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Meet the IRIS Center: Online Resources for Today's Teachers

Naomi Chowdhuri Tyler

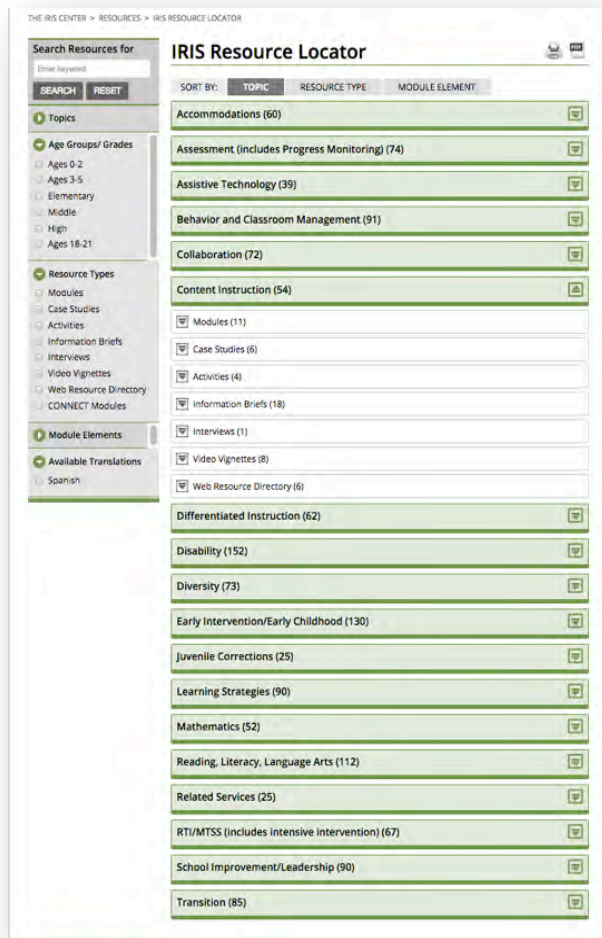
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Abstract: *The IRIS Center, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, creates free online resources about classroom strategies and effective, evidence-based practices for use with all students, including struggling learners and students with disabilities. This paper provides a guided tour of the IRIS barrier-free Website and the vast array of resources it contains, including Modules, Case Study Units, Information Briefs, and so much more. These engaging, interactive resources make it easy for teachers to gain knowledge and skills about instructional practices that work, and to implement them immediately into their instruction.*

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funds more than 50 national centers in its Technical Assistance and Dissemination (TA&D) Network. The purpose of these centers is to provide services and supports to key stakeholders that include the families of children with disabilities and school, district, and state personnel.

Among these national centers is the IRIS Center, which OSEP has funded continually since 2001.

Dedicated to improving education outcomes for all children and students, including struggling learners and those with disabilities, the IRIS Center develops and disseminates free, engaging online resources about evidence-based instructional and behavioral practices. These resources, designed to bridge the research-to-practice gap, are intended for use in college teacher preparation programs, in professional development (PD) activities for practicing professionals, and by independent learners. All of the IRIS resources are available at no cost on the center's barrier-free, Website (iriscenter.com) that meets Section 508 and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 standard AA accessibility standards.



Resources

The IRIS Center offers hundreds of resources—including modules, case study units, activities, and a number of other Web-based tools—that are developed in collaboration with nationally recognized U.S. researchers and education experts, many of whom work at the top universities in the country. The current resources (see the IRIS Resource Locator at <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/iris-resource-locator/>) provide information on evidence-based practices in 18 topic areas, including behavior and classroom management; content instruction; learning strategies; reading, literacy, and language arts; and many others of importance to educators in today’s classrooms. Clicking on any of the topics in the IRIS Resource Locator will open a drop-down menu of resources addressing that particular topic. Resources can also be sorted by age groups/grades, type of resource, module elements (e.g., audios, videos, interactive activities), and Spanish-language availability. The center currently offers 80 resources in Spanish and more are added all of the time.

STAR Legacy Modules

The center’s signature resources, *STAR Legacy* Modules offer in-depth looks at evidence-based practices within each of the aforementioned 18 topic areas. For example, within the Early Intervention/Early Childhood topic area, IRIS offers instructional modules such as [*Dual Language Learners with Disabilities: Supporting Young Children in the Classroom*](#), [*Early Childhood Behavior Management: Developing and Teaching Rules*](#), and [*Early Childhood Environments: Designing Effective Classrooms*](#).

Based on How People Learn (HPL), the adult learning theory developed by Dr. John Bransford and his colleagues (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Harris, Bransford, & Brophy, 2002), IRIS Modules translate research findings into practical information, making evidence-based practices more accessible and easier to learn than would otherwise be possible for many busy educators or novice learners (i.e., college students). HPL is founded on a problem- or challenge-based approach, which opens opportunities for students to achieve a fuller understanding of instructional or classroom issues and challenges. HPL promotes different approaches to traditional methods of adult instruction and assessment, and organizes thinking about the design of effective learning environments through four overlapping lenses: learner, knowledge, assessment, and community.



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The *STAR* (Software Technology for Action and Reflection) *Legacy* model was designed as a way to introduce and balance the features of these lenses for instructional settings. The model uses an inquiry cycle that anchors learning, is easy to understand, and is pedagogically sound. The cycle is composed of

five parts that have been repeatedly recognized in educational research as important, yet often implicit, components of learning (Schwartz et al., 1999). IRIS *STAR Legacy* Modules incorporate these five components, balancing the four HPL lenses, while incorporating new and innovative methods to make learning engaging and interactive.

- *Challenge* – Modules are organized around case-based scenarios. Research shows that effective instruction often begins with an engaging scenario or challenge to introduce the lesson and invite learner inquiry (Barron et al., 1998).
- *Initial Thoughts* – Learners then generate their own ideas in order to explore what they currently know about the Challenge. Discovering the extent of a learner’s prior knowledge and experiences regarding the problem or case-based scenarios—and building upon that knowledge—is a means through which to enhance learning. This can be particularly true for learners from culturally diverse backgrounds, who often struggle to study content in ways that are antithetical to their learning preferences (Cobb, 2001).
- *Perspectives & Resources* – Next, students access resources relevant to the Challenge. These resources are presented as nuggets of information and may include text, interviews with experts, videos, and interactive activities. These resources often create “ah-ha!” experiences, moments during which learners discover information or perspectives they had not previously considered.
- *Wrap Up* – The cycle continues with a summary and an opportunity for the learner to review his or her Final Thoughts (which are the same questions asked in the Initial Thoughts section of the Module). Learning is considered to have occurred when there is disparity between initial and final thoughts, with greater disparity indicating greater learning (e.g., Bransford, 1979; Schwartz & Bransford, 1998).
- *Assessment* – In this final component of the cycle, learners receive assessment opportunities to test their understanding of the Module’s content, apply their knowledge, and return to the Perspectives & Resources section if necessary.

Find Resources that Fit Your Needs

The IRIS Resource Locator, mentioned above, is the starting point to locate IRIS resources. Once users identify what resources interest them, IRIS offers additional supports to help them utilize those materials effectively. The Using IRIS portion of the IRIS Website can be particularly helpful for District Education Officers and Special Education Officers as they plan and provide professional development support to teachers. When a user clicks on the Using IRIS tab at the top of the IRIS Homepage, a dropdown menu provides him or her with role-related options for faculty, PD providers, or independent learners. By clicking on the PD Provider link, users can access an array of resources that offer tips and suggestions for using IRIS resources in PD activities, such as:

- PD Provider Guide — A handout that summarizes different ways of using IRIS resources
- Using IRIS Resources — A summary of the *STAR Legacy* Module components and IRIS Case Study Units
- Navigating the IRIS Website and Resources — Step-by-step video demonstrations of key IRIS resources
- The IRIS Adult Learning Theory Module — A detailed explanation of the HPL theory and *STAR Legacy Cycle*
- Wrap-Around Concept Maps — Diagrams that display supporting materials that can be used to extend and deepen the information included in IRIS Modules and Case Study Units
- Sample Professional Development (PD) Activity Collection — A resource to help PD providers integrate IRIS resources into training events for teachers



Examples of Use for Professional Development

Because the IRIS resources are open-access educational resources—available at no-cost on a barrier-free Website—they are used widely throughout the United States. For example, the state of Alabama requires all newly hired teachers to work through two IRIS Modules: *Classroom Management (Part 1): Learning the Components of a Comprehensive Behavior Management Plan* and *Classroom Management (Part 2): Developing Your Own Comprehensive Behavior Management Plan*. Each district can determine how it handles the accountability for module completion. In some cases, teachers work through the modules and submit their Assessment answers to a district coordinator; in other cases, the building principals oversee the submissions. Teachers who move from one district to another are considered “new hires” in the second district and are thus required to work through the modules again, serving as a “refresher” course to maintain or improve their classroom behavior management skills.

To improve the transition planning process, several districts in Alabama require key stakeholders to work through two IRIS Modules—*Secondary Transition: Helping Students with Disabilities Plan for Post-High School Settings* and *Secondary Transition: Interagency*

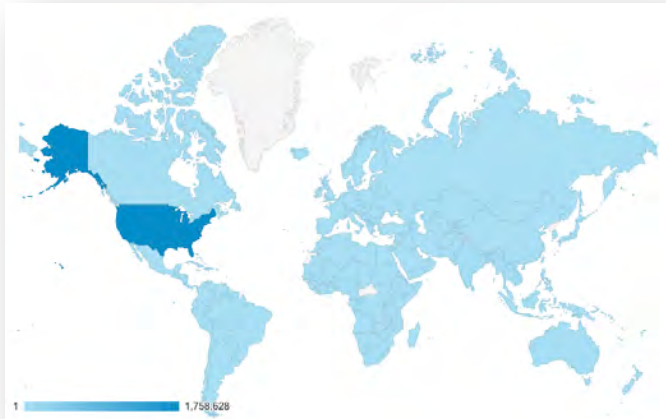
Collaboration. These key stakeholders include transition coaches, special education teachers, special education coordinators, and the parents of students with disabilities. This process continues to unfold as more districts are introduced to the IRIS transition series.

In Utah, IRIS resources, particularly the modules, are highlighted on the Utah Professional Development Network (UPDN) Website. The goal of the UPDN is to provide quality professional development for the state’s educators, including teachers, school leaders and administrators, and related service providers. The UPDN encourages the use of IRIS Modules to upgrade the knowledge and skills of practicing educators, many of them with years of classroom experience, about evidence-based practices. Through this statewide initiative, teachers and principals receive professional development on topics that district leaders have determined to be of critical need. The IRIS resources are also used on individual basis, often assigned by a principal who feels that a particular teacher needs a specific set of skills updated.

Monroe School District, in the state of Washington, has used the six-module series on classroom and behavior management (a) to create basic and advanced knowledge for school psychologists, counselors, general and special education teachers, and school leaders on how to support positive behaviors, and (b) for training for all new special education staff. In the second instance, the staff meets six times per year, work through the modules in pairs or in teams, after which they apply their newfound knowledge to situations in their individual classrooms.

Use and Reach

In 2017, the IRIS Website hosted 2.1 million visits. The map (right) shows the 219 countries and territories worldwide in which IRIS resources were used (indicated in blue). A conservative data analysis of use in the United States indicates that the IRIS Website was directly linked to or accessed by nearly all 50 state education agencies, approximately 1,500 school districts, and by 90% of the colleges and universities that have both general education and special education teacher preparation programs.



Not surprisingly, the IRIS Center and its resources have been the subject of extensive examination, study, and commentary. Of special note, Test and his colleagues (2015) conducted an analysis of the trustworthiness of Websites that claimed to provide information on evidence-based practices in special education. The IRIS Center was among only a small handful of sites that received top ratings for both levels of trust and quality of evidence. Similar recognition of IRIS resources as valid, reliable, and trusted can be found in practitioner-focused journals and newsletters: *TEACHING Exceptional Children* (e.g., Mason-Williams & Wasburn-

Top 5 Modules (2017)		
Rank	Module	Visits
1	Universal Design for Learning	101,641
2	Differentiated Instruction	101,045
3	Functional Behavioral Assessment	100,428
4	Classroom Management (Part 1)	82,115
5	RTI (Part 1): Overview	77,601

Moses, 2016), *Insights into Learning Disabilities* (e.g., Ecker, 2016), *Intervention in School and Clinic* (e.g., Yell, Katsiyannis, Losinski, & Marshall, 2016), *Young Exceptional Children* (e.g., Rahn, Coogle, Hanna, & Lewellen, 2015), and *Early Childhood Education Journal* (e.g., Purper, 2016).

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