the life chances of the little blighters in our

2 George Sampson, *English for the English: A Chapter on National Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), p. 25.

3 Department for Education, *Teachers' Standards* (May 2012). Ref: DFE-00066-2011. Available at: <<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/teachers%20standards.pdf>>, p. 7.

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care. Because, let's face it, whether you believe it's all about exams or not, children's life chances are only going to be improved by being literate.

But it's not just that you *should* teach literacy; the bigger issue is that you *are* teaching literacy, whether you like it or not. The only question is: are you doing it badly or well? This means that at some point, in every lesson, you will be modelling how to read, write, speak or listen. And you'll either be providing an admirable model, or you won't. This being the case, surely it's well past time to ensure that we're doing our jobs to the best of our ability.

Ever since Ofsted upped the ante on reading and literacy, schools have been scrambling around producing policies so as to be seen to be doing something. Anything. But, if what you do doesn't show impact in the classroom then it's a complete and utter waste of everyone's time and effort. My advice, therefore, is to concentrate on those high impact, low effort strategies which will give every teacher the opportunity to show that they are teachers of the literacy that drives the content they are teaching. It almost goes without saying that the more you do for someone the less they value it and, conversely, the more someone does for themselves the more valuable it becomes. I've seen scores of literacy coordinators in schools all over the country who work their socks off producing reams of spelling starters, punctuation posters and grammar guides which no buggger ever uses. This simply cannot be a good use of anyone's time. Much better to shift the emphasis onto equipping teachers (and therefore pupils) to do it for themselves.

Now, despite this harangue, you might be feeling that literacy really isn't that important in your subject area and that, willing as you are, there really isn't much scope to promote the correct use of Standard English in your average maths lesson. Well, you'd be wrong. In the vast majority of lessons, pupils are asked to read stuff and then write it down. And even in those where printed materials and pens are seldom seen (PE, again), there is almost always a requirement that pupils listen, if not speak. I defy you to conceive of a lesson that, deliberately, involves none of the above. You can't, can you?

This means that every single lesson is a golden and unmissable opportunity to take responsibility for doing all that the Department for Education says you should be doing. And if you're not *actively* teaching pupils how to better use the



Chapter 1

Why is literacy important?

It's not (just) because Ofsted say so!

In the world of the current Ofsted inspection, few schools will quibble with the prominence being given to the teaching of literacy. But I'm far from convinced that we're clear on precisely *why* teaching literacy is so important, beyond the fact that Big Brother is watching.

The effect of 'affect'

For those of us fortunate enough to be literate, the whole idea of literacy in schools can seem bewilderingly overcomplicated. Something that comes to us as naturally as breathing can hardly require all the fuss and bother devoted to it, surely? Reading and writing can appear so straightforward that there *must* be something wrong with those who struggle.

But, if we're able to resist the temptation to label those with poor literacy as somehow deficient and thus attribute biological or social causes for their shortcomings, we might have more of a chance of addressing some of the real issues. One of the most fascinating of these is the effect of *affect*. How we feel about a thing determines, in large part, how good we will be at that thing. The feeling of struggling with reading and writing can create a sense of searing anxiety. For the most part this tends to be portrayed as the result of failure: 'We always describe anxiety as the cart, but it could just as easily be the horse. Anxiety could just as easily be a

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primary cause of failure rather than its result. It could, at least beyond the very initial stages of literacy failure, be prior to, rather than consequent upon, this failure.¹

When I was at school, I decided early on that I was bad at maths. I found manipulating numbers tricky and this made me feel stupid. When given a maths problem to solve I would become anxious, and the more anxious I became, the harder it was to concentrate on the numbers. It got to the point where I would feel that I was having a panic attack.

Unsurprisingly, I decided that it would feel far more comfortable not to try. And so I gave up. I spent the remaining years of maths lessons doodling, staring out of the window and generally avoiding doing any work. It was easier to give up and resign myself to being rubbish at maths than it was to deal with the crippling anxiety of making an effort and failing. Teachers shrugged and shunted me down the sets until I found myself largely untroubled and left to my own devices in the bottom set. My teachers' expectations of me were as low as those I had for myself. Equally unsurprisingly, I got a D grade in my GCSE maths exam.

I didn't care. I left school blithely convinced that I was bad at maths, and who needs to know any of that stuff anyway?

Some years later I decided I wanted to be an English teacher. No problem. I had a decent English degree and a variety of universities were happy to take me. Except that I needed a C grade in maths. I railed against the injustice of this and howled 'why?' at the moon before buckling down and enrolling in an evening class.

This was probably the single most difficult and painful episode I have ever endured. I wept bitter tears of frustration at the improbabilities of probability and almost tore out my hair at grid references. I just didn't get it. Who was I kidding? There was no way I could ever pass the damn thing; I might as well give up. In my desperation, I even considered paying someone to sit the exam for me.

But something in me persevered. I got hold of some past papers and, with the help of a friend, did one of them every day for the month before the exam. If I started to bug out, I would just skip the question and focus on the ones I could do. And,

1 Hugo Kerr, *The Cognitive Psychology of Literacy Teaching: Reading, Writing, Spelling, Dyslexia (and a Bit Besides)* [ebook]. Available at: <<http://www.hugokerr.info/book.pdf>>, p. 77.

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as I got used to the processes of solving equations and translating shapes, my anxiety began to fade and I started to recognise that I could do it. On the day of the first exam I experienced a moment of pure joy as I realised that I knew the answer to *every single question on the paper!* I didn't have to miss out any of them. The second paper didn't go quite as perfectly but I was still pretty sure I'd done well.

When, a few months later, I went to collect my results I actually managed to feel disappointed that I had *only* got a B! This was back in the days when there was an intermediate tier for maths GCSE and a B was the highest grade it was possible to get. I can't tell you how proud I felt. This was the first time in my life that I had accomplished something that I hadn't found easy. It was, I realised after beginning my PGCE course, great preparation for the rigours of teaching.

Anyway, that lengthy and self-indulgent anecdote does have a point. There's lots to infer about the importance of mindset, and it certainly taught me that I could achieve anything, if I was prepared to put in effort despite the discomfort of failing. But, more than that, it has allowed me to empathise with those pupils who 'can't do' English. Although reading and writing have always come so easily to me, I know what it's like to feel stupid and to believe that I can never get better.

Those who struggle with their literacy feel the same anxiety about their deficiencies as I did about mine. And my story is both a cautionary tale and a cause for hope. The debilitating anxiety felt by so many pupils when asked to read or write chimes so absolutely with my own experience: emotions affect performance. They affect the enjoyment of learning and they also affect the work we are able to produce. Obviously, this can also be a huge benefit: I have always got a huge kick out of studying language. Because I so actively enjoy reading and writing, my performance of these skills is also joyful.

The Matthew Effect

For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.

Matthew 13:12

In his excellent book, *The Matthew Effect*, Daniel Rigney sets out a stark message. He points out that, 'the word rich will get richer while the word poor will get poorer.'² There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, 'while good readers gain new skills very rapidly, and quickly move from learning to read to reading to learn, poor readers become increasingly frustrated with the act of reading, and try to avoid reading where possible.'³ Who can argue with that? Few people persevere with something they find difficult and uncomfortable. No one wants to feel stupid, and struggling to read is guaranteed to make you look thick. If you're literate you will gravitate towards literate friends. It comes as no surprise that 'good readers may choose friends who also read avidly while poor readers seek friends with whom they share other enjoyments.'⁴ And these friendships make a difference. The more we interact with the word-rich, the deeper our own pool of words will be. Because, as Myhill and Fisher point out, 'spoken language forms a constraint, a ceiling not only on the ability to comprehend but also on the ability to write, beyond which literacy cannot progress.'⁵ So, if our spoken language isn't up to snuff nothing else will be either. This advantage means that those 'who possess intellectual capital when they first arrive at school have the mental scaffolding and Velcro to catch hold of what is going on, and they can turn the new knowledge into still more Velcro to gain still more knowledge.'⁶

2 Daniel Rigney, *The Matthew Effect: How Advantage Begets Further Advantage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 76.

3 Daniel Rigney, *The Matthew Effect*, p. 76.

4 Daniel Rigney, *The Matthew Effect*, p. 76.

5 Debra Myhill and Ros Fisher, *Informing Practice in English: A Review of Recent Research in Literacy and the Teaching of English* (London: Ofsted, 2005), p. 4.

6 E. D. Hirsch, Jr, *The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 20.

Why is literacy important?

Success breeds success, and our confidence and enthusiasm will be bolstered, further stoking our expectation that we can succeed again in the future. When we struggle, we don't consider ourselves to be failures. Instead, we'll put this down to the complexity of a text. The more difficult a task, the keener we'll be to attempt it, and our motivation becomes intrinsic.

But this is not the case for many. It's all too easy to write off 'kids like these' as thick and having no hope of achieving anything. The pressure on pupils to be literate is enormous and failure is usually attributed to something inherent in a child. This kind of labelling and negative language is toxic.

This leads inexorably to the same learned helplessness I used to feel when encountering numbers. Interestingly, this 'mathematics anxiety' is well known and has been knocking about in academic literature since the 1970s. But 'literacy anxiety' hasn't had the same kind of coverage.

And, as you're no doubt aware, poor literacy results in some shocking statistics:

- One in six people in the UK struggle with literacy. This means their literacy is below the level expected of an 11-year-old.
- Seven million adults in England cannot locate the page reference for plumbers in a telephone directory.
- One in sixteen adults cannot identify a concert venue on a poster that contains the name of the band, price, date, time and venue.
- More than half of British motorists cannot interpret road signs properly.⁷

So there it is. We practise what we're good at and we're good at what we practise. If the problem starts with poor reading skills then so must the solution. As Robert Macfarlane says, 'Every hour spent reading is an hour spent learning to write.'⁸ This is only becoming more pressing as increasingly 'the digital world is centred

7 Statistics are taken from Deeqa Jama and George Dugdale, *Literacy: State of the Nation: A Picture of Literacy in the UK Today* (London: National Literacy Trust, 2010).

8 Quoted in Literary Non-Fiction: The Facts, *The Guardian* (21 September 2012). Available at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/21/literary-nonfiction-the-facts>>.

Literacy? That's someone else's job, isn't it?

This is a book for all teachers on how to make explicit to students those things we can do implicitly.

In the Teachers' Standards it is stated that all teachers must demonstrate an understanding of, and take responsibility for promoting, high standards of literacy, articulacy, and the correct use of standard English, whatever the teacher's specialist subject.

In *The Secret of Literacy* David Didau inspires teachers to embrace the challenge of improving students' life chances through improving their literacy.

Topics include:

- Why literacy is important
- Oracy – improving classroom talk
- How we should teach reading
- How to get students to value writing
- How written feedback and marking can support literacy

This book needed writing. Literacy, the quoin of education, has frequently been assumed, glossed over or ignored. Threaded through our personal and professional lives, it takes a brave soul to unpick it, unpack it and sort it. And that's what David Didau has done.

Mary Myatt, advises, writes and inspects, www.marymyatt.com

In his inimitable style, David manages to enliven and illuminate literacy, making what is a potentially tricky topic accessible and downright intriguing.

Alex Quigley, subject leader of English and assistant head teacher at Huntington School, York

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