

Educational Leadership

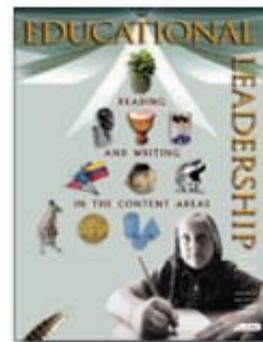
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Getting Started: Manageable Literacy Practices

To help all students succeed, content-area teachers can infuse into their curriculum several simple but powerful principles of developmental reading instruction.

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In language arts classrooms, educators have a good sense of what it takes to help students become motivated and skillful readers. Almost everyone agrees on the importance of giving students books that they can read and want to read, explaining and modeling how to make sense of text, and setting aside time for students to practice reading. In content-area classrooms, however, students rarely encounter these key elements of good reading instruction. Although students may learn specific strategies to help them understand their textbooks, these strategies will probably have little or no effect in the absence of appropriate materials, instruction in thoughtful reading, and extended time to read—particularly for students reading several grade levels behind their peers.

Educators in content-area classrooms need to implement the same key practices that work in reading classrooms. As a starting point in building classrooms in which all students have productive experiences in learning from text, consider the following principles of developmental reading instruction.

Collect Real Books and Other Content-Rich Materials

Students report that having the right materials motivates them to read (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001), but schools typically do not offer the materials that students prefer to read (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Textbooks continue to dominate content-area classes as the primary—and often the *only*—reading material, despite students' and teachers' complaints that textbooks are too difficult, too boring, or both. In response to this problem, we have seen the growing popularity of various instructional strategies to support textbook reading, such as graphic organizers and the K-W-L strategy (Ogle, 1986), along with professional development opportunities for teachers to learn these strategies. But despite these efforts, content-area reading strategies have not taken hold in most classrooms (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995).

The textbook, after all, is still the textbook. Even the best strategies in the world will not help students read something that presents unfamiliar concepts in language far beyond their reach.

Instead of creating new and better strategies to help students read the textbook, why not provide different kinds of materials that students can read with only minimal support to build comprehension and interest?

Teachers at Thomas Harrison Middle School in Harrisonburg, Virginia, had this in mind when they brought together numerous and varied trade books and arranged them by subject themes on mobile shelves in an area accessible to content-area teachers. There, a social studies teacher planning a unit on World War II can find scores of related books, including journals, historical fiction, poetry books, photo-essays, picture books, and volumes containing primary-source documents. The materials vary in format and in difficulty level to suit the diverse needs of individuals. Students find in these collections a wide variety of texts that they can manage on their own.

When teachers make the transition from textbook-only classrooms to multitext classrooms, the focus of study becomes concepts rather than the content of one particular book. Students gain both a broad perspective and an in-depth sense of the subject matter from reading many texts on the same topic. I know of no one textbook that contains enough information to help a student become even mildly expert on any topic. Students in a multitext classroom are also more likely to read with understanding because they are not limited to one particular text that they might find inaccessible.

Developing text-rich classrooms requires schools to make difficult decisions about the allocation of resources. But considering that good materials make the difference in how much and how well students read, devoting significant amounts of money to purchase diverse, high-quality instructional resources is a worthwhile investment. Multitext classrooms also challenge teachers in all content areas to expand their knowledge of the information resources available on their subjects. Further, teachers must learn to orchestrate instruction when students are reading a variety of texts as opposed to the entire class reading the same book.

Although these changes may seem overwhelming, successful teachers across the country have already found that the benefits of using multiple texts outweigh the drawbacks. In their study of exemplary 4th grade instruction across five states, Allington & Johnston (2002) found that a key commonality among effective teachers was that they used multiple texts with a range of formats and difficulty levels for content-area instruction.

Read Aloud to Students

Consider what these two 6th graders said about what happens when their teachers read to them:

I like it when I can just hear it and have nothing in my hands. I can just sit here and listen and picture what's happening in my mind. When I'm reading I'm hooked on the words rather than what's going on.

[The teacher] makes it sound so interesting. If there's complicated words, instead of us trying to figure it out she'll be reading it, and she understands what the words mean. (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001, p. 361)

Reading aloud, like other teacher demonstrations with text, helps student comprehension. Language arts teachers across the grade levels commonly read aloud, but content-area teachers have not fully explored the value of this practice. When teachers read aloud to students, they give a voice and meaning to text that students often cannot give to the reading themselves, most often because they lack knowledge about the subject.

Teacher read-alouds provide many specific benefits. First, as any teacher who reads aloud regularly knows, it inspires students to read on their own. Teachers can “sell” books to their students by opening up texts in front of the class and reading the most intriguing parts. As one 6th grader explained,

I want to read in this class when the teacher reads a little part of the book. If it is interesting, I want to find out about the rest of the book. (Worthy, Broaddus, & Ivey, 2001, p. 78)

Second, read-alouds give inexperienced readers access to information in the more difficult texts commonly used in content-area classes. We know that a 5th grader reading most comfortably on a 2nd grade level will have her best literacy experiences in easy materials, but we would not want to limit her to the information that we typically find in 2nd grade materials.

Third, teacher read-alouds provide a format in which teachers can demonstrate for their students the mental processes they use to make sense of what they are reading. When you read silently, you ask yourself questions, hypothesize and predict, make connections to what you already know and to what you have read, relate the information to personal experiences, and check whether or not you truly understand what you're reading. When teachers read to their students, they can explain some of these processes as they unfold. In a method commonly called a think-aloud, the teacher reads a portion of text and then pauses to describe his or her thinking before going on to the next portion of text.

Provide Time for Independent Reading

When my colleagues and I asked more than 1,700 6th graders from two states which activities they most preferred in their reading and language arts classes, an impressive 63 percent of students selected independent reading—more than any other classroom practice (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). In follow-up interviews, students explained that uninterrupted reading allowed them to get involved in the content of the book, to pace their own reading, and to better comprehend what they had read. In a nutshell, students felt that having time to read helped them learn.

If spending time with texts helps students learn new concepts and think critically, then it makes sense to create time for engaged reading within content disciplines, where building knowledge and learning to reason are the top priorities. Including time for independent reading may at first seem burdensome to content-area teachers who face the demands of accountability and curriculum coverage. But how can students learn to read and think like scientists, historians, or writers if they have few opportunities to read science, history, and literature?

Block scheduling, in which students attend fewer classes per day for longer periods of time per class, helps create time and space for independent reading (Fisher, 2001). Some teachers might designate blocks of time for student independent reading within each unit of study rather than schedule a specific amount of time for reading each day. In a four-week unit of study on living systems, for example, a 4th grade science teacher might devote one week to self-selected student reading on related topics using a variety of materials such as field journals, newspaper articles, picture books, research logs, magazine articles, photo-essays, and poetry. Having time to explore texts on their own gives students a chance to read texts that they can negotiate without a struggle and to deepen their knowledge of topics of personal interest that are related to the larger unit of study.

Teachers should carefully consider what they do during content reading times. During most schoolwide voluntary reading programs, teachers serve as models for their students by reading texts of their own choosing. Content-area teachers might also use reading times to help struggling and inexperienced readers select interesting, readable texts and get started with reading. Or teachers might take advantage of the time to discuss content with individual students.

Make Reading Support Manageable

Too often, instructional leaders inundate content-area teachers with an array of textbook-reading strategies that target the needs of only a limited number of students or that may not be relevant to the teachers' particular subject areas. A more reasonable and manageable approach is to translate into professional development agendas the three principles of good reading instruction—provide student-friendly materials, show students how to read difficult texts through teacher read-alouds, and create time for students to read.

That is, provide teachers with the resources and time to explore the new and interesting trade books related to their disciplines so that they can become experts in the information-rich materials that their students can read and will want to read. Instill confidence in content-area teachers' understandings of reading comprehension by first having them study, identify, and reflect on their own reading processes. Finally, rather than require attendance at one-size-fits-all workshops on content-area reading, give individual teachers or groups of teachers who teach the same subject the option of spending that time reading and discussing professional materials specifically focused on the teaching of reading and writing within their disciplines (see VanSledright, 2002; Whitin & Whitin, 2000).

Asking all content-area teachers to become expert reading teachers, although ideal for students, is not realistic. But by taking a few straightforward steps, schools can better equip content-area teachers to support the wide range of readers they will undoubtedly encounter in their classrooms.

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