



Teacher-as-Researcher, Making CRISS a Hobbit Habit!

By Susan Steffan

Marengo Community High School (MCHS) is a single school district in a rural community about 60 miles west of Chicago. This is my sixth year teaching English and drama at MCHS. I cannot imagine doing anything else, but teaching was not my first vocational choice in life. As a matter of fact, it was 17 years after college that I embarked on my first year in front of a classroom. With six children of my own and a dusty teaching certificate pulled from the bottom of my cedar chest, I had determination to make up for lack of experience. I quickly realized that teaching wasn't at all what it was when I had been a student teacher in 1983, so I enrolled in a Master's program to make up for lost time. The final requirement for graduation was an in-depth applied research project. Choosing the topic was not difficult; MCHS had just participated in an in-service training on Project CRISS.

As a result of low state test scores, the School Improvement Plan Team at MCHS concluded that improvement in reading and writing skills was a priority and would continue to be the focus for school improvement. The School Improvement Plan Team looked for a program that would be implemented across the curriculum to all students in all classrooms. This focus led to Project CRISS. The CRISS manual stated the program was founded as a result of frustration with student passivity. The first chapter of the CRISS manual put my own dissatisfaction in print, "... students did not have sufficient knowledge about how to learn and, consequently, remained dependent upon us to do the learning for them. Our students weren't leaving our classrooms with the skills needed for life-long learning." (Santa, C. M., Havens, L. T. & Valdes, B., 2004, p. 3). I decided to research if the implementation of this program in my classroom would improve my students' reading comprehension skills.

For the study, I chose eleven of the CRISS strategies; K-W-L, Pre/Post Reading Entries, Free Writes, Pattern Puzzles, the Frayer Model, Three-Minute Pause/Prediction, Venn Diagram, Picture Notes, One-Sentence Summaries, Story Plan, and RAFT. The CRISS strategies were integrated into a specific literature unit I had already prepared and had taught to students the previous year. This five week unit covered the novel *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien (1936). Comparing the students' scores on the 130-question, final unit test with the test results from the previous year's scores would provide me with quantifiable data that would indicate whether or not and to what extent, if any, a change had occurred in the students' ability to comprehend the material. This study was conducted on all the students in my three sophomore English classes.

I wanted to be sure I was comparing apples to apples so I first compiled the unit test scores for the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd hour sophomore English classes from a short story unit taught at the beginning of the school year 2003-2004 and the year 2004-2005. This unit was taught in the same way to each year's set of classes without the implementation of Project CRISS and before I had received training in Project CRISS. The unit consisted of three short stories and studies in the elements of literature. A comparison of these test scores was done to see if the two years were similar in number and scores. The total number of students was similar and the average of the test scores as well as the overall grade distribution was similar.

Next, we began the reading unit on *The Hobbit* with activities that explored students' background knowledge of the topic of fantasy and the themes of friendship and heroism. The CRISS strategies used were K-W-L, Pre/Post Reading Entries, and Free Writes. I taught the students how to use these strategies through modeling and then guided them through the application of the strategies to the selected unit.

As the classes progressed through the nineteen chapters of *The Hobbit*, other CRISS strategies were introduced, implemented in the same format as the first ones were, and repeated where appropriate. These strategies included Pattern Puzzles, the Frayer Model, Three-Minute Pause/Prediction, Venn Diagram, Picture Notes, One-Sentence Summaries, Story Plan, and RAFT.

At the conclusion of *The Hobbit* post-reading activities, students took the same 130 question, teacher-created final unit test that pupils in school year 2003-2004 took. Scores were then compiled and compared from the two years to determine if comprehension improved. When analyzed, the test data collected demonstrated a slight improvement in student comprehension. On the following page, Table 1 shows the percentage scores on *The Hobbit* unit test for school year 2003-2004 with an average score of 69%. Table 3 shows the percentage scores on *The Hobbit* unit test for school year 2004-2005 with an average score of 74% reflecting a 5% improvement in test scores between the two years. Tables 2 and 4 show the total number of each letter grade students received on the test in school years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 respectively. In school

year 2003-2004, 17, or 31%, of the students failed the test. In school year 2004-2005, five, or 10%, of the students failed the test. **This shows a 21% decrease in the percentage of students who failed the unit test from school year 2003-2004 to 2004-2005.** This, to me, is the most significant result of this study. Although the overall average test scores increased by only 5% from year 2003-2004 to 2004-2005, the failure rate was reduced by 21%.

Part of the Project CRISS philosophy is that students who are metacognitive are better learners (Santa, et al. 2004). According to the founders of Project CRISS, students who are already able to learn have developed some metacognitive skills and will out-perform their peers. If this is true, then little movement in the scores of students who already achieve should not be surprising, but movement in students with poor metacognitive skills would be expected. This movement of students from “failing” to “passing” led me to conclude that the Project CRISS staff-development plan is successful in improving reading comprehension by building metacognitive skills in learners.

My study found the Project CRISS program is effective for classroom instruction in four areas.

#1 Improved Comprehension

First, and most important, student comprehension did improve, even though the improvement was only 5% on the overall average score. I wonder how much more improvement will be realized as I become more skilled in the instruction and application of the strategies and as the students become more comfortable and self-directed with them.

#2 Failing Students Realized Greatest Growth

Second, the students who were failing realized the greatest growth. Finding a program that equips teachers to help the struggling students achieve is something all teachers hope for. These are the students who most need the assistance and will realize the greatest benefits to their improved learning.

#3 Enjoyment of the Lessons

Third, the students and instructor enjoyed the strategies. It may be hard to believe, but these strategies make learning fun. I found many opportunities for students to use their imagination and for the students and me to interact in ways that were not present in my traditional methods of instruction. My own enjoyment of the lesson was a contributing factor to the students’ success, although another research design would have to be implemented to determine the validity of this supposition.

#4 Ease of Implementation

Fourth, the CRISS program is easy to implement. I found that most of these strategies were not hard to understand or difficult to adopt as a part of my standard teaching practice. Many educators as a part of their individual style and method

Data for *The Hobbit* Unit Test, School Year 2003-2004

Table 1 Actual Percentage Scores (Average score: 69%)

<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>F</u>
89	79	68	58	
89	79	67	58	
88	78	63	58	
87	78	61	57	
87	78	61	56	
87	77	60	52	
85	76		52	
85	76		51	
84	75		49	
84	72		49	
84	72		48	
83	71		48	
82	70		48	
82			46	
82			45	
82			38	
81			35	
80				
80				

Table 2

Grade	# of Students
A	0
B	19
C	13
D	6
F	17

Data for *The Hobbit* Unit Test, School Year 2004-2005

Table 3 Actual Percentage Scores (Average score: 74%)

<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>F</u>
91	89	78	69	58
90	88	78	69	56
90	87	76	68	55
90	86	75	68	52
	86	75	68	52
	85	74	67	
	85	73	65	
	83	73	65	
	83	71	65	
	82	71	63	
	82		61	
	82		61	
	82		61	
	81		61	
	81		60	

Table 4

Grade	# of Students
A	4
B	15
C	10
D	15
F	5

may already use some of these approaches. I found lots of similarities to stratagem already used within my practice. The Project CRISS manual is a comprehensive, easy-to-follow guide with strategies fully explained and examples provided.

I expected that infusing the unit of study with the CRISS strategies would lengthen the unit, but this did not happen. Much of the material I normally covered in traditional teaching methods was covered in the implementation of the CRISS strategies and repetition was unnecessary.

Upon reflection, I believe my school district's decision to instruct the staff in the use of Project CRISS was a prudent one. It would follow that if one 5-week study in one class produced a 5% increase in test scores, implementation of these strategies over the course of a year in all classes would multiply those results. Project CRISS, if practiced by the majority of the staff, could have dramatic, positive results on student learning and, consequently, test scores. As teachers augment their lessons to include the Project CRISS stratagem and as students practice and perform these strategies as a part of their daily learning routines, both teachers and students truly will have become life-long learners.

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