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Reading, Writing, Discussing: An Interactive Approach to Teaching in the Content Areas

**Pamela J. Farris
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Content area reading necessitates that students develop effective study strategies. Farrar (1986) pointed out that much of the reading in the content areas requires higher thinking skills than for narrative passages and noted that “examining one’s own opinions, judgments, and reactions in relation to what the author has presented and applying that knowledge to new situations marks a qualitative jump from the... comprehension of the basal reader” (p. 46).

The prominent study strategy in the content areas continues to be Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review (SQ3R) which was introduced by Robinson (1961) in the 1940’s, nearly five decades ago. While other study strategies have been developed, SQ3R continues to be used either as it was originally introduced or with some modification. The studies reported here investigate the effectiveness of an interactive study strategy, RESPONSE, developed by Jacobson (1989), with regular and high risk learning disabled students at the junior high level.

Reading, writing, reasoning and discussing

Real connections between reading and writing occur whenever literacy activities require both reading and writing in order that a goal be accomplished (Teale and Sulzby, 1989). Building upon this premise, Bromley (1989) wrote:

Students at all levels of literacy development benefit when they actively engage in meaning construction with language that has a purpose and for which they receive tangible feedback. As students explore blended reading and writing activities and observe each other in these explorations, classrooms become literate communities where students become increasingly able to create and deal with extended texts of varying kinds (p. 122).

RESPONSE is a study technique which provides an opportunity for students and the classroom teacher to interact as part of a study strategy which combines reading, writing, and reasoning (Jacobson, 1989). RESPONSE differs from other study strategies in that individual students cannot use the technique alone; it necessitates that the teacher provide feedback.

Students read the text and write down major points, questions, and unfamiliar terms and concepts on a RESPONSE sheet which is given to the teacher. The teacher then “responds” by writing back to the student and elaborating upon the student’s comments, questions, and vocabulary. The steps in RESPONSE are as follows: 1) As the student reads the content area material, major points are recorded. 2) As questions arise in the student’s mind while reading the text, the student writes them down along with the page number of the text. 3) Whenever a new term or concept is encountered, the student writes those down along with the page number on which the term or concept appeared. 4) Questions, terms or concepts have an

asterisk placed beside those which the student would like to have explained or defined as well as the page number from which they came. 5) The student gives the completed RESPONSE sheet to the teacher, who then writes a "response" to the student in order to clarify and/or elaborate upon the text itself. 6) The teacher returns the RESPONSE sheet to the student the following class period prior to holding a class discussion of the text material.

Because the teacher has read and reacted to all of the students' response sheets prior to discussing the text, the teacher has gained insights as to the most appropriate direction the class discussion should take. For instance, if six students are unfamiliar with the concept of the Mason/Dixon line, the teacher can help students by including it as part of the discussion.

An application of the response teaching strategy was attempted in two academic environments. A watermark of success when using a teaching strategy is its adaptability. Teacher and class personality, lesson objective, or just the time of the school year, may dictate the need for versatility. As teachers are always in search of successful strategies, RESPONSE offers an excellent opportunity for reading, writing, and discussing in the classroom.

Response and regular students

The RESPONSE technique was utilized with 36 seventh grade students of average reading ability in two social studies classes. The students had been used to using SQ3R (Robinson, 1961) on an individual basis. RESPONSE was introduced to the class and implemented in a cooperative learning setting of four students assigned to each group. The students each read the chapter, jotting down important points, questions, and new vocabulary as they

read. The groups then discussed the chapter and compiled a single response sheet which was handed in to the teacher.

The following class period, the group received the response sheet back, along with the teacher's comments. The group then had ten minutes to discuss the material prior to the entire class engaging in a discussion about the chapter. In comparing the scores on end of chapter tests using SQ3R over nine weeks with RESPONSE over a similar nine weeks period, the seventh graders scored significantly higher ($p < .01$) using RESPONSE as a cooperative learning activity.

Response and high risk students

The appeal and potential of the interactive study strategy RESPONSE is demonstrated by its adaptability within a variety of learning environments. A second example of its use is within an eighth grade skills social studies class. The class was comprised of fifteen students classified by district guidelines as learning disabled. In addition, four low achieving students were included in the group based upon teacher recommendation. The class was team-taught in the regular classroom setting where students could benefit from the content area expertise of the social studies teacher while receiving support from the learning disabilities teacher. The rationale for combining these particular students was that their learning profiles were more similar than different (Deshler, Schumaker, Alley, Warner and Clark, 1982). It was anticipated that instruction could be tailored within the confines of the class to meet the students' various needs more effectively. RESPONSE was selected as a beneficial study technique for these learners for two reasons. First, it required active involvement with the text material. Second, student responses were reinforced by both written and verbal interaction with the teachers, thus

couraging those real connections between reading and writing as advocated by Teale and Sulzby (1989).

There is a paucity of research on the best way to provide an optimum education for learning disabled adolescents (Deshler et al., 1982; Whyte, 1983). Wiederholt (in Lefstein, 1984) explains that some information is known regarding effective strategies, other information is tentative and experimental, and much remains to be discovered. In an effort to add to the meager body of existing knowledge, RESPONSE was taught and analyzed as to its effectiveness with adolescent learning disabled and low achieving populations. The results were encouraging indeed.

One marvels at the ingenuity that teachers across the country must display when faced with the array of learning difficulties and motivational concerns demonstrated by adolescents. In drawing a profile of the group involved in this study, the following characteristics would be included. First, reading levels ranged between the second and the eighth grade as measured by *The Woodcock Johnson Psycho-educational Achievement Test*. Next, there was a discrepancy between the quality of students' written and oral responses. Some students preferred talking to writing while others, as demonstrated in the example included in Figure 2, much preferred to write. (It should be emphasized that all of the participants, however, reacted positively to written comments from the two teachers on their response forms.) In addition, the group as a whole had difficulty following directions. Despite modeling the most efficient way to read, to locate important information in the textbook, and to form appropriate questions, it wasn't until the third use of the form that the majority of students were following directions as required.

Figure 1
RESPONSE completed by a regular student
RESPONSE

Name: Lindsey

Date: 1-2-90

Reading assignment: S.I. pgs 94-98 lesson 1

1. Important Points: Important Ideas — put page #'s

(Things you think are important to the topic)

- pg. 95 - at first there were no women in the colony
- pg. 95 - food ran out quickly, water was dirty, winter was coming
- pg. 96 - At the end of spring only 40 people were alive.
- *pg. 96 Captain Smith said, "He who will not work, will not eat."
- *pg. 97 The Virginia company gave permission for white, males to vote for representatives
- pg. 95 Jamestown - not in a good spot

2. Questions: Questions that come to you as you read — put page #'s.

A. Things you don't understand/words, charts, etc.

B. Things you find interesting/agree with or disagree with.

- pg. 95 - chart at bottom, what is the building in the upper left outside the fence?
- pgs. 96-97 I don't understand why people had to march everywhere after Sir. Thomas Oates arrived to serve as governor.

3. New Terms: Vocabulary, people's names, new words

- *pg 96 Captin John Smith
- pg 96 Powhatan People
- *pg 96 Sir Thomas Oates
- *pg 97 burgesses
- *pg 97 John Rolfe

*Notes: The student's answers are presented as they were written.
The RESPONSE form used has been adapted by the teacher from the original (Jacobson, 1989).*

Figure 2 RESPONSE completed by a high risk student

RESPONSE

Name: Barry

Date: 2-1-90

Chapter: (19) unit 6 402-415 American Life 1860-1900

Directions: Fill in the form as you read. The form is for notes, questions and ideas. You may write on the back if needed. Your RESPONSE will be returned to you, with comments, at the next class period.

Important points: As you read, list important information and state important ideas; write down page numbers.

- sec 1 Tenements: Large, often poorly built buildings which housed large numbers of people at low rents
Sanitation: Clean and healthful living condition.
- sec 2 Political machine: A political organization
Settlement houses: Community houses found in poor neighborhoods.
Party Boss: a strong party leader person who ran political machine was called PB.
Hull House
- sec 3 Spectator Sports: Sports that people can watch
melodrama: were plays or movies
Realistic novel: a book that describes people, places, events
Ragtime: a new style of music invented 1880's by Black Americans

Questions: As you read write down questions that occur to you along with page numbers of their source. Some questions will be ideas for discussion. For others, you will want an immediate answer; star these (*).

- * What caused the Chicago fire? pg 408
- * who invented the train? 386

New terms / concepts / vocabulary / names

Notes: The student's answers are presented as they were written. The RESPONSE form used has been adapted by the teacher from the original (Jacobson, 1989).

In general, the class had trouble completing all of the assignments. Lack of motivation was a prime concern for two-thirds of the students. Unfortunately, but probably realistically, the use of the study strategy didn't significantly impact the motivation issue for every student. It takes a longer time than the period during which the study was conducted to change firmly entrenched, detrimental habits.

In addition to the above factors, at least one-third of the class had difficulty attending to the classwork at hand. Even during the use of RESPONSE as a class assignment, several of the boys had to be redirected consistently via the teacher's presence near their desks or by specific questions designed to focus attention back on their assignment. Then, on several occasions, disorganization resulted in the loss of work. Finally, the more resistant learners in the study were characterized by passive behavior, high levels of distraction, impulsive behavior, and an occasional tendency to sleep through class. That particular trio of learners consistently handled the requirements of the response forms poorly. Despite the variety of characteristics existing in the class, however, the teaching of this study technique was valuable for the majority of students.

Findings

The overall results of the use of the response study strategy with the skills social studies group was encouraging. Following the reading of the students' work, lectures were tailored to their written questions while still highlighting critical concepts within the textbook chapter. As a result, there was a noticeable vested interest in lectures and discussion as students listened for answers to their specific questions.

Graham (1985) states that learning for students in general is a direct result of the students' activities and pursuits. Acquisition of knowledge in the skills social studies class required opportunity for, and effective use of, practice through repeated use of the RESPONSE study technique. Since learning disabled students often fail to use effective or efficient learning strategies spontaneously, teachers must instruct, review, and monitor their use during class time (Lefstein, 1984; Graham, 1985; Deshler et al., 1982). This process was followed each time the response forms were handed out. By the end of the study, it wasn't that students didn't know what was required that inhibited completion of the forms, but rather the resistant lack of motivation and follow through that impeded progress.

In looking briefly at some of the students' work, consider Rachael whose first test score was a failing grade. After the use of RESPONSE, her next written test score rose to a B, and then leveled off at C's during the rest of the study. Barry also failed the first test. Use of the technique helped him focus his attention on the material at hand; his grades rose to C's briefly, and then he stabilized at B's.

Motivated and consistent, Ken's grades remained B's both with and without the strategy. However, his verbal contributions to class discussions showed a stronger grasp of concepts after the completion of the response assignments. Ability was not an issue with Tony. When he tackled his assignments, Tony completed the forms conscientiously and tests reflected his efforts. However, his work was only sporadically turned in. Unfortunately, there were the three students who never completed a single form, rarely contributed quality comments to class discussions, and had erected barriers that even enthusiastic teachers and a high quality study skill could not penetrate. On the

positively affected their test scores and classroom discussions while facilitating concept formation.

Conclusion

With no clear-cut answers to the best way to educate learning disabled adolescents and their counterparts, the low achievers, it is imperative that viable learning strategies be researched (Lefstein, 1984; Whyte, 1983). As repeated use of the RESPONSE strategy for the majority of learners in the regular and skills social studies classrooms indicated, it is a study skill that deserves attention. It appears that with its use, regular and high risk learners can more readily contribute within a classroom literacy community (Bromley, 1989). Continued application in other content areas should be pursued to assess the benefits of RESPONSE. Upon mastery of the use of this teaching strategy, RESPONSE can be applied in a multitude of learning environments.

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