Content Area Reading: A Modular Approach

Walter L. Powers
Coeur D'Alene, Idaho

Michael C. McKenna
Wichita State University

John W. Miller
Wichita State University

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**Dorothy J. McGinnis
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The idea that content area teachers should accept some measure of responsibility for their students' success in assigned reading —long epitomized in the maxim, "Every teacher a teacher of reading"—is hardly new. Dissatisfaction with the transfer effects of take-out reading programs federally funded during the 1960s led to a ground swell of interest in content area approaches during the 1970s (Herber, 1978).

The degree to which the idea has been accepted by secondary content area teachers, however, is more than a little disappointing. In a recent naturalistic investigation, Ratekin et al. (1982) observed that the techniques most frequently recommended in content area courses and workshops are only infrequently used by practicing teachers.

Major reasons for the lack of significant progress in fostering an acceptance of these techniques include a misunderstanding of their function and a distorted idea of the amount of time, effort, and know-how they require. Moreover, even when these impressions are corrected through inservice training, the fact remains that many teachers lack the degree of creative and linguistic background needed in developing vocabulary reinforcement activities, effective study guides, graphic organizers, and the like.

A recent and promising attempt to alleviate these problems is underway in the Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, Public Schools in the form of Project READ:S (Reading Education Accountability Design: Secondary). This ESEA IV-C innovative/exemplary project is funded federally through the Idaho State Department of Education and embodies a new approach to bringing about teacher utilization of content area reading techniques.

The project is unique in two major respects. First, it greatly simplifies the participation of individual teachers by making available instructional modules prepared in advance for each textbook unit. Second, it coordinates the use of these modules with a diagnostic/prescriptive management system operated in the language arts program.

Secondary students are first diagnosed by one of two criterion-referenced systems, depending on their achievement level. The results of this testing are made available to content teachers. A science teacher might learn, for example, that a certain student has difficulty in predicting outcomes based on prose material and also in interpreting charts and tables—both important skills in learning from science texts.

The teacher is then free to make use, either in original or modified form, of one or more modules based on units from the actual text in use. These modules have been prepared by teams of instructors using the same book. By collaboratively developing the materials, ideas and insights are pooled and quality products are obtained, well in advance of the moment they are actually needed.

The modules contain three types of activities: vocabulary, comprehension, and study skills. They thus correspond to key steps of a directed reading activity and comprise, in addition, the principal techniques of content area reading instruction.

The vocabulary component presents key terms included in the unit, first in isolation with accompanying cassette (if desired), then in conjunction with brief definitions, and finally in appropriate contextual settings, both in the form of sentences and graphic organizers. Also included are a structural analysis component, which depends on the terms, and a self-check. Such units are intended to assist the student in quickly attaining the background necessary to good comprehension and thus correspond to the initial step of a DRA.

The comprehension component is designed to guide the students' understanding as they read silently by focusing their attention on information valued by the instructor. The most common (but not the only) format used for this purpose is the question-before-reading. One set of questions is written for each unit and each question is classified according to comprehension skill type. These types correspond to those included in the management system, thus placing the teacher in the position of easily modifying the module for individual students by eliminating or including questions as indicated by the diagnosis. The comprehension component facilitates the second, or purpose-setting, step of the DRA. It apprises students of what they are to read for. The result, of course, is a content guide to assist students during the third, or silent reading, step of the DRA. By responding in writing as they progress through the assignment, students are engaged in an active rather than a passive learning process. Module questions subsequently form the basis of a class discussion of the unit and help to ensure competent participation in such a discussion (the fourth step of the DRA). In addition to the question format, others are also used, depending on the nature of the unit. These include charts and diagrams to be completed, statements to react to, puzzles and problems to be solved, and so on. The variety of formats draws on extensive treatments of the subject of reading guides during the last decade and a half, and adds much needed flexibility to module development.

The study skills module component corresponds to the final step of the DRA. It provides students with practice in important and content-relevant skills, such as skimming, scanning, interpreting tables, etc., and does so by using actual text units as the basis of activities. As one might expect, the formats used for the study skills component vary considerably. Like the vocabulary component, however, each contains a self-check.

An area avoided deliberately is that of phonics. While an integral part of the skills step of the DRA at the elementary level, phonics is generally felt to be of minimal value and perhaps even counterproductive in a content area setting (Herber, 1978; Ryder, 1981). Participants in Project READ:S therefore concentrate their efforts on study skills.

Students involved in the project make use of all three types of module components in each of their academic subjects. Their progress is monitored through periodic use of the criterion-referenced instruments which form the basis of the management systems. Content area teachers are informed of updates in each student's status so that decisions about how best to employ the modules can be made.

Project READ:S possesses a number of attractive advantages. Considered together, they are sufficiently attractive to give educators pause and to cause them to reflect on whether a team-oriented, modular approach is preferable to the current individual-oriented emphasis.

The principal advantage is the ease with which teachers can make use of the modules. Daily preparations of graphic organizers, reading guides and the like are no longer the burden so many content area teachers perceive them to be.

A second advantage is the team approach employed both in the development of materials and in the diagnosis and instruction of students. Teachers working together on mutually taught text units are able to share insights into problems and gain an enhanced understanding of their subject and how best to teach it. Additional benefit is derived from the fact that monitoring each student's progress lends an aspect of accountability and, as a result, of reading awareness.

A third advantage is the close connection between teaching and assessment. The intent of Project READ:S is both to facilitate students in textbook reading assignments and to increase comprehension ability generally. These goals are approached by the management system simultaneously, and data presently available suggest that they are being reached.

Reflective of national trends, the Coeur d'Alene secondary schools experienced a test score decline through much of the 1970s. From 1972 to 1979, for example, eighth-grade composite percentile ranks on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills fell from 66 to 48, while those of tenth graders dropped from 43 to 36. It was at this point that Project READ:S was begun. After three full years, during which the national trend continued downward, Coeur d'Alene students

experienced remarkable gains. From 1979 to 1982, composite ITBS percentile ranks of eighth graders rose from 48 to 78 while those of tenth graders rose from 36 to 60.

These dramatic results attest to the soundness of the team-oriented, modular approach encompassed in Project READ:S. It may be time for such a method to be instituted on a broader scale.

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READERS - PLEASE NOTE

Word was received after the printing of this article ("Content Area Reading: A Modular Approach") that the instructional program described in the article (Project READ:S) has just been approved by the National Diffusion Network of the United States Department of Education for exemplary program status. This federal validation provides dissemination funds for any school district in the United States to use to replicate this junior/senior high school reading program in its schools. Information concerning adoption may be obtained by writing or calling Dr. Walter L. Powers, Assistant Superintendent, School District 271, 311 North 10th Street, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, 83814. Telephone (208) 664-8241.