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Professional Concerns

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PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS

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Professional Concerns is a regular column devoted to the interchange of ideas among those interested in reading instruction. Send your comments and contributions to the editor. If you have questions about reading that you wish to have answered, the editor will find respondents to answer them. Address correspondence to R. Baird Shuman, Department of English, 100 English Building, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61810.

Because most states now require that all prospective teachers must have formal instruction in the teaching of reading in order to qualify for certification, the reading teacher must be prepared (1) to justify the requirement and (2) to teach the sort of course which will be valuable to students in a broad diversity of subject areas. In the article which follows, Professor Billie Jo Rieck of West Liberty State College in West Liberty, West Virginia offers a workable method for presenting the required course in the teaching of reading to the broad variety of students who pass through it. Professor Rieck's method is practical and easily workable. It requires no great outlay of money. It involves teacher trainees directly in school experiences related to the teaching of reading. It is the sort of program which many teacher training institutions might adapt to their own purposes.

TEACHING SECONDARY READING METHODS – A DILEMMA

Teaching a reading methods course in half a semester to *all* secondary teacher trainees, including physical education and music majors, smacks of going into the arena to meet the hungry lions. From the first day, the comments and complaints and questions begin:

1. "Why do *I* have to take this course?" (Physical Education, Music, Business, Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, Art, English. These are listed in order of strength of complaint!)
2. "Is there really a reading problem?"
3. "I'm supposed to teach _____ not reading."
4. "Why does the elementary school promote the students when they can't read?"

Although my teaching background included several years of high school English and business subjects as well as elementary teaching, neither my teaching experience, or college course work prepared me for my Reading 414 course! In fact, my attitude had been similar to theirs and many secondary teacher's. Almost by chance, I enrolled in my first reading course to find out why my high school students didn't enjoy the English textbooks, stories, and reading. Being an excellent reader, I couldn't believe that many of my students couldn't read, were reading below grade level, couldn't handle the reading level or concepts in the materials, or worst of all, didn't like to read. When I became convinced that the reading problem was *real*, I enrolled in the doctoral program and discovered my professional love, reading!

After eight years of teaching my Reading 414, I haven't completely eliminated the dilemma, but I have worked out a much more palatable approach for the students and myself! Immediate failure and common sense taught me that telling them about and lecturing on the reading problem was ineffectual. I had to develop a method to expose them to the reading problem and to create a positive attitude toward reading and the role of the secondary teacher in teaching reading skills. Each new semester and each new class is a challenge, but the complaints and questions are fewer and don't continue as long, the interest and acceptance are much higher, and my student ratings have gone up!

I'm sure that most college instructors of a secondary reading course have experienced the same reactions and/or problems. My approach is what I wish to share in this paper. I have structured the course hopefully to answer the student's questions before they can be asked and to expose them functionally, via discovery, that there is a *need for all teachers* to be involved in reading and the teaching of reading skills required for their subjects.

IS THERE REALLY A READING PROBLEM?

(Translated: Is this just another course to take?)

The textbooks, newspapers, journals, TV programs and most educators say so! But, unfortunately, most of my students just haven't reacted to the phenomenon of "Johnny can't read."

STEP 1: AWARENESS

On the first day, I give each student a reading survey sheet. I ask about their reading interests, how much they read, how they rate reading as a source for gaining formation, their reading rate if they know it, and any reading problems or poor habits that they experience. **THIS IS IMMEDIATELY SUMMARIZED AND PRESENTED AS A CLASS PROFILE TO ILLUSTRATE THE READING CHARACTERISTICS OF THEIR AGE GROUP.** (I have found it amazingly consistent from semester to semester.)

I then give each student one of four carefully selected articles to read and be prepared to share with three other class members on the following

day. These articles all deal with some aspect of the secondary reading problem. They *must* be short, well written, current and factual!

The next day, the students share their articles in groups of four. **THIS EXERCISE GETS THEM INTO PROFESSIONAL LITERATURE, STRESSES THE READING PROBLEM, AND DEMONSTRATES THAT A READING ASSIGNMENT NEEDN'T BE DISTASTEFUL.**

The whole class then discusses the four articles, summarizes the problems, and reacts to them. I let them verbalize and sound off, but I just keep my reading opinions to myself at this time.

STEP II: REALITY

On the third day, I play several taped sections of local high school and junior high students taking an oral reading test. The class is given the test paragraphs and instructed to follow along and mark the errors. For example, one of the tapes has a sophomore who reads on the fourth grade level. Most of the class express shock that there are such poor readers in the schools.

STEP III: SELF-ANALYSIS

On the fourth day, I administer the Nelson Denny Reading Test for High School Students and Adults. The students are instructed to do their best so they will have an idea of their reading rate, vocabulary, and comprehension levels. The test is for diagnosis and does not affect their class grade.

STEP IV: REALIZATION

On the fifth day, I give them their individual test results along with interpretation. I show them the class profile of the total scores as well as the ranges of the rate, vocabulary and comprehension. (I have done this for several semesters and the results are reasonably constant: of a class of 30, 2 or 3 will be 9th grade or lower, 15 will be high school level, and the remaining will be college level.)

Week one has ended! The students haven't gotten into a reading textbook or any reading theory, but they are aware of what current literature says. Some have discovered that they aren't reading very well! All are talking about reading and many are now asking, "What will I do if I get those students in my class who can't and won't read?"

WHY DO I HAVE TO TAKE THIS COURSE?

Some of the students have already personally answered this question. For those who request it, we supply a self-improvement, home study reading course. This course is designed to increase rate, comprehension, and reading interest. For the ones who read well, it is now time for theory and practice.

STEP V: READING

Through lecture, discussion, reading and media we now analyze how

secondary reading is unique, the general skills required, the specific skills needed in different subject areas, and why reading skills must be taught and reinforced after the sixth grade.

Each student is assigned to a public school classroom to observe and carry out reading assignments:

1. Observe a class or classes and fill out a checklist rating the teacher and student involvement in reading skills.
2. Interview the teacher and students concerning reading, reading problems, and attitudes toward reading. (See *Journal of Reading*, May 1977.)
3. Administer a short reading test to one or more students and analyze the results.
4. Construct and give a teacher-made test; after scoring, have the students react to the directions, type of questions, vocabulary, etc. Could they read and understand the questions that were written?

STEP VI: INTEGRATION AND APPLICATION

As the students carry out their classroom assignments and observations, we begin to work.

1. *Study* and *analyze* the reading process. (I used to do this first and it was disastrous. The students didn't have the background for immediately attacking reading theory.)
2. Construct reading skill exercises for the different subject areas and reading levels.
3. Write, teach, and evaluate lessons in which the reading skills are *integrated* into the subject lesson.
4. Build a personal bibliography for continued professional reading.
5. Build a bibliography of "good" books and materials which are multi-level, subject-oriented, and can be used for teaching and reinforcing reading skills.
6. Design and construct a learning center for use in the student teaching assignment. The center must have exercises which meet the individual needs of students, including those exceptional students in the classroom.
7. List reading problems and determine methods, techniques, and materials for their correction within the regular classroom.

THE CLASS IS OVER! The students now can tell me several reasons why students in high school can't and won't read; why elementary schools can't and shouldn't teach the higher level reading skills required in content subjects; why the schools can't keep poor readers in sixth grade forever; and how they plan to integrate reading skills into each lesson that they teach. (We stress integration rather than direct teaching of reading. Secondary teachers are responsible for content teaching.)

Both verbally and nonverbally, many of these students will become teachers who go into the classroom and convey that "Reading is important

to me, and in my class we are going to read and develop the reading skills necessary for effective learning of the subject!"

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