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How Preservice Teachers Perceive Traditional and Competency-Based Reading Education

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Several semesters ago an undergraduate education major left a note, unsigned, on the desk of one of the authors. The note masked the student's disenchantment with her/his professional education. The phantom notewriter outlined a "typical" preparatory program in the art and science of sailing. S/he asked:

> If I were going to teach someone how to sail a boat, How would I proceed? Perhaps I would use an acdemic model. If so this is how it might look:
> Sailing 101. An introduction to the sport of sailing. Subjects include classifications of ships, their various riggings and basic design formats.
> Sailing 200. History of sailing vessels. Course covers the entire historical development of sailing crafts from the primitive reedboat to the modern variable slot wing high, forward floatation, cut away stern, racing catamaran.
> Sailing 327. Theory of hull design. Covers all aspects of design inherent to keel (fixed and centerboard), planning and multihill.
> Sailing 337. Bases of sail plan. Focuses on aerodynamic factors relating to proper rig design for a given hull.
> Sailing 406. Intricacies of Seamanship. Stresses preventive maintenance and use of equipment in turbulent weather.
> Sailing 499. Practicum. You are put in a boat and left alone in the middle of the Atlantic.

We don't know to this day whether the message was a fine creative effort or whether it was "borrowed" from a professional source to suit the writer's intended purpose. However, we were puzzled. Dissatisfaction among students and educators for traditional teacher education programs certainly has helped to usher in the era of CBTE – Competency-Based Teacher Education – where "competency"

and "job relevancy" have frequently become synonymous terms. CBTE generally attempts to maximize the relationship between what teachers are taught to do and what they must actually do on the job.

CBTE — its rationale, philosophy, strengths and cautions — has been widely discussed with respect to the preparation of reading personnel (Allington, 1974; James, 1975; Burnett and Schnell, 1975), in particular, note that:

> Since competency or job relevance is demanded early and in large classes where supervised practicum work ordinarily is not feasible an emerging emphasis is on paper and pencil exercises . . . These simulation experiences calling for responses approximating as closely as possible those responses called for in an actual classroom setting are tending to take up course time previously given to lecture-discussion (p. 546).

Moreover, Allington (1974) supports CBTE as a means of offering realistic alternatives to traditional-based reading programs. He sees CBTE as providing a framework in which students will no longer "complete a course through passive but regular attendance. No longer will instructors simply stand at the front of the room all term and talk, for in order to truly assess competence requires interaction on a personal basis" (p. 522). Traditional-based programs have thus been chastised and not without provocation — for providing too much "talk," i.e., concern for the theoretical, and not enough "job relevance," i.e., concern for the practical, in the preparation of teachers of reading.

Our reaction to a student's implied dissatisfaction resulted in the qualitative study that is described below. The study, we should emphasize, was exploratory in nature. Its purpose was to generate tentative insights into the effects of traditional and competency-based reading education so that relationships between the two instructional approaches could be better understood and lead to further hypothesis-making and empirical verification.

Procedures

Twelve preservice teachers who enrolled voluntarily in a secondary reading methods course participated in the study. Each participant satisfied two necessary requirements: First, each had no previous teaching experience. Second, each was enrolled in his/her first reading methods course. Although they were not told that they were part of an experiment, the students were aware that the course was to be conducted "differently" from previous offerings, and that their participation was vital in the evaluation of the new course format. The "different format" involved the implementation of two eight-week instructional modules: a Traditional-Based Module (TBM) and a Competency-Based Module (CBM).

Students participated in the TBM for the first half of the semester, meeting twice weekly for 75-minute class sessions. The TBM consisted of sixteen lessons in which students were exposed to cognitive type objectives. Information was introduced and techniques and materials were presented for discussion. Knowledge was covered in four reading areas in order to form the cognitive base from which instructional decisions could be made in a real teaching situation. The four reading areas of study were: instructional objectives, diagnostic evaluation, work perception, and comprehension.

During the second half of the semester, the participants were exposed to the CBM. The CBM consisted of a field-based practicum in which the participants tutored students in a nearby high school, twice weekly for eight weeks, for 75-minute instructional sessions. Given a general framework and goals for the practicum experience, the participants formulated competency objectives in the reading areas covered during the TBM phase of the study. The objectives were developed under the close supervision of the instructor and varied with the learning needs of the high school students. Clearly, emphasis during the CBM treatment condition was on performance, to "practice what was preached" in the first half of the semester. Participants developed the learning activities and provided the materials which would accomplish their objectives. The preservice teachers evaluated their performance through individual conferences with the instructor. Throughout the CBM the instructor served as a facilitator providing assistance when needed by the participants.

There were three dependent variables in the study: (1) attitude toward becoming a reading teacher, (2) attitude toward the instructional modules and, (3) knowledge acquisition. Attitude toward becoming a reading techer was determined by administering equivalent forms of Remmers' Scale to Measure Attitude Toward Any Vocation. Attitude toward the instructional modules was determined by adapting Remmers' Scale to Measure Any School Subject. In the Remmers' scales, students check those statements with which they agree. Each statement has a scale value, decreasing in order from 10.3 to 1.0.

Knowledge acquisition was measured by equivalent forms of a 26-item test. The two forms were developed by selecting questions from the Artley-Hardin Inventory of Teacher Knowledge of Reading (1971). In order to be selected for inclusion in the outcome measures, test items from the Inventory of Teacher Knowledge of Reading had to meet two criteria. First, questions had to test the four reading areas covered in the TBM and CBM treatments. Second, questions had to have general application to secondary reading methods. Questions dealing specifically with elementary school reading were not included.

Design

Due to the limited number of students enrolled in the secondary course, it was not feasible to compare an experimental group with a

control group. Instead, each preservice student in the study was tested under each treatment. Thus, immediately following the TBM phase of the study (the first eight weeks of treatment), students were administered the dependent variable measures. Upon completion of the CBM phase (the second eight weeks of treatment) students were tested on equivalent forms of the same dependent variable measures. Because of the nature of the study (a small sample size and lack of randomization), a repeated measures design for statistical analyses was considered inappropriate. Instead, we decided to observe the means and standard deviations for all tests as descriptive indicators of performance.

Throughout both treatment conditions students were required to "log" on a daily basis their thoughts, feelings, reactions, observations, etc., of each module. Each participant also submitted a retrospective/introspective comparison of the two instructional modules at the end of the semester. These impressionistic data were then analyzed to determine if any patterns of response emerged.

The interpretations which emerged from the loggings and comparisons were contrasted with mean performances on the tests. In this way each set of information — quantitative and qualitative — served as a check on the other during the insight making process of the study.

Results and Discussion

A perusal of the means and standard deviations for each dependent variable (See Table 1) indicates the following: (1) There is practically no observable difference for knowledge acquisition between traditional-based and competency-based modes of instruction. (2) There appears to be a slight observable difference in students' attitudes toward the instructional modules in favor of the traditional-based module. (3) There ia also an observable difference in students' attitudes toward becoming teachers of reading in favor of the traditional-based instructional module.

Table 1

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR
TRADITIONAL-BASED AND COMPETENCY-BASED MODULES

| Dependent Variables | Reading Education Modules | | | |
| | Transitional-Based | | Competency-Based | |
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Knowledge Acquisition	20.6	1.8	20.3	2.2
Attitudes Toward Modules	8.4	.4	7.9	.9
Attitudes Toward Becoming A Reading Teacher	8.1	.8	7.3	1.2

The qualitative analyses of the participants' observation and the introspective-retrospective comparisons of the two instructional modules seemed to suggest the following: First of all, it appeared that students acquired reading understandings equally well in both traditional-based and competency-based reading education modules, even though the TBM ostensibly stressed acquisition and the CBM, performance and utilization. Participants, however, observed that the CBM demanded an inquiring attitude on their part. It seemed that the preservice teachers felt a "sense of urgency" to search out (and research) information "solve" their immediate problems to improve the reading performance of the high school students they tutored. One participant aptly stated, "I worked hard during the second half of the semester (the CBM treatment). I spent countless hours going through the material . . . searching for something that would work for me." Another participant noted, "Instructing in a real-life situation made the experience meaningful and loose ends seemed to come together." Interestingly, all but one of the participants voiced satisfaction with their experience in the TBM treatment. The TBM made them receptive. The CBM, however, seemed to force them to act upon and utilize knowledge to purposeful ends.

It is also possible that the knowledge acquired from the first treatment condition (TBM) may have affected students' test performance at the end of the second treatment (CBM). Several of the participants implied that an "interactive effect" was at work. One student commented in his log that, "The first eight weeks were informative, but it was actually putting knowledge to use that helped me retain what I learned." Another preservice teacher remarked, "Those second eight weeks (CBM) would not have been possible without the knowledge of the first eight weeks . . . without the second eight weeks (however) I feel that much of what was taught would have soon been forgotten."

The preservice teachers in this experiment seemed to have more favorable attitudes toward becoming reading teachers after the traditional-based module than after the competency-based module. The qualitative response of the participants gave insight to this result. It appeared that the "real thing," i.e., on-the-job training, during the preservice experimental situation had a tempering effect on students' attitudes toward becoming a reading teacher.

Conclusion

What the experiment suggests is a continuous reciprocity between traditional and competency-based modes of instruction. An art major who participated in the study depicted the mutual relationship that existed between the traditional and competency-based modules. She commented:

> The first half of the semester was like one of those "how to draw" books. It is necessary to learn the processes of making an

accurate drawing. The second half of the semester was like the awakening of the artist . . .

Traditional-based reading education has been, perhaps, too harshly criticized in the recent literature. To the end that traditional-based instruction efficiently and effectively carries out cognitive-type objectives, it plays a necessary role in the preparation of teachers of reading. Although necessary, the role certainly is not sufficient. Reading education programs should continue to find ways to balance cognitive and performance objectives.

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