A Functional Approach to In-Service for Secondary Content-Area Teachers

W. John Harker
University of Victoria, British Columbia

Recommended Citation

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
**Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic**

A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO IN-SERVICE FOR SECONDARY CONTENT-AREA TEACHERS

W. John Harker
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

This report describes the development and implementation of an in-service program in reading instruction for practising secondary teachers. The program to date has been carried out in seven locations in the United States and Canada and has involved 247 teachers. Its development and implementation, and the evaluative data which have come from its use, provide valuable insights into secondary teachers' perceptions of reading instruction, and the needs of these teachers in an in-service setting.

Needs Assessment

Rather than remaining satisfied with preconceived notions of teachers' specific needs in reading, as a first step in developing the program, an assessment instrument was designed to determine teachers' own perceptions of their needs. As a result of using this instrument, the focus of the program has been sharpened and its credibility with teachers has been heightened through the initial determination and subsequent recognition of teachers' specific needs.

The Secondary Reading In-service Assessment form which was developed is shown below. It is normally completed by teachers about two weeks before the scheduling of the in-service program.

Secondary Reading In-Service Needs Assessment

As you know, in a few weeks you and your colleagues will be participating in an in-service program in secondary reading.

For this program to be as successful as possible, it would be helpful if you would indicate on the questionnaire below those topics which you particularly would like to be included.

Thank you for assisting in this way. We look forward to working with you soon.

(Answers, 1 = important, 2 = undecided, and 3 - not important)

1. Word-attack skills
2. Comprehension skills _____
3. Speed _____
4. Locating information _____
5. Organizing information _____
6. Retention skills _____
7. SQ3R _____
8. The nature of individual differences _____
9. Determining students' needs _____
10. Specific teaching techniques _____
11. Classroom organization strategies _____
12. Appropriate instructional materials _____

Figure 1 shows the prevailing trends in the accumulated responses of the two hundred and forty-seven teachers who have used the assessment so far. It is clear that the majority of teachers are relatively less interested in learning about specific reading and study skills than they are concerned with the nature and causes of the individual differences in reading, ways of determining students' particular reading and study skills needs, specific teaching techniques, ways of organizing their classrooms to accommodate students' reading and study skill demands, and techniques for selecting instructional materials—all topics having more to do with the process of instruction (the "how" of teaching) than the product ("what" to teach). These data suggest the teachers believe they already know about skills—their problem is how to implement skills instruction in their classrooms.

Figure 1
Topic Options
%'s as determined by Needs Assessment

```
         10  -  20  -  30  -  40  -  50  -  60  -  70  -  80     90
Word
Attack   xxxxxxxxx

Compre-
 hension xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Speed    x

Locating xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Organi-
    zing xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Reten-
    tion xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

SQ3R     xxxxxxxxx

Indivi-
   dual
Differ.  xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Student
 Needs   xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Teach.
Tech-
 niques  xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Classrm.
 Organiz
   ation xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Instruc-
 tional
Materials xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
```

While our initial reaction to the distinction between teacher' expressed need for help with the process as opposed to the product of reading instruction was caution ("Do they really know what context clues, etc., are?"), subsequent experience has proven the accuracy of this finding. Two factors seem to contribute to it. The first is that the emphasis on teaching secondary reading in recent years, and the informal discussion among teachers which this emphasis has produced, has created a pool of shared information among practising teachers about reading skills—teachers know what these skills are, but they don't know exactly how to go about teaching them in their classrooms. A second related factor is the collegial education provided by those relatively few younger teachers who have entered the profession in recent years and who have had pre-service or in some cases post-graduate courses in secondary reading. The expertise of these better-informed teachers has to some extent rubbed off on their colleagues. The result is that most practising secondary teachers today do know what reading and study skills are, but they need help in the process of teaching these skills. Moreover, the pattern of response as revealed by Figure 1 was almost identical in each of the seven locations where the needs assessment has been administered.

Program Content

Space limitations prevent an extensive outline of the specific contents of the in-service program which was developed. However, the following provides a general overview:

1. Introduction: Teaching Reading in Content Areas
   A. The range of reading abilities to be expected in the typical content area classroom
   B. The specificity of reading abilities in the content areas
2. Assessing Reading Abilities
   A. Standardized Tests
   B. Informal Tests
3. Determining Instructional Strategies
   A. Questioning Techniques
   B. Study Guides
4. Organizing the Classroom for Instruction
5. Selecting Instructional Materials

It can be seen that the emphasis of the program is placed on the process dimension of reading instruction as opposed to the product, this being the required emphasis indicated by the needs assessment.

Program Features

We believe that equally important with the actual content of the program are some of the features we tried to build into it. These may be summarized as follows:

Responsive—The program has a functional emphasis in that it is based on teaching reading in content areas and not on teaching reading as a separate subject divorced from the learning of specific content-area material. In this way teachers are able to see that the in-service program responds directly to their

particular instructional needs. To reinforce this linkage, we encourage teachers to bring and to use during the program examples of the content-area instructional material they teach from in their classrooms.

Participatory—There is an emphasis on individual and group participation and the accommodation of teachers' individual differences as these are evidenced by the various content-areas and grade level teachers teach. In this way we try to model effective teaching as well as preach it.

Contributory—We encourage teachers to talk to one another, to compare and share teaching ideas and solutions to mutually encountered problems. Besides directing the learning of teachers, we interpret our role to be catalysts in encouraging the contributory group learning of participants.

Structured—Since time is limited (usually to one day), we have found that a reasonably structured program is preferable to a loosely organized one which threatens to provide little more than an opportunity to share misinformation. While we encourage teachers to share, we also direct what is to be shared and how. Contrary to our initial misgivings about this approach based on our fear that teachers would resent this kind of directed activity, teachers generally seem quite accepting of this structuring.

Follow-Up—The structure for the program is provided by the booklet which we developed and which every teacher works through during the program. The booklet contains directions for activities in which participants engage and to which they contribute directly (e.g., determining appropriate reading, study skill instructional objectives, preparing a study guide, planning classroom organization, and individualizing instruction). The result is that at the conclusion of the program, each teacher takes away a mini-textbook which he or she has evolved from the program and which contains ideas and answers gained from directed activities and discussion with other teachers during the program. The philosophy here is that by providing something tangible to take away, teachers are encouraged to review and over time use the information they have gained rather than forget it or feel inhibited from applying it because of a sense of lost familiarity.

Evaluation

The final part of the program is its evaluation. Approximately two weeks after the program has been run, each participant is asked to complete the Secondary Reading In-service Evaluation which is shown below. A two-week interval has the effect of dampening any unrealistic euphoria generated by the program, and, more important, the interval also gives teachers time to apply and assess in their own classrooms some of the information and ideas which the program provides.

The results of the evaluation are summarized in Figure 2. As can be seen, teachers have determined most aspects of the program to be successful. The one really disappointing element is the apparent lack of follow-up in the schools. This is a perennial problem with in-service and one which seriously threatens its

<u>Secondary Reading In-Service Evaluation</u>

Approximately two weeks ago you participated in an in-service program in secondary reading.

It would be helpful if you could now indicate your response to the workshop as an aid in your teaching.

(Answers, 1 = Agree, 2 = undecided, and 3 = disagree)

1. The content was appropriate ⎯⎯⎯
2. The program was well organized ⎯⎯⎯
3. The program director was sensitive to my needs ⎯⎯⎯
4. The pace was appropriate ⎯⎯⎯
5. The program was about the right length ⎯⎯⎯
6. The objectives were made clear ⎯⎯⎯
7. The content met the objectives ⎯⎯⎯
8. I had adequate opportunity to participate ⎯⎯⎯
9. There has been suitable follow-up in my school ⎯⎯⎯
10. Further in-service is needed ⎯⎯⎯

Figure 2
Accumulated In-Service Evaluation
Percent Agree (N = 247)

```
                10  - 20  - 30  - 40  - 50  - 60  - 70  - 80  - 90
Appro-
  priate
  Content       xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Well
Organized       xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Sensitive
Direction       xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Appro-
  priate        xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
  Pace

Appropr.
  Length        xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Clear
Object-         xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
  ives

Object-
  ives          xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
  Met

Adequate
Particip.       xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Suitable
Follow-up       xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Further
In-Serv.        xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
```

effectiveness. It is also a problem area we plan to address in future administrations of the program by requiring school officials to quarantee a follow-up series of opportunities for teachers to meet and discuss their progress, and to continue to learn from one another as they gain more expertise in the teaching of secondary reading.