

LITERACY 2000

Background and Rationale

Content area reading instruction is often the focus of many university courses and school-based staff development programs. It continues to be a popular topic at conferences and as material for articles in professional journals. As professional dialogue includes discussion of strategies for integrating learning, content area reading instruction has become even more popular.

The phrase "content area reading instruction" often suggests reading instruction within content instruction. While this reasoning is basically accurate, it actually reflects a somewhat limited perspective. A teacher may very well perceive, initially, that a recommendation is being made to add the teaching of reading to an already filled instructional day of teaching the content associated with the subject area primarily taught. Time is always a constraint. It is challenging enough to adequately deliver the content in the limited time available for instruction, without having to add more to any given instructional lesson. Yet, content comprises an extensive amount of information and ideas that must, somehow, be taught by the teacher. In many content areas, textbooks and other text materials are used in instruction. However, not all students are proficient in their reading of the text material. The conscientious teacher must deliver a significant amount of content and must help students learn that set of information and concepts by way of resource materials that may present a learning challenge.

The purpose of this article is to facilitate reflection upon one's perceptions regarding content area reading instruction and its potential for application in the classroom. Several key points are introduced that encourage a more comprehensive view of content area reading instruction. In promoting a degree of reflection and consideration, several assumptions are provided associated with the nature of the learner and the nature of content. It is the opinion of this author that before considering implementing content area reading instruction in the classroom, it is important--and necessary--to examine and reflect upon one's perspectives related to teaching, learning, and content area reading instruction, itself. An overview of representative strategies is then provided for each of the skills areas within content area reading instruction: vocabulary, comprehension, study skills, and writing.

Content Area Reading Instruction--Key Points

Any discussion of content area reading instruction must begin with an examination of one's beliefs about this construct. All too often educators might think of content area reading instruction as reading instruction attached or added onto content instruction. There might be a tendency to think of reading instruction in a more narrow and limited fashion, for example, teaching reading skills such as word recognition skills or adding 15 minutes of vocabulary instruction at the conclusion of the "more legitimate" instruction in subject matter content.

An alternative and much more instructionally manageable way of considering content area reading instruction is to think of content area reading instruction as the integration of content instruction with communication skills instruction (Conley, 1995; Herber, 1978; Herber & Herber, 1993; Vacca & Vacca, 1999). The model proposed here can be described as integrated and wholistic in nature. Reading instruction is embedded within communication skills instruction. Indeed, it is one of the five communication skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. Content instruction and communication skills instruction are delivered as a whole and at the same time. Therefore, it is possible to integrate content instruction and communication skills instruction. This is known as "content area reading instruction."

Content area reading instruction is comprehensive. It includes all of the communication skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing (Conley, 1995). Importantly, it also involves thinking/reasoning abilities and higher-level thinking skills. While reading is an important component of content area reading instruction, it is desirable to think of reading along with the related communication processes, as well. Content area reading instruction would therefore include instruction in not only reading, but in other communication skills. Included, too, would be instruction in helping students utilize reasoning abilities, problem-solving skills, and higher-level thinking abilities.

As more specifically applied to content instruction, content area reading instruction focuses on promoting students' vocabulary development, comprehension development, utilization of study strategies, and writing proficiency. Instruction that includes attention to vocabulary development helps students to acquire an understanding of the meanings of the words or terms associated with the content. Vocabulary development also helps students acquire the skills that help them learn the meanings of words with greater degrees of independence. Attention to comprehension development helps students to better understand what it is they are learning and reading. Instruction in study skills and study strategies facilitates development of each student's system for learning. Writing activities can be used in content instruction to help students acquire understanding of content.

The goal of content area reading instruction is to help students learn content and to help them learn the related communication and reasoning/higher-level thinking abilities needed to learn that content (Herber, 1978; Herber & Herber, 1993). The goal is not to turn a content teacher into a reading teacher who is removed from the content and classroom. The goal is not to focus on reading skills--or communication skills--within instruction that is separate from content instruction. Vocabulary development, comprehension development, acquisition of study skills and study strategies, and writing proficiency all applied within the teaching of content will help students, ultimately, to learn the content more effectively. It will also help students to gain competency with skills, competencies, and "tools" to help them "learn how to learn." Ultimately, students attain a greater level of independence with respect to their own learning.

Beginning to Consider Adopting Content Area Reading Instruction

If a teacher wishes to consider adopting and subsequently implementing content area reading instruction for use in the classroom, several suggestions are presented which focus on the learner and the content. These might be thought of as philosophical assumptions regarding the learner and the content. Before selecting specific strategies and using instructional materials, it is beneficial to reflect upon one's own perceptions associated with these.

Considerations with Respect to the Learner

Learning is maximized when learners actively participate in their own learning. In spite of the fact that good teachers try very hard to create the best learning environment using the most effective teaching techniques and instructional strategies, we cannot force our students to learn. This does not mean that all of our efforts are wasted. It just means that students, themselves, have a responsibility for trying to do their best, within a productive learning environment. They need to exert effort. They need to try and to be persistent with their own learning.

With respect to content area reading instruction, instruction needs to focus on the role and responsibility of the learner (Vacca & Vacca, 1999). Students can acquire strategies that help them become more involved in their own learning. They can learn how to use prior knowledge as the foundation for learning. They can also be guided in the selection and use of strategies that will help them monitor their own learning (Vacca & Vacca, 1999). Included within the application of content area reading instruction should be strategies for helping students to become active participants in their own learning. The instructional use of questioning and brainstorming techniques, discussion, study guides, projects, and other experientially based activities encourage students to become more invested in their own learning.

Unfortunately we have probably all, at one time or another had the unpleasant experience of meeting a type of student who chooses to play the role of passive recipient in the instructional process. That person almost seems to challenge the teacher to deliver learning on the proverbial silver platter, with no effort on the part of the student. As we well know, life does not work that way; learning does not work that way, either. Ideally, students need to choose to learn and to do their best. They need to choose to invest themselves in their own learning. What has been learned will be meaningful, understandable, remembered, and made relevant only to the degree that this actually occurs.

It is important that we help students learn, use, and apply the content we want them to learn. However, learning is maximized when what is being learned is related to the learner's prior knowledge and background of experiences. Content instruction will become more understandable if we can help students perceive the connections or associations between what they are learning and what they already know. The simple but effective use of strategies such as questions and brainstorming activities help in this regard. While students need to learn what it is we want them to learn, they also need to use and apply the product of that learning for maximum understanding, retention, and relevancy. It is not enough to receive initial

instruction in the set of information and ideas that comprise the content. True and lasting learning occurs to the degree that students have meaningful opportunities to actually use and to apply what they have learned, considering the associations they are able to perceive in light of their prior knowledge.

It is necessary that we help students more fully learn how to learn and to be able to monitor their own learning. It goes without saying that we want our students to learn our content more effectively. Yet, we also want them to acquire the skills and tools that will enable them to learn how to learn, that is, to pursue their own learning with greater degrees of independence. This idea speaks to the notion of helping students learn not only for the moment, but for all time. This implies that students acquire proficiency with the various skills and skills areas which will help them pursue learning within content instruction, that is, vocabulary development, comprehension development, study skills and study strategies acquisition, and writing proficiency. Achieving independence in learning also implies that students will be better able to acquire those skills and abilities that promote metacognitive awareness, that is, one's own monitoring of learning. Strategies can be used within content instruction that help students to attain this very important ability.

Considerations With Respect to the Content

Before selecting and using strategies and instructional materials to include in content instruction, it is necessary to study our content very carefully, to identify what it is that we want our students to learn. In applying the notion of content area reading instruction, the teacher must consider various factors associated with the content, that is, the substance of instruction. A suggestion is made here to identify the important concepts or ideas and related information associated with the content. Essentially the teacher engages in a content analysis, an analytical planning process in which response is made to the question "What do I want my students to learn?" (Misulis, 1997). Of course, the teacher uses all pertinent resource materials available including state and school-developed curriculum guides and syllabi. The content analysis process, however, will facilitate the teacher's use of these curricular resources.

Initially analyzing content to identify the concepts or ideas that connect pieces of information benefits instructional planning and ultimately the delivery of instruction. Analysis of content to identify more global concepts provides a useful tool for continued instructional planning and delivery. The focus becomes the framework of concepts which then leads to a more coherent, organized planning and delivery of information associated with the concepts. Instructional planning initially based on an extensive set of pieces of information and facts might be overwhelming because of the quantity of the information. Unfortunately, the subsequent delivery might not be presented in as clear and understandable a way as possible. Analysis of content that initially focuses on the concepts will result in planning and instruction that helps students learn the many facts and pieces of information, in an organized, understandable way that highlight their associations and relatedness.

After the content has been analyzed to identify the set of concepts and related information, the teacher then analyzes the content to identify the communication skills that can be used within content instruction to enhance students' learning of the content. Specifically, the teacher would identify skill areas such as vocabulary acquisition abilities, comprehension abilities, study strategies and study skills, and writing proficiency that could be used to help students learn the content more effectively.

Selection of Strategies

After analyzing and reflecting upon considerations involving the students and the content itself, the teacher then would select specific strategies and activities that help students learn the content and the related tools for learning. These consist of strategies that help students learn--and, importantly, help them learn how to learn. The content area reading strategies would help to develop and reinforce students' proficiency in four areas within content instruction: vocabulary, comprehension, study skills and study strategies, and writing. Strategies and instructional materials would be selected and used directly within content instruction, rather than in instruction separate from the delivery of the subject matter, itself.

Vocabulary instruction and reinforcement should focus on the vocabulary words associated with the content, itself. Instructional activities would then be an integral component of the delivery of the subject matter. A review of the use of context clues, structural analysis skills, and dictionary skills can promote independent acquisition of the meanings of vocabulary words. In order for words to be understood and retained, there must be opportunities for reinforcement of those words within meaningful activities. Reinforcement activities that can be included in content instruction include matching exercises, multiple-choice activities, word puzzles, categorizing activities, writing activities, and demonstration-types of activities such as role-playing, actual use of the words within experientially-oriented activities and so forth. Use of graphic organizers such as the structured overview (Barron, 1979) or a semantic map (Heimlich & Pittelman, 1986) enhance awareness of the relationships among concepts and the vocabulary words associated with those concepts.

Comprehension strategies can be used throughout content instruction, and may well be placed at the beginning of instruction to activate the learners' prior knowledge, in the middle of instruction as a technique to promote guidance and support of learning, and/or at the conclusion of content instruction for enrichment and extension of what has been learned. Questions and comprehension strategies can be used to help students understand at all levels of comprehension, from obtaining the specific information, to interpreting information, creating ideas, analyzing, synthesizing, and applying information and ideas, and even generating new ideas beyond what is presented. Use of strategies such as Question-Answer Relationships or QARs (Raphael, 1984) facilitate students' comprehension at several levels. Teacher-developed study guides such as a K-W-L strategy and guide sheets (Ogle, 1986), Levels of Comprehension Guides, Patterns Guides, and Reasoning Guides (Herber, 1978; Vacca &

Vacca, 1999) provide the guidance and directions for students as they engage in the learning experience. While it is important that students acquired the information, the facts, associated with content, it is critically important that instruction provide opportunities for students to move beyond the literal level of comprehension.

We want students to know, to understand, and yet to be reflective. These students should be able to apply their learning and to engage in critical and higher-level thinking.

Study skills and study strategies can also be taught and reinforced throughout instruction, as the need arises for their use and application. These consist of the skills that help students to learn, understand, organize, and retain information and ideas effectively and efficiently. Indeed, utilization and proficiency in study skills contribute to a student's system for learning. Study skills instruction focuses on reference skills, organizational skills, and specialized study skills. Reference skills include those skills and competencies that facilitate students' use of special reference materials, such as the encyclopedia, atlas, library acquisition skills, use of Internet. Organizational skills include notetaking skills such as the Cornell Notetaking System (Pauk, 1974), and outlining skills. Special study methods includes instruction in the use of strategies that provide a methodical approach to reading, such as the SQ3R (Robinson, 1941) and the Survey Technique (Aukerman, 1972), and other strategies such as those that promote time management. Students need to be informed of a variety of study strategies. With opportunities to use study strategies within learning contexts that warrant their use, students will ultimately select, use, perhaps even modify the strategies that can maximize their own learning, and therefore contribute to their own system for learning.

Writing proficiency can be developed truly at any point within a content lesson. Writing activities should be selected and utilized as they fit the instruction of the subject matter, that is, within meaningful contexts and occasions that would warrant their use, and therefore, maximize their effectiveness. Many possibilities exist with respect to incorporating writing into subject matter content. Some examples of writing activities include writing essays, reports, letters, critiques, descriptions of events, written notes or records based upon experiences or observations, writing summaries at the conclusion of class sessions, journal entries, written accounts that focus on perspective-taking, written interpretations of a sports event or a dramatic production, written explanation of the procedures for solving a problem, etc. The possibilities are limited only by the imagination.

Synthesis

In summary, content area reading instruction can be a very powerful tool in facilitating the learning of the subject matter associated with content instruction, and with equipping students with competencies or tools to facilitate their independent learning. Our goals for our students are extensive, multi-dimensional, and very significant. We do want our students to learn for the moment ... and for all time. In considering the potential application of content area reading instruction to instruction in content, it is necessary to first of all consider one's own

perspectives related to the nature of the learner, the nature of content; essentially of one's own philosophy of teaching and learning. An examination and reflection of these perspectives along with a more comprehensive understanding of content area reading instruction, will ultimately impact the teacher's level of comfort and the manageability of actually applying content area reading instruction to content instruction in the classroom.

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By Katherine Misulis Elizabeth Latosi-Sawin

KATHERINE MISULIS is associate professor in the Department of Foundations, Research, and Reading in the School of Education at East Carolina University, Greenville North Carolina. Her research and professional interests include content area reading instruction and effective teaching.

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