

# TEACHING READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

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*Five thinking operations can be taught—and learned—that will assist high school students in their reading in all subjects and at all levels. The total staff can be involved in putting these procedures into effect.*

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**R**ECENTLY a group of 14 science and social studies teachers were discussing the problems of high school teaching. Most of the complaints seemed to center on reading. "The reading problem is so bad," said one social studies teacher, "that I no longer make any reading assignments. It is useless. Most of the kids cannot read the text. Whatever they learn, they learn through lecture and discussion. All verbal."

Eight of the 14 teachers admitted to a similar pattern. The class text was used as a reference for those who wanted to pursue a topic beyond class discussion. But, it was not used in any substantive instruction.

Those 14 teachers worked in an upward striving middle class neighborhood. They had no evidence that they dealt with neglected or poverty-stricken or educationally deprived children. Surveys and reports from other secondary teachers add weight to the notion that the reading problem is so persistent that secondary teachers are aban-

doning their books in frustration (Negley, 1975). Movies, discussions, personal experience, group projects—that's the substance of many secondary classes.

## Independence Thwarted

Even though we all can sympathize with the teachers' dilemma, consider the personal tragedy this modus operandi inflicts on the student. Routinely, the sources of ideas are so limited that stimulating concepts have to be limited. Must be downright boring! Even worse, the students are hindered from using or are not shown how to use the one universal instrument for independent learning—the book.

Why should this scene exist? Instead of looking for a scapegoat in the elementary school, let's ask, instead, how many subject matter teachers are prepared to cope with the reading problems they will naturally face as a result of compulsory education.

Several states, recognizing the existence of such a deficiency in teacher training, have recently prescribed a reading methods unit in the certification requirements for all secondary teachers. Arizona and Indiana have just joined a group of two dozen states that now require reading methods for secondary teachers. Though this seems a step in the

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right direction, reading in the secondary schools needs a fresh outlook, a silver bullet calling card.

## Overcoming Teachers' Bias

Experience shows that most secondary teachers do not want to be reading teachers. Rather, they have a strong interest in a subject that they want to communicate to youngsters. Their definition of reading is related to decoding and working on syllabication—a view so uninteresting (as the same definition would be to elementary teachers) that they want to steer as far from “reading” as they can. And rightfully so. What secondary teachers do want to do is to be effective teachers and to develop means to help their students learn science or math or auto mechanics—and that includes using information in books. If asked whether they wanted to devise efficient means for thinking about their content book, they would certainly answer yes. No teacher would reject that idea, and yet, how to think with a book is not part of the training of most secondary teachers.

## Bookthinking, a Fresh Outlook

“Bookthinking” may be the fresh outlook that reading instruction needs in the secondary schools. By working on book-thinking, teacher bias favors action instead of preventing it, as often happens when a reading specialist proclaims: “Every secondary teacher must be a teacher of reading.” Each of us strives to improve his or her efficiency in thinking with a book. Yet most of us were not trained to analyze what book-thinking requires. For lack of that analysis we are not prepared to explain to students how they can think efficiently with books.

When a student opens an American history book, for example, just what is he or she expected to do? Certainly it is reasonable to ask the history teacher to explain to students how they can accomplish what is expected. For instance, George Washington was commander of the Colonial Army. How effective was he? For the student who does

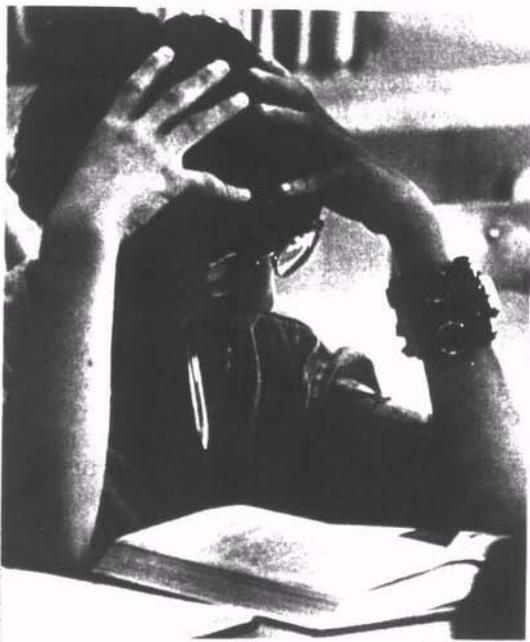
not know how to read and to evaluate the effectiveness of Washington as a general, the history teacher should be prepared to demonstrate the application of criteria in judging Washington. The teacher might use the coach of a football team as a high interest example of a leader who deploys personnel in order to win a battle. What criteria are used to judge a coach?

How then does the student read about Washington and make a judgment? What leadership and historical criteria ought to be applied? Part of the answer to that question lies in the very reason for having a teacher of history, or of science, or of math. In addition to having a chunk of knowledge that he or she has organized, the teacher has a responsibility to show students how to use the tools of learning. Books come first on the list. What is it that a student is to do with books in health or geography or physics? If one subject is different from other subjects, then thinking about and thinking with the books of the subject is different, too. Explaining that difference is part of the job of teaching.

## Thinking Operations

There are relatively few bookthinking operations (Davis, 1968). They can be categorized under four or five headings, and those headings fit all manner of subjects—English, math, science, social studies, vocational studies. There are probably hundreds of nuances to these four or five major thinking operations but they are only examples or instances of the major categories. That is a great advantage, because those few thinking operations can be used across all the subjects. But students do not learn this all by themselves. It is the teacher's role to help them see how to transfer thinking skills from one subject to another. Which thinking operations? Here are five that work:

1. Have accurate associations for the vocabulary of the subject or that part of it in a given passage.
2. Recall significant features or events; for example, who discovered the serum?



absorption of printed words. The reader is a wrestler, not a sponge.

### Curricular Implications

In a true sense, bookthinking (reading) is a developmental activity. The learner should always be improving his or her finesse within the major bookthinking categories described earlier. Since secondary teachers have not usually examined bookthinking as part of their undergraduate training, existing staffs should apply in-service time to develop awareness of and teaching examples of the major bookthinking operations that fit their subject. One of the guiding questions for in-service activity is: How can I promote independent learners by using books and other periodicals related to my subject? In colleges where secondary reading courses are taught, the same questions should be addressed. The answer surely requires examining the current texts used for each subject and applying thinking operations to those texts.

The readability problem of secondary texts has to be solved, too (Mallinson, 1972). If a tenth grade text carries an eleventh grade score according to a readability formula (a common phenomenon), and if a tenth grade class has students capable of reading from grade three to thirteen (because that is the nature of a typical tenth grade class), then the school and the teacher need to adjust to the implications of the situation for bookthinking. Alternatives include different books for different students, or different reading assignments (and expectations) to match the reading ability of the students, or student study guides that show the advanced, the average, and the poor readers how to get the most out of the text, or an elective system where courses are described in terms of their reading difficulty. Students could choose and could be counseled into courses that match their reading capabilities.

The so-called reading problem in the secondary schools cannot be solved unless teachers and curriculum adjust to the needs of the students.

3. Analyze (manipulate) the content for a given purpose; for example, to compare the lifestyles of the two main characters.

4. Judge the worth of the passage, or the ideas in it; for example, was it worth reading that chapter?

5. Extend the ideas logically or emotionally beyond the text to show understanding of how to use the ideas; for example, predict what will happen next.

These major categories may have dozens of variations, dozens of different questions within each category, but the commonality of the basic operations is easily recognized across subject disciplines, and the categories give each teacher a kind of mental framework within which to organize questions and teaching activities.

In addition to those common thinking operations there are special textual idiosyncrasies that each subject teacher should help students think about, for example, tables in the science text, and relating illustrations and text in the history books (Robinson, 1975). Students need to be shown how to take an active attitude about using books. Thinking demands activity, not a passive

## **Program Adjustments**

A significant effort on the part of a secondary school to help students with bookthinking and reading will include these program adjustments:

1. *Training in bookthinking* for all teachers. Each must understand that bookthinking is a developmental process across the years of schooling and it is the first and most important skill that a student needs to become an independent learner in the teacher's subject. Each subject has some special textual features that need to be explained to students in addition to explaining the vocabulary and demonstrating the application of thinking operations to the science or math book.

2. *An optional reading course* should be available to those students who elect to upgrade their personal reading skills. This option usually includes reading speed exercises and practice in effective study reading skills. Many secondary schools hold this course in a "reading lab."

3. *Specialized assistance* for students who have little mastery over the basic reading skills should be available on a referral basis. When a secondary student cannot demonstrate competency with the vocabulary and comprehension skills usually associated with the primary grades, then he or she should be referred to a reading specialist who can analyze and direct development in reading survival skills or basic literacy skills.

## **Final Dictum**

The person who designs a secondary program to include a developmental, optional, and specialized assistance in bookthinking and reading would help the program by putting some program dictums on the planning sheet. They might read as follows:

1. Bookthinking (reading) achieves importance when it is given a significant or prominent place in learning activity. Some schools, for example, have a reading period for the entire school (including the janitors) for 20 to 30 minutes twice a week.

2. Keep the bookthinking skills few enough to be manageable and ask for evidence of achievement on those few skills. Subject matter teachers should indicate that students can carry out one or more of the thinking operations in the textbooks.

3. The classes and curriculum should be flexible enough to enable each student to read no matter what his or her reading ability is.

4. Teachers should have workshop opportunities to develop study guides and teaching plans that help students work toward bookthinking at various levels of readability. For example, some teams of teachers get together and write student study guides at three levels of reading proficiency.

Most secondary teachers and administrators acknowledge that many of their students have difficulties in reading adopted texts. The solution should not be an avoidance behavior—"I won't assign reading in the text." The solution should involve the total staff in adjusting to the needs of the students. Involve the teachers in bookthinking—for they are all interested in and involved in getting their students to think critically about their subject. With that attitude, a staff can tackle the task of adjusting to the text and to the "bookthinking needs" of the students. The results are bound to be constructive, for solutions will arise from the vocabulary of the secondary subject matter specialist and not from the language of the reading specialist. That's the silver bullet.

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