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DIFFERENTIATING TEXT ASSIGNMENTS IN CONTENT AREAS: SLICING THE TASK

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There are several ways to accommodate content reading assignments with students' varied reading levels. Rieck (1977) reported that many times content teachers simply do not expect their students to read the text. She found that tests given in content classrooms often covered only material from lectures and class discussions rather than text reading. In addition, students were rarely required to discuss their assigned readings.

Completely neglecting the text is a very limited way to accommodate students' abilities, however. Forcing students to rely on lectures and discussions for information makes them dependent upon others for information. In addition, there is much material available in textbooks, and guidance may be provided to help students comprehend it.

Teachers can vary the amount of guidance students receive. For example, students can be told to read a chapter and then answer the questions at the end of it. These questions ostensibly highlight the major concepts, but little guidance is provided before or during the reading. At the other extreme, near-complete guidance can be provided. Cunningham and Shablak (1975) advocated the "Guide-O-Rama" as a means to help students selectively process text. With this method, students are carefully directed to each bit of information which the teacher considers important.

The use of study guides as described by Herber (1978) falls between the extremes of guidance mentioned above. Study guides are designed to enhance students' comprehension by focusing their attention on relevant information in the passage. They consist of questions, statements and directions interspersed throughout the text.

Post-chapter questions, guide-o-ramas and study guides can be powerful tools to enhance comprehension of text. However, the authors are aware of few sources that deal with differentiating these tools to accommodate students' divergent reading abilities. Of note is a discussion by Earle and Sanders (1973) which suggests some excellent ways to individualize certain aspects of content assignments. The authors intend to elaborate upon their discussion of dealing with a single text by developing a technique called "slicing" (Pearson and Johnson, 1978). Slicing refers to reexamining the tasks required of students in text assignments and then recasting them to ease their demands. What follows is a discussion of differentiating reading guidance for students by employing a slicing technique.

Scope of Information Search

Content textbooks are laden with facts. Since it is not feasible to teach students every concept presented, decisions regarding their relative importance are generally made. The number of concepts for which students are then held responsible determines the scope of information search.

If the concepts to be mastered are few, a limited information search is necessary; as the concepts become more numerous, the scope of the search becomes more exhaustive. An exhaustive search generally requires better reading skills than a limited one, and its negative effects on attention, motivation and retention seem fairly obvious. Therefore, teachers should slice the scope of the search according to students' abilities and work habits.

The number of concepts for which students are responsible can be readily varied by adding or deleting the number of assigned tasks on their study guides or end-of-chapter questions. Some students may be responsible for 15 concepts while others may deal with only five. These concepts may or may not be exclusive from each other. Whatever the case, whole-class discussion should follow the directed reading so that all students are exposed to the desired information.

Contrary to a common assumption, limiting the scope of information search does not mean that only literal level thinking be involved. Rather, the number of understandings is shortened and not the level. Since it seems best to involve all students at the interpretive and applied levels of comprehension (Herber, 1978), limiting higher-order reading in an attempt to reduce the scope of the search is especially misguided. In fact, slicing the scope of the search seems to enhance students' higher level reading since it focuses their thought processes on only a few topics.

Additionally, varying the scope of the search is different from varying the length of the passage to be read. Some students may be responsible for several concepts on a certain page while other students are responsible for only a few. This way, the number of assigned concepts is varied, but the length of the stimulus passage is identical.

Length of Passage

Subject matter reading assignments do not always have to cover one chapter at a time. In many cases, reading disabled students become overwhelmed by assignments covering more than five pages, no matter how limited the actual scope of the search may be.

Once the teacher identifies the important concepts of a passage, resulting assignments should balance the number of concepts with the length of text to be dealt with at a single time. Slicing reading assignments to a paragraph or section at a time might be appropriate for certain students to insure concept mastery.

Pictorial aids should also be considered as a unit of text for assignments. Authors use graphs, charts, pictures, etc. to express what might take hundreds of words. Focusing on a single pictorial aid may be an appropriate task for certain students while others may focus on the running text which elaborates upon the aid.

Information Index

Dealing with end-of-chapter questions provide teachers many opportunities to slice students' reading tasks. Interspersing questions throughout the text is one method. That is, students are directed to mark question numbers at appropriate points in their textbooks and then deal with the question at the time its number is encountered. This is often the first step content teachers will take as they begin using and developing study guides.

If students are not provided interspersed help, then an alternative in the form of an information index may be provided. Questions may be keyed to the page, section, paragraph and/or sentence where one can find literal answers or information on which answers may be based. The degree of question interspersing and information indexing may be varied according to the importance of the concept reflected in the question, the level of thinking required and students' reading ability.

Type of Vocabulary

Content textbooks include specialized, technical vocabulary as well as terms with meanings peculiar to their subject matter area. Students must be able to deal with these terms since they are the labels for the concepts being considered. Strange and Allington (1977) recommended that content teachers base their intervention in vocabulary instruction upon estimates of the decoding ease and conceptual difficulty of terms. The authors have modified Strange and Allington's classification scheme in an effort to provide further criteria for slicing reading tasks. Once new terms are classified, they may be presented to students with an instructional emphasis upon the special difficulties of each word.

Four categories of vocabulary terms are suggested. Category I words are easy to decode and easy to understand. "Barter" and "warfare" exemplify this category. They are easily decoded because they present no sound-symbol irregularities; they are easily understood because a familiar word or phrase can be supplied (e.g., barter = trade).

Category II words are easily decoded but are difficult to understand. "Recession" and "franchise" are examples of this type. While there are no phonic irregularities, it is difficult to supply a common word or phrase for these terms. Somewhat lengthy explanations of these terms are required.

Category III words are those which are difficult to decode but easy to understand. Examples of such words are "initiative" and "buoyancy." Spelling irregularities exist in both words ("tia" in initiative and "uo" in buoyancy). Nevertheless, a common word or phrase may be supplied for each word (e.g., initiative = beginning).

Finally, Category IV words represent the most difficult type of vocabulary. "Chivalry" and "nostalgia" exemplify this category. They are difficult to decode because of their phonic irregularities. Additionally, it is difficult to supply a familiar word or phrase that explains the concept each word represents. Again detailed explanation of the term would be necessary

for it to be understood. An accompanying table is provided to illustrate the categorization scheme proposed here.

	Easy Decoding	Difficult Decoding
Easy Understanding	I barter, warfare	III initiative, buoyancy
Difficult Understanding	II recession, franchise	IV chivalry, nostalgia

Categorizing words this way allows teachers to slice the task which students face when dealing with new vocabulary. By using this gauge of the difficulty of words, study guides and questions may be constructed that accommodate students' abilities to deal with the decoding as well as the conceptual aspects of terms. Words in Categories I and II allow students to concentrate on meaning since they are easy to decode. Emphasis is placed on decoding with Category III as they are easy to understand. Finally, because of the difficulty Category IV words represent, emphasis must be given to both their decoding and conceptual aspects.

Response Mode

Many questions, statements and directions designed to guide students' comprehension of text often fail because they are too diffuse. Slicing such comprehension aids can be based on a task analysis approach as suggested by Harker (1973) among others. Provided below is an example of how a diffuse question can be made more specific, thereby slicing the task.

Diffuse: What were the causes of the Civil War?
Specific: List five reasons why the South seceded from the Union.
List four reasons why the North did not want the South to secede.

It should be noted that the text from which the above question comes does not literally state the causes of the Civil War, but it does literally state the reasons called for by the specific, sliced directions. Once those reasons are listed, students can more readily infer that they were the causes of the war. Recasting higher-order questions to a literal level this way is an effective method of slicing comprehension tasks.

Another way of dealing with diffuse tasks is to rewrite higher-order questions at the same level of thinking but to require smaller amounts of information. For example, rather than asking for all the causes of the Civil War, only three may be required of poor readers and seven of good readers. This limits the scope of the search as discussed earlier.

Converting recall items to a recognition mode is another method of slicing the task. Little structure and guidance is provided by recall tasks; on the other hand, recognition items call for verification and are generally

easier to answer (Herber and Nelson, 1976). It should be emphasized that simplifying questions this way does not mean that students will deal with less important concepts, but rather, that they will be dealt with in a different way.

Recognition items may be constructed in numerous formats. First, a matching task might be considered. Students are asked to match two columns of items which may be equal or unequal in number. Using equal columns slices the task considerably; unequal columns provide more of a challenge to students.

Multiple choice items are another form of the recognition format to be considered. There is considerable structure provided by this format to help students master important concepts. Below is an example of how a recall question can be changed to a multiple choice, recognition item covering the same concept.

Original: What new problems arose in American life in the second half of the 1800's?

Multiple Choice: What new problems arose in American life in the second half of the 1800's? Place an "X" next to the correct statements.

_____ Trade with other nations increased.
_____ Much Southern property was destroyed.
_____ Cities became smaller.
_____ Few Northern soldiers had been killed.
_____ European countries interfered with the United States.

Multiple-choice and essay questions can require students to deal with the same concepts, but multiple-choice items present those concepts in more manageable proportions. In addition, multiple-choice questions can be sliced even further by providing an information index and by varying the number of distractors provided according to students' abilities.

Another type of recognition task is the true-false question. The multiple choice task presented above could easily be converted to true-false by changing the directions to read, "Place a 'T' for true and an 'F' for false by each statement below." Such directions often increase students critical attention to each statement.

Fill-in-the-blank, cloze-type tasks can be readily sliced. Reading passages may be taken verbatim from the text or else paraphrased and then reproduced with selected words deleted. Good readers may be assigned this as a recall task; that is, they must provide words on their own to fill the blanks. Other readers may be provided a list of correct words plus distractors to fill the blank. Poor readers may receive a randomly ordered list of correct words which equals the number of blanks in the passage.

Finally, recall questions may also be sliced by providing possible statements to be verified. Difficult, diffuse questions can be changed into statements for the students' reaction and subsequent defense. An example is provided below to demonstrate this alternative.

Original: Why was little accomplished during the administration of President Grant?

Statement: President Grant was dishonest and crooked. He was experienced in politics and able to tell good advice from bad.

In conclusion, there are numerous variables which teachers may vary while making text assignments. The variables described above, scope of information search, length of passage, information index, type of vocabulary, and response mode, may be adjusted individually or in combination to fit students' abilities. Although many students cannot master all the information in their textbooks, they can acquire some of the information with proper guidance. This is preferable to completely neglecting the textbook. Slicing comprehension tasks is suggested as an effective way to differentiate the guidance students receive as they deal with content area reading assignments.

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