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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Kenneth VanderMeulen

During the past school year, the writer mailed letters to principals of over two hundred high schools in Michigan, asking questions which pertained to teaching reading on the secondary level. We wanted to learn, first, whether administrators were concerned about reading problems on the junior high and high school levels; and second, we wanted to find out how much information in the field of reading was readily accessible to teachers of secondary classes.

The first question was emphatically answered by the ratio of replies to letters sent. An eighty-seven percent response—220 out of 249 letters sent—indicated a sincere concern on the part of the administrators. We learned through the survey that only one-third of the Michigan high schools we contacted—average size of high school was sixteen teachers—could offer any kind of course devoted to reading improvement. This included all arrangements for remedial work. Only a quarter of the teachers in the schools contacted had materials dealing with the teaching of reading made readily or regularly available to them. Our question as to whether the principals would be interested in receiving practical ideas and information designed for use by content teachers, was answered with a positive “yes,” the only reservations being the query, “. . . but how much will it cost?”

With this background, the reader will understand why *Reading Horizons* is instituting this series of articles on the means of and approaches to helping students read and study their secondary texts with more efficiency. We wish to share with the readers—especially subject matter teachers at junior high and high school levels—a few of the many helpful ideas and useful suggestions currently being written about by experts in the field of reading and study skills.

Our common goal as teachers is to produce students who can find significant material about relevant matters and then read with comprehension and discernment what the material says. Since it must be obvious to us all that we cannot impart enough facts or information to equip students for survival in the technological world of tomorrow, our job as teachers must be to help students become independently skillful in using the tools of learning.

There is no attempt through this article to superimpose the role

of reading teacher on every content teacher in high school. The work of the reading teacher is to help students refine their reading and study skills; the content course teachers are engaged in stimulating students to use the reading skills to gain understanding in certain academic areas. There is no reason, however, why content teachers should not be able to tell students how to apply particular skills to gain more from the passages under consideration. If the teacher wishes to help students build foundations of understanding in preparation for more complex levels in the discipline, it is to *his* benefit as well as the students' that classes learn to recognize the reading skills and to practice applying them.

Your initial effort in every course and class is to meet and *know* your students. One of the most important jobs you can undertake when new groups of classes come to your room in the fall is to learn as much as possible about each student. Many teachers feel it is sufficient to consult the cumulative folders, others bring in a standardized test, still other teachers have students tell something about themselves, and a few chat with the students' previous teachers. What is proposed here is truly a departure from those time-dishonored methods mentioned. If you wish to learn more than all the above procedures could yield and gain an additional value of ascertaining the suitability of your text to the reading levels of your students, use the text itself as the source for a close look at your students' reading behavior and abilities.

If you are very familiar with the basic text used in your course offering, the first step of choosing six paragraphs of expository material throughout the book should not pose a problem. If it is a first year adoption, the process will have a bonus benefit attached—edification.

The object in step one is to choose six paragraphs which will exercise certain specific facets of one's general reading ability. One of the paragraphs might relate a series of facts leading to a general thought. Another might have a few non-technical but highly complex words which allow a testing of one's word attack skills. Another paragraph might be useful because it expresses its main idea in the middle or at the end. Still another might lend itself for use because it implies a conclusion without the statement. A paragraph might be used as a test for recognition of causal relationship. Another might be used to measure student ability to see a process in the proper sequence of steps. There might even be a paragraph for use in testing student ability to read with critical evaluation.

Step two, write four questions to accompany each paragraph.

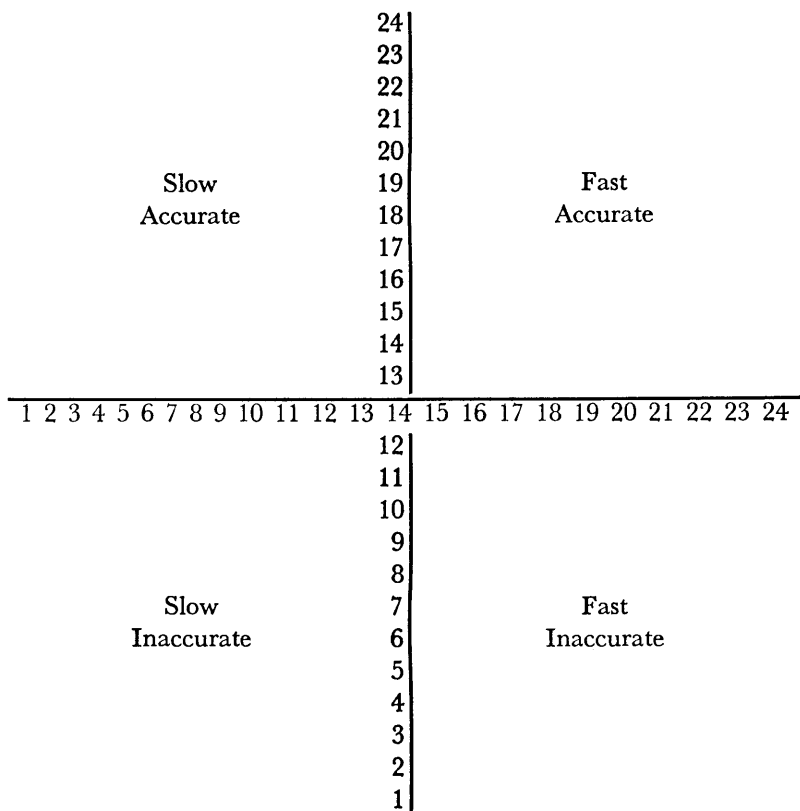
The questions should be objective type and not more than a line or two in length. Each paragraph and accompanying questions should constitute one dittoed page, all six pages stapled together for some permanence. (Separate answer sheets are recommended.)

Step three, administer the reading assignment with a limited amount of pre-discussion and direction. Also, limit the time to about half the time for average students to complete the work, and explain that the time allowed is for reading *and* answering questions. The reason for the arbitrary limit on time is primarily to discourage reverie on one item and reckless abandon on another. Try to establish a uniform test situation for all.

Step four includes scoring and analyzing the results. If you allowed a twelve or fourteen minute read-and-answer period uniformly, you will soon discover that your class has, besides the range of abilities, four distinct types of reader-thinkers. They are the fast-accurate readers, the slow-accurate readers, the fast-inaccurate readers, and the slow-inaccurate readers. These terms must be seen as realities of what practical help and guidance certain students need for improvement. While standardized tests may give percentiles for rate, vocabulary, and comprehension, there is usually not enough information for the teacher to use in helping the student.

Step five is simply putting the results into graphic form so that students as well as the teacher can analyze aspects of reading behavior. The teacher is not required to explain standard deviation and coefficient of correlation to interpret results for students. Here, you need to find the average number of questions attempted. Second, find the average number of answers correct. Then, draw a horizontal line (numbered from left to right) to represent the number of questions attempted; and, draw a vertical line (numbered from the bottom) to intersect the horizontal line at the point of average for each, and plot the scores on the graph.

Illustration of Typical Graph



When you discuss the rationale and the results of the test as you used it, you may be able to help a number of your students dispel a widely held misconception—that a high rate of reading is to be sought for its own sake. You might repeat what Dr. George Spache concluded, “Some students need rate training which would result in slower rather than faster reading.” If students see that they are in the fast-inaccurate quarter of the graph because of carelessness and poor concentration, they can take steps themselves to remedy the situation. If, on the other hand, a student had read with great care and attention every word, and always word-by-word, his accuracy *and* snail-like pace will become very apparent to him. He too may take steps to eliminate the old habit or deficiency of sub-vocalizing.

If the project of analyzing both the comprehension level of your

text and your new students' reading-thinking habits seems like too great an undertaking, don't drop the whole idea as you put away the article. Such a means of learning something about your students' reading and the text must have a number of efficacious variations. From a future unit which includes a reading assignment, choose a paragraph that requires the reader to draw a conclusion or make a generalization. Let the students read the paragraph in a limited time, and ask them to write their ideas about what the author wanted them to think or feel or believe. Such mini-essays can be quite revealing to the understanding teacher. The purpose, whatever variation you choose, is simply to know your individual students well enough to let every one make a contribution to your course on his level of ability and comprehension.

That students understand the need for reading with a specific purpose in mind is of utmost importance, and the principle can best be taught and demonstrated by the teachers of the content courses. When the instructor emphasizes what skills are required to obtain the most value from a passage in the text, the student will doubtless apply the skill and meet with success. And, as everyone knows, an ounce of success is worth a pound of remediation in any school.