The DR-TA: Avoiding Common Pitfalls

Jane L. Davidson
Northern Illinois University

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

THE DR-TA: AVOIDING COMMON PITFALLS

Jane L. Davidson
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA) described by Stauffer (1969, 1980) is currently being used by many classroom teachers at all levels of instruction. The DR-TA is a procedure which improves students' reading-thinking skills by encouraging students to establish their own purposes for reading.

The basic steps in a DR-TA are as follows:

I. Establishing purposes for reading (individual and/or group)

II. Adjusting rate of reading to the declared purposes and to the nature and difficulty of the material

III. Achieving reading purposes

IV. Developing comprehension

V. Completing fundamental skill training activities of discussion, further reading, additional study, or writing (Stauffer, 1969, pp. 41-42)

Students establish their own purposes for reading by formulating predictions regarding the outcome of a story or what they expect to find in a content area selection, such as a social studies or science passage. The teacher regulates the amount of material read by students by stopping periodically to allow students to verify their predictions, reflect on or refine some of them, and formulate new predictions based on the additional information they have gleaned from the passage. Thus, the major thrust of the overall procedure is on the process of problem solving.

The superiority of the DR-TA is well established (Stauffer, 1976), and teachers who use the strategy effectively indicate that students do increase their abilities to reason while reading. However, elements of the DR-TA are being distorted or misused by some teachers who may then wonder why children don't seem to respond "like they're supposed to." Some suggestions for instruction may assist teachers in the effective use of DR-TA.

Use of Indirect Influence

Stauffer emphasizes repeatedly the importance of the use of verbal statements or questions which encourage students' par-

ticipation and freedom of action in group activities. Note the difference in these two questions:

"What do you think will happen next, John?"

"Does anyone have a prediction regarding what will happen next?"

The first question could demand a response from John. He u t respond to the teacher's question. The teacher has become an authoritative figure using direct influence over the student. In contrast, the second question permits nyone or everyone to respond, if they choose to do so. The teacher is using indirect influence with the students and it is in a facilitating role.

All the students in the group may not choose to respond to the teacher's questions. There seems to be concern from many teachers about this point. They feel that everyone in the group must respond in order to be involved. It is easy for teachers to fall into the "round robin" trap when they find themselves verbally or nonverbally forcing each student to respond to questions. Note the trap for students in the following examples:

"Who has another prediction? George, do you have any additional ideas? Jimmy...?
"Who has another prediction?" The teacher waits and looks expectantly at each student in the group. One student breaks the silence by giving another prediction. The teacher again waits and looks expectantly at those students who have not yet voiced their predictions...

The teacher's behavior is autocratic in these two examples. Students are quick to recognize the pressure; they know that what the teacher really wants is an answer from each of them. They have lost freedom of interaction between group members. Receiving no responses from the second question could be a strong indication that the students need to read additional information, that they feel strongly about their original predictions, or that there is some other element in the group process which has gone awry. For a DR-TA to achieve its goals, students must be encouraged to interact freely with other members of the group; the teacher's major role is to serve as a moderator in the discussion.

Individual and/or Group Purpose-Setting

I once observed a DR-TA demonstration in which teachers were advised to write predictions for children, who were to read them aloud at appropriate times when the teacher called on them. The teachers participating in the demonstration were told that this practice would help children who were afraid to respond. Whether or not it would achieve its goal, this practice is a clear abuse of the DR-TA, because the students should establish purposes for reading, not the teacher. It is simply unnecessary for all children to make oral contributions to the group. Teachers frequently ask, "But what about the youngster who never contributes?" When youngsters feel the need to contribute, they will choose to do so, if the teacher establishes an appropriate environment and maintains indirect influence. Teachers who force

students to respond, like the teacher who directed Jimmy to respond, or the teacher who directed students to read predictions that were not their own, have broken the consistency of the pattern of influence imbedded in the DR-TA. Children respond to such practices by becoming suspicious and distrustful, and for good reason. There is no fear of failure, if the teacher is using indirect influence consistently in the DR-TA procedure and regulating the amount of material being read by the students. They are free to establish individual and group purposes for reading, because the outcome of the passage is unknown. The students are involved as individuals and as a group in predicting the outcome of the passage based on the information that is revealed to them as they read and think about what they have read.

When students make predictions based on information from the first part of a passage, teachers must be careful not to consciously or unconsciously reward those predictions that will prove accurate; all predictions should be encouraged and accepted. After a passage has been read, discussion of the accuracy of predictions will help students improve their abilities to look for various kinds of clues. Teachers, trying to help students who don't immediately offer predictions, sometimes piece together facts that lead to predictions. Students must have the opportunity to piece together facts for themselves, thus increasing their powers of reflection and abstraction.

Questioning Practices

Another common misunderstanding about DR-TAs involves the question types used. The two types of questions which tend to be most frequently asked during the procedure are interpreting, inferring questions ("What will happen next?") and evaluative questions ("Why do you think so?") (Davidson, 1978). Students base their responses on the facts they have gathered through reading and their background of experience or knowledge of the world. These two types of questions tend to keep students focused on the material being read; they are task-oriented when they read to find out if their predictions were accurate. These types of questions also assure students of their freedom to respond and encourage them to make further predictions. Inappropriate use of applying-type questions can actually lead children away from the problem they are involved in solving. An applying question has been defined as "one in which the teacher... asks a student to make some direct application of information or criteria related to lesson. It includes applying information to illustrate a point, applying criteria to be used in evaluation, and illustrating a generalization or a principle in a specific instance" (Wolf, King, & Huck, 1967, p. 169). Many teachers tend to use applying-type questions to cause students to relate to the passage by identifying their own experiences. For example, if the passage being read is about dogs, the teacher may ask, "How many of you have dogs?" Students respond by discussing their pets; at some point, the teacher is forced to stop this discussion or to ask questions which lead them back to the material. This example of an applying-type question shows a distortion or lack of knowledge of the question type. Use of this question does not further

facilitate problem solving; rather, it directs students away to another topic as it is not passage dependent. However, an applying-type question can be properly used to assist students in the transfer of information after reading a passage as in the following illustrations:

"How do these points relate to our social studies
lesson from this morning?"
"What are some rules that should be established for
taking care of pets, based on information in the story?"

These questions ask students to relate to the information in a more appropriate way, which leads to transfer of information.

Regulating the Amount of Information

It is possible to "beat the DR-TA to death" by establishing numerous stops and asking so many questions that students feel they are being interrogated. While it may be necessary to create frequent stopping points during students' first experience with a DR-TA, this practice should certainly not become a regular part of the procedure. It is important to vary the amount of information read at one time by students, depending upon the type of material being read and the students' sophistication with the procedure. There are numerous ways to vary the amount of material being read at one time, such as, stopping at the end of the first few paragraphs, just before the climax, before the final ending, or providing a picture clue. It is equally important to provide opportunities for students to examine the quality of their predictions after a story or passage is finished.

Proving a Point

Although students should be encouraged to justify their predictions, the practice of having students read the line in the passage that proves a conjecture is also one which can be carried to extreme. The student who is reading fluently and effectively may read only that portion of the sentence which contains proof when responding to the teacher's question, "Why do you think so?" or "What facts support your statement?" Teachers who challenge students by coupling an evaluative question with interpreting, inferring questions are basically letting students know that support for predictions, hypotheses, or theories is always expected. Students soon tend to habitually support their predictions from information in the material and their oral reading becomes natural and fluent. In contrast, the teacher who orders students to "read the entire sentence or the paragraph out loud to the rest of the group" have placed themselves in authoritarian roles, which changes the climate of the group. The student who is forced to read is under psychological pressure, causing oral reading to sound choppy and stilted. When such demands on students occur, they make predictions less often.

The Fifth Step

The last step of the DR-TA provides for refinement of skills through additional activities: discussion, further reading, additional study, or writing. Many teachers tend to assign written

after students have completed the reading of a passage and either call the students back to the group to correct their written work or to collect students' written work, evaluate it, and give it back to students at a later time with little, if any, discussion (Durkin, 1978-79). Stauffer identified students' needs in increasing powers of observation and reflection, clarifying and developing concepts, developing adeptness in the use of semantic analysis, and refining word identification skills. These needs cannot adequately be met by assigning unrelated workbook pages or ditto practice sheets that require little intellectual involvement on the part of the student. Teachers who understand that what follows the reading of a passage is as important as the actual reading of the passage tend to organize and/or devise activities that facilitate the improvement of students' reading-thinking skills. Concept development activities, library research related to aspects of the passage, individual or small group assistance in word identification, writing activities, Group Mapping Activities (Davidson & Bayliss, 1978), and independent reading are but a few examples of useful follow-up activities.

These suggestions may help teachers refine and develop their skills in the use of DR-TA. The DR-TA is a sophisticated procedure when it is appropriately used by a sensitive teacher who is knowledgeable about reading and the reading process. The motivation and intellectual commitment of students who seek to improve their reading-thinking skills is a critical goal of reading instruction.

REFERENCES

Davidson, J.L. The DR-TA: A reading-thinking strategy for all levels. In R.T.Vacca and J.A.Meagher (eds.), Reading As Language-Experience. Storrs, CT: The Univ. of CT, 1978, 37-43.

Davidson, J.L. & Bayliss, V.A. Mapping. The Journal of Language Experience, 1978, 1, 6-9.

Durkin, D. What classroom observations reveal about reading comprehension instruction. Reading Research Quarterly, 1978-1979, 14, 481-533.

Stauffer, R. G. (Ed.). Action Research in L.E.A. Instructional Procedures. Newark, DE: University of Delaware, 1976.

——— Directing Reading Maturity As a Cognitive Process. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

——— The Language-Experience Approach to the Teaching of Reading. (2nd ed.). New York: Harper and Row, 1980.

Wolfe, W., Huck, C.S., & King, M.L. Critical Reading Ability of Elementary School Children. U.S.Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, Project No. 5-1040, Contract No. OE-4-10-187. Columbus: The Ohio State University, 1967.