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MAKING A DENT IN THE CONTENT: READING THAT IS

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In 1954 Rudolf Flesch wrote a book published by Harper and Brothers that caused an upheaval in homes and public schools throughout America. His book *Why Johnny Can't Read* is referred to as an angry book by an aroused parent. The conclusion drawn by Dr. Flesch as to why Johnny can't read is that "nobody ever showed him how" (Flesch, 1965, p. 2).

Twenty-one years later one continues to hear, especially from content area teachers at all levels of instruction, that there are Johnnies in their classrooms who still cannot read. One also hears from the same group the aged old story of "Passing the Buck" or "Blame, Blame – Who's to Blame: the one in which college and university teachers blame high school teachers; teachers in high school blame teachers in junior high school, and so on down the educational ladder until the kindergarten teachers are left to blame the parents and the parents are left to blame each other's family.

So paramount is the reading problem that reading has come to be regarded as one of the highest priority areas in modern education. During his administration, former President Richard M. Nixon declared war on illiteracy by establishing a national "Right to Read" campaign. As outgrowths of the campaign federal, state, and local governments poured millions of dollars into reading programs throughout the country. Reading laboratories were established, special reading teachers were employed, and voluntary and paid paraprofessionals were used in an effort to combat, correct, and eradicate reading difficulties. In the schools, most of these efforts have been concentrated in the "formalized" reading area. A cursory review of the literature reveals that very little has been done by content area teachers to reinforce, to expand, or to teach the reading of content books. "Pervading the literature is the feeling that content teachers just do not understand—they are ignorant of—what they can and should do for students" (Herber, 1970, p. 9). They have rejected the cliché that "every teacher is a teacher of reading" and have come to believe that the teaching of reading is the responsibility of elementary school teachers and special reading teachers (Herber, 1970). This belief is also prevalent among many middle and upper grade elementary school teachers and is practiced to the extent that they regard reading as a specific subject to be taught at a specific time of the day and from a specific book.

For many years basic reading problems have been the focus of much educational research. Children have been graded, non-graded, grouped,

re-grouped, tracked, and leveled for reading instruction, yet content area teachers are still dissatisfied with the reading skills of their students. Causes for dissatisfactions are many and varied. The lack of reading skills exhibited by students in content area courses may well be in part the results of a lack of involvement by all school teachers in reading instruction, and “the assumption that teaching the content of a subject and teaching the skills that are related to the subject are somehow separate entities” (Herber, 1970, p. 6). According to R. Baird Shuman (1975, p. 2), the lack of involvement by school teachers in reading instruction is not because teachers of content area “do not have a genuine desire to enhance their student’s academic achievements,” but because “teaching one to read effectively . . . involves such a sophisticated learning process that most teachers consider themselves inadequate to deal with the task.” Likewise, Harold L. Herber (1970, p. 6) states that: “Research evidence shows that reading and study skills related to a course need not be taught in isolation, as an appendage to the curriculum. Skills can be taught simultaneously with the course content; content and process need not be separated.” The fact of the matter is, then, that the content area teacher who has a thorough knowledge of his content area might be better equipped to teach reading in his content area than many of the reading teachers upon whom the burden now rests who have had no specialized training in the specific content area and, in many cases, have had no specialized training in the teaching of reading.

Questions to Build Confidence

Seemingly, many school teachers of content areas fail to teach reading in their area of specialization because they lack confidence. Therefore, it is being suggested that teachers of content areas, instead of playing “Pass The Buck” or “Blame, Blame—Who’s to Blame” and instead of making rationalizations for not teaching reading in the content areas, ask themselves the following questions: (1) Can I read? (2) Do I comprehend what I read? (3) Do I have a thorough knowledge and understanding of my subject area? (4) Can I explain successfully to pupils the content of my area of specialization? (5) Do I know how to study? (6) Do I possess a specialized vocabulary in my subject area? (7) Can I, phonetically and/or structurally, attack words? If these questions can be answered in the affirmative by teachers of content areas, then they should be able to teach reading in the area of their specialization.

Let’s Begin

Bernice Leary (1947, p. 13) writes “Reading is not a thing to be considered apart from education.” The writer would add to that statement, or to be taught in isolation for fifty-five minutes per day by a reading teacher as a single subject and then forgotten until the next reading period. Instead, “teaching a child to read . . . requires a program that is long enough to train him to read many different kinds of materials for many different purposes” (Leary, 1947, p. 13). This being the case, content subjects provide an ideal place to begin, since research clearly reveals that

various content subjects involve markedly different vocabularies, concepts, organizations, and purposes.

Paul Rosewell (1973, p. 26) challenged all teachers to assume the responsibility for “evaluating reading competency, diagnosing reading difficulties, prescribing study techniques to alleviate problems and ineffective procedures, and promoting enriched reading opportunities.” R. Baird Shuman (1975, p. 2) added to Rosewell’s challenge the responsibility of each teacher “to devise alternative learning methods within content areas so that the non-reader or severely disabled reader can be exposed to the content of the course despite his disability.”

Dispel the myth that reading is a separate subject to be taught by only the reading teacher or the English teacher or for a certain period of the day from a particular book. Forget the thoughts of not knowing anything about phonetic analysis, structural analysis, building and teaching vocabulary skills, comprehension skills, and study skills. In lieu of these, think of pupils who may need continuing help in order to cope with the more complex materials and reading approaches as they advance through the grades. Think of the language of the subject—the technical vocabulary—and of how pupils must adjust their language and reading ability to meet the demands placed upon them by this vocabulary. Remember, “until a student has facility with that language, he cannot communicate any ideas essential to the subject” (Herber, 1970, p. 194). The language of any subject, then, should become the focus point. By zeroing in on the language, many advantages may be realized including: (1) Word analysis, word recognition, and word meaning can be developed within a meaningful context; (2) pupils may develop an understanding of and competence with skills that will enable them to add to their vocabulary independently; (3) as skills are developed an understanding of basic concepts are presented by words to which skills are applied. In essence, the technical vocabulary developed can and should become a continuation of teaching skills and course content simultaneously (Herber, 1970).

Branching Out

Reading in the content areas generally encompasses the areas of literature, mathematics, the sciences, and the social studies. Therefore, the reading material in content areas is best understood by the content teacher, the reading specialist or the teacher of English, who may have been charged with this added responsibility, is clearly not the one to offer the most effective direction to reading in the subject-matter area (Rosewell, 1973). Moreover, to expect a utopia with regard to equipping unskilled readers to read content material in each of these areas, without assistance from the content teachers, might be like the Cinderella fairy tale—wishful thinking. It is unskilled readers whose reading skills and abilities need whetting, extending, and reinforcing.

Assuming that the content area teacher is now ready to “branch out” and become involved in content area reading, the question might be how. Because of space limitations and because the literature is replete with

articles, books, and other materials pertaining to teaching reading in the content areas, it is not possible or feasible to go into great detail here. However, some general suggestions have been included that might prove helpful to the subject area teacher who wants to make a dent in teaching reading in the content area.

Beyond teaching the language of the subject, the content area teacher should also teach the purposes, organization, and specialized vocabularies of the subject as well as give help in reading rate adjustment, concept development, and in understanding of assignments.

Mr. and Ms. Content Teachers

First, it might be "helpful to think of reading study skills as those skills that form an integral part of the reading process, but that are used especially when application of the content is desired" (Smith, 1963, p. 307). Second, with this in mind, reflect upon the purposes of your particular subject-matter area. Mr. and Ms. Social Studies Teachers, it would appear that one of the primary purposes of social studies is to provide pupils with the knowledge and skills for acquiring information which will be needed throughout life as a functioning member of society. Mr. and Ms. Science Teachers, would not the purposes of your subject area be to help pupils obtain facts, acquire understanding of data, and develop scientific attitudes, appreciations, and interests? Mr. and Ms. Mathematics Teachers, is not the purpose of mathematics to teach pupils to reason, to estimate and compute, and to understand and be proficient with the concepts, ideas, and meanings of mathematics? And, Mr. and Ms. Literature Teachers, since "literature is usually considered to be a body of writings belonging to a people which includes their legends, myths, experiences, beliefs, values, and aspirations," (Shepherd, 1973, p. 173) would not its purpose really be to introduce the pupils to this mythos—to the evolving values of the culture to which they belong—rather than merely to teach the characteristics or genre?

Needless to say, in different subject areas pupils must read different materials for different purposes. The pupil who attempts to read his mathematics or science text at the same rate or in the same manner as he reads a novel for pleasure might discover serious comprehension difficulties. The rate of reading should be adjusted to the difficulty of the material and to the demands placed upon the pupil by the content area teacher. It is of utmost importance that the subject area teacher help the pupil to understand the concepts that he will be reading about and lead him to a state of readiness to grasp these concepts by drawing upon his experiences and helping him to decode the printed page. Similarly, a vocabulary peculiar to the subject area being taught must be introduced and explained within the context of the subject. For example, the word "product" in mathematics and the word "product" in social studies might have entirely different meanings. Lessons should be organized in such a manner as to provide for the varying abilities of members of the class. Likewise, assignments should be made, not in broad sweeping generalizations, but, rather, concisely and

with the type of guidance that will foster a conscious understanding of the reading process that will lead pupils to successful comprehension (Harris, 1973).

Admittedly, this might not be an easy task for the content area teacher but, according to Bernice Leary, neither is it any light matter for students “to convert into meaning the language of mathematics, science, literature, and the social studies; to maintain a critical attitude toward what is read; to develop the habit of relating written expression to one’s own experiences; and to adjust reading abilities to different materials by grasping the author’s intent, his use of words, and his style of writing, and by defining clearly one’s own reading purposes (Leary, 1947, p. 10). Moreover, if the task is to be made easy without sacrificing its educational value, why not make it easy for the pupils? After all, is it not our job and aim to teach pupils rather than books? Also, in an endeavor to advance reading within the content area, subject-area teachers are hereby called upon to explore and search the literature in order to ascertain what has been and what can be done. The following references might prove of value: Harold L. Herber, *Teaching Reading in Content Areas*, Prentice-Hall, 1970; *Improving Reading in Content Fields*, compiled and edited by William S. Gray, University of Chicago Press, 1947; David L. Shepherd, *Comprehensive High School Reading Methods*, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1973; and the December 1973 edition of *Clearing House*. These are just four of the many sources readily available on reading in the content areas. Because of the vast amount of information and suggestions now available, a challenge is being presented to you, Mr. and Ms. Teachers of content area subjects, to make a dent in Content – Reading, that is.

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