

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AND CRISS

Often we are asked how Project CRISS and its philosophy of learning fit into situations other than the standard classroom learning experience. The following article, written by Tristan Komlos and Nancy Legler, two teachers from Deer Park, Texas, affirms that the CRISS strategies work and are successful in an alternative school setting.

A WORKING ALTERNATIVE

Project CRISS in an alternative school? YES! Wolters Learning Center in Deer Park, Texas, is a self-paced, alternative high school of choice attended by over 200 students aged 15-20. Students work individually, with the teacher serving as facilitator. The students must pass the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test and earn a diploma based on the criteria set forth by the district's regular high school program. We have found that the CRISS strategies work and empower our at-risk students in this alternative setting.

After attending the Project CRISS training program in November/December of 1998, we decided to implement CRISS strategies immediately upon returning to our campus.

"Oh no," our kids protested, groaning about yet another change in the curriculum. "Please let us keep our fill-in-the-blank packets!"

"Throw out your packets!" we boldly insisted. "We are going to teach you how to learn and how to be responsible for your own education. You can use these strategies in any class, for any college or technical course, or with any job in the future."

Some teachers jumped in with this "all or nothing" approach while others gradually changed their curriculum—one packet, one concept at a time. But both types of teachers found student learning shifting from a "regurgitation" of the chapter facts to a more-than-surface-level and occasionally a very in-depth knowledge of the subject matter.

With surprisingly little individual instruction, students began highlighting, taking notes, and getting excited about passing tests. As students began reading and truly understanding the material, the atmosphere in the classrooms became quieter and more academic. The quality of student work improved dramatically. Students who initially protested the "new way" begged to try it, and the students' level of confidence in tackling difficult concepts soared.

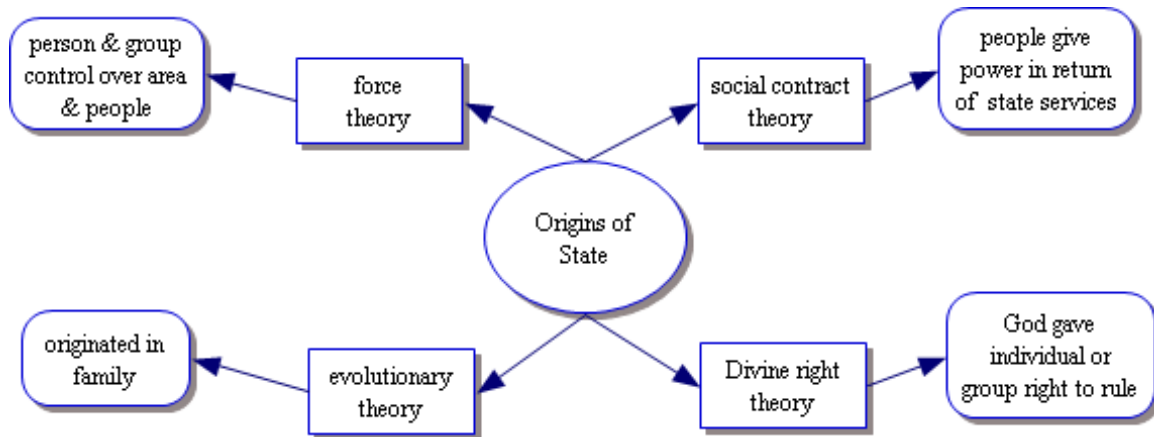
The notes the students were taking astounded us, and the understanding they exhibited reinforced our beliefs about the power of strategy instruction. Teachers implementing the strategies quickly ran out of space in their rooms to display work as each student adjusted to his or her own strategies and began doing quality work. What we, as teachers, observed was exciting, but it was the students' comments which validated our new approach.

Social Studies

With our new approach, students in the social studies classes worked through a textbook chapter by reading, highlighting, and taking notes. Then, before taking a test, they highlighted their own notes.

The students have learned the CRISS strategies individually and now work with *Power Notes*, *Two-Column Notes*, *Concept and Vocabulary Mapping*, *Graphic Organizers*, and *Content Frames* until they find the strategy that works best for them. No longer are students "filling in the blanks" and asking questions like, "Where is the answer?" Instead, questions utilize higher-level thinking, "What does this mean?" "Why does that happen?"

A student in a government class used this Concept Map to take notes in preparation for a test.



In taking responsibility for their own note-taking, students are truly reading the material and stopping only to highlight, ask questions, and take notes. Students are proud of their work and almost always pass tests. Each student is encouraged to add one of his own questions to a chapter test (based on the *Question-Answer-Relationship [QAR]* strategy, pp. 70-74, CRISS manual), and we are creating computer-based, student-generated test banks for each subject. This year we are trying something new—tests which include only essay questions. Students find these “easy” because their notes provide a structure that helps them organize information for writing. It’s great practice for the written part of our state assessment, too. Recently, a student confided that while babysitting a fifth grader and helping her study science notes, she suggested using a highlighter to understand the main ideas and vocabulary words. Wow! Students teaching students and assimilating their knowledge into the “real” world.

English & Journalism

As we incorporate more CRISS strategies into our English and journalism classes, we are pleased to see the students making real connections with the literature they choose to read. After we taught them to organize the information from a novel or short story in a *Content Frame*, (pp. 143-146, CRISS manual), they became better at analyzing character motivations and plot developments. We couldn’t believe how much more thorough they were than when we simply asked them to write a summary. Several students, after studying the play *Pygmalion (My Fair Lady)*, decided to create and use a content frame for the characters. (See the student example top of page 3.)

One student, after having read the short story, *The Outcasts of Poker Flats*, created a similar character chart using different category headings. He selected “the character’s profession,” “a quote from the story exemplifying the character,” “transformation of the character’s personality,” and “movie stars” who would be cast into each character’s role, if the story were made into a movie. What great proof of students in charge of their own learning!

To understand different types of literature, such as Transcendentalism or Romanticism, students highlighted the information in the text which related to each type and then transferred it to a *Concept of Definition* vocabulary map (pp.197-204, CRISS manual). In another lesson, students used *Venn Diagrams* (pp. 97-100, CRISS manual) to compare and contrast characters and also authors. With both strategies, they added supporting quotes from the selection and pictures cut out from magazines to reinforce their understanding further.

Pygmalion Content Frame

Character name	Description	Goal	Purpose	How he/she treated Eliza	Change	Quote
Eliza Doolittle	She was a flower seller “nobody”, very poor. Independent	To become a lady.	Eliza was the main character in the play.	Even though Eliza was a flower girl, she still held her head high.	Eliza became a lady.	“Ah-ow-oo-ooh.”
Colonel Pickering	A gentleman to the letter. Very nice to Eliza, treated her like she was a queen.	To win the bet, but also see Eliza succeed.	One of the major characters in the play. There to help Higgins turn Eliza into a lady.	He never treated Eliza like a flower girl. He always treated her like lady.	Did not change at all.	“It’s really amazing. I haven’t taken half of it in, you know.”

Reporters from the journalism classes used *Two-Column Notes* (pp. 118-141, CRISS manual) and *QARs* to practice asking relevant questions that required more than one-word answers.

We do not use all of the strategies right now, but as we use our favorites more, we (teachers and students) continue to adjust and adapt the strategies to expand our repertoire.

Field Trips

Before taking two extra curricular field trips, one to see the opera, *La Traviata* and the other to explore the exhibits at the Houston Holocaust Museum, two teachers met with the students during their lunch breaks. For each trip, the teachers started by working through the “K” and “W” parts of the *Know-Want to learn-Learned (KWL)* strategy (pp. 83-90, CRISS manual). The students read various sources and researched to find the answers to their questions. They created *Free-Form Maps* (See *Picture Notes*, pp. 106-108, CRISS manual) about what they had learned and presented their maps in a gallery format. Next, they filled in the “L” section of the KWL and corrected any misconceptions generated in the “K”. Students were not just being told information. They were learning by creating their own understanding. The students really impressed the docent at the Holocaust Museum. She praised them for being so well prepared and focused, and she commented on how much better behaved they were than other groups she had hosted. CRISS strategies offered our students the opportunity to garner this praise.

At-Risk Students

We discovered that these strategies work with all of our students, but our at-risk students—those who struggle—benefitted the most. The strategies gave them ways to focus their learning and sort through difficult material. Ultimately, they gained an understanding that would not have been reached by reading, answering the fill-in-the-blank questions, and taking a test. By implementing CRISS strategies throughout the Wolters’ curriculum, we have given the at-risk students the tools for learning, not just in their English, social studies, math, and science classes, but in the “real” world, too.

Implementation

We continue to be amazed and thrilled at the progress our students are making since we started to use Project CRISS. The shift in student attitudes is happening, because learning is replacing boredom and misbehavior.

By January, we will have trained our entire staff of 24, including principals, through a series of one-day and half-day inservices. In addition, the administration, with teacher input, has decided to include the evidence of CRISS implementation as part of their teacher appraisal.

Ernie Salazar, the principal of Wolters Learning Center, used these strategies himself while taking notes at an administrators' training. The other principals questioned him when they saw his unusual style of notes. "Oh, this is just a strategy that I learned at our last staff inservice," he replied. "Two of my teachers are training our campus in Project CRISS."

Britt Williams, a math teacher, got excited when she saw the Holocaust Museum use the KWL at a recent exhibit she visited. She immediately reported to us, "I knew that strategy! We learned it already!" The campus is seeing and using Project CRISS in their classrooms and beyond.

In addition, we are so convinced that CRISS can be a valuable tool for all alternative schools, that we have written a proposal to do an awareness presentation at the Texas Alternative Association of Education Conference in February, hoping to "spread the good news!" [Note: CRISS learned that the proposal submitted by Tristan and Nancy was accepted.]

Project CRISS works. It empowers our students and gives them the strategies ***to take charge*** of their own learning. ***It works*** with at-risk and special education students. ***It works*** in alternative settings. ***CRISS works!***

Tristan teaches language arts and journalism at Wolters and Nancy teaches social studies and chairs the department. We thank them for their devotion to CRISS and for this informative article.

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