Does Content-Area Reading Teach Content-Area Learning

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The 1970s may be called the decade of content-area reading. From tentative beginnings in the 1960s and before, content-area reading instruction gained recognition during the '70s as a great means of furthering students' learning in the content areas.

But what real progress has been made? To what extent has content-area reading instruction actually furthered students' content-area learning? The answer seems to be equivocal. While there has been a growing acceptance by teachers of reading and study skills as important aspects of school learning (Jackson, 1979), a closer look at the directions for instruction given to teachers suggests that there remains considerable confusion over the purpose and practice of content-area reading.

This confusion is best exemplified in a number of recent textbooks dealing with teaching reading in the content areas (Dillner and Olson, 1977; Forgan and Mangrum, 1976; Piercey, 1976; Robinson, 1978; Thomas and Robinson, 1977). These textbooks all provide specific guidance in planning and implementing content-area reading activities. But they fail to link these activities with particular content-area learning objectives. Teachers are left to assume that somehow by teaching a wide range of isolated reading and study skills, content-area learning will be improved.

This assumption is open to question. It is reminiscent of the experience of remedial teachers who find retarded readers becoming increasingly proficient at performing the tasks required by various remedial programs, but remaining unable to handle assignments in reading outside these programs. Similarly, teaching content-area reading activities detached from a clear determination of the specific content-area learning which these activities are intended to improve will fail to result in student gains in content-area learning. The following four steps are suggested to teachers as a way of ensuring that content-area reading instruc-

tion does in fact teach content-area learning.

Step 1: Determine Content-Area Learning Objectives

Content-area learning objectives define what the teacher considers important for students to learn. The question for the teacher to ask is, "What is it about my content-area (geography, English, science, etc.) that I can realistically expect my students to gain from my teaching, given the resources and limitations under which we both must work?" For example, in a unit or lesson in geography, the content-area objective may be that students gain an understanding of how a watershed forms; in English, the objective may be an understanding of the ways in which a short story writer develops character through dialogue; or in science, the objective may be an understanding of the periodic table of the elements.

Step 2: Determine Needed Reading and Study Skills

Besides determining what content-area learning will be pursued, content-area objectives have the second function of defining the specific reading and study skills needed for their achievement. It is only after content-area learning objectives have been specifically determined that the particular reading and study skills needed by students for the achievement of these objectives can be identified.

This identification can be done by introspection. The teacher will "think through" the content-area task of learning from the students' point of view, taking such factors under consideration as students' previous learning, their general level of achievement, and the degree of mastery to be expected. This is both a difficult and a crude method, but, next to directly observing students' thinking while learning—a desirable but up to now impossible practice—teacher introspection is the best method available. For example, in "thinking through" the learning task presented to students in understanding how a watershed forms, the teacher may identify such needed skills as map reading, making predications, and determining relationships of cause and effect.

Step 3: Diagnosis

The next step is for the teacher to determine which skills students already possess and which ones need to be taught. For example, the English teacher who wants to know the level of students' preparedness to understand how a short story writer develops character through dialogue will prepare an informal test based on short story material with questions measuring the

students' ability to perform the skills they need to
gain this understanding. These skills might include
such ones as identifying significant details, visual-
ization, and interpreting connotative language. When
students' ability to perform these skills has been
assessed, the teacher will know in which skills areas
students are weak, with specific reference to the par-
ticular content-area learning objective intended for
instruction. In this way, subsequent skills teaching
can focus directly on the exact areas of need thereby
avoiding wasting time teaching skills which are not
supportive of the specific content-area learning objec-
tive being pursued, or which students have already
mastered. A number of writers have provided teachers
with comprehensive directions in the preparation of
group information tests, and these sources can be re-
ferred to for further guidance (Ahrendt & Haselton,
1973; Rakes, 1975; Shepherd, 1978; Taschow, 1967; and
Voix, 1968).

Step 4: Skills Selection

     An obvious outcome of diagnostic teaching is that
not all skills are taught all the time. For example,
the science teacher whose content-area objective in
learning is that students gain an understanding of the
periodic table of the elements will not concentrate
on word attack skills since the information to be un-
derstood is presented by symbols (therefore making the
comprehension of symbols a skill which will be assessed
and taught if necessary), the level of comprehension
required is literal (therefore making teaching critical
and inferential levels of comprehension [Harker, 1973]
unnecessary--although in teaching students to apply
the information once comprehended, these levels of com-
prehension will probably be required).

     The point is that teachers will not attempt to
instruct students in the full range of the reading and
study skills at any one time. But instruction in this
range will ultimately result as students encounter
skills instruction in the different content areas as
the need for this instruction arises through the aca-
demic levels. And since this instruction will be in
direct response to specific content-area learning ob-
jectives, the teaching of these skills will be highly
functional, rather than being in some undefined way
"comprehensive" with little or no direct reference to
specific objectives.

Conclusion

     In answer to the question, "Does content-area read-
ing teach content-area learning?" the answer is "Yes"
if teachers keep in mind the real purpose for teaching

reading and study skills in the content areas. This
purpose is not to "get through" an arbitrary list
of skills which has application to content-area learn-
int in at best only a general sense. The purpose,
rather, is to provide students with the specific skills
of reading and study they require to achieve clearly
defined content-area learning objectives. These object-
ives are the ones which content-area teachers have
traditionally pursued, and which they have also seen
as being intruded upon by reading and study skill
instruction. It is probably the most important develop-
ment of the 1970s for teachers of content-area reading
that there is less likelihood now of viewing reading
and study skill instruction as an intrusion, but that
they are willing to admit the value of this instruction
in furthering content-area learning. However, the
direction currently being given teachers to teach
content-area reading and study skills having no direct
link to content-area learning objectives threatens
to reverse this progress.

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