

The Challenge of Content-Area Reading

A Conversation with Donna Ogle

A past president of the International Reading Association discusses the skills and strategies needed to implement a reading program in middle and high schools.

Marcia D'Arcangelo

For many years, you've been an advocate of teaching reading in the content areas. What progress have schools made in making reading in the content areas part of the curriculum?

We're still struggling to make reading across the curriculum a reality, particularly at the middle and high school levels. We've done a much better job at the elementary level because we've moved to a more integrated curriculum. We have a grand array of materials—magazines and news formats designed for children, the World Wide Web, computers with CD-ROMs—that help teachers create instruction in a very rich way. Plus, we have effective strategies to help students work in groups as well as on individual projects.



However, the middle schools are still struggling with the old model of organization by subject areas, making it challenging for school



faculty to work together on projects and to create the kind of learning environments that many teachers would like.

At the high school level, the problems are exacerbated. In many schools, reading is not even part of the curriculum. We have departmental, discipline-based instruction and students in classes for short periods of time each day. Using good instructional materials and strategies makes a great difference. But making the processes of reading and writing a priority in the curriculum is a real struggle.

Why does it seem to be especially difficult to teach reading and writing at the secondary level?

Many middle and high school teachers think of themselves as content experts. When I started teaching, I thought of myself as a historian. I wanted to teach history, and I really didn't think much about how students learn. I always focused on content. A lot of secondary teachers enter the field because of their passion for what they're teaching. It's an unusual teacher who comes into secondary education wanting to teach students how to learn. Yet, if we're going to be good teachers, that's really essential.

Why is it that high school teachers need to teach students how to learn?

Well, students are novice learners. They don't come with the years of experience that teachers have. They don't have the disciplined-based background knowledge to know what's important and what isn't. The demands for knowledge keep increasing. Students must shift from one content area to another very quickly in a school day, and they have to make enormous adjustments. Good teachers realize that a major part of teaching is helping kids understand themselves as learners and helping them begin to think like professionals in whatever discipline they are studying.

Are we talking about all students or primarily low-achieving students?

Although some people think that these strategies are just for the low-achieving students, this is absolutely not the case. Studies of how good readers engage with text when they are reading for their own pleasure or to learn new material are the foundation for the strategies that we teach students. Good learners always begin a text with a purpose, a reason for

reading. They don't pick up a book randomly and start reading. They go into a text because they know the author, or they want a mystery, or they are interested in learning more about some aspect of the world around them. They read strategically, with motivation and purpose, in a way that makes sense for them.

Many students don't develop these strategies early because they do not spend much time with text in the way that some of us did a few generations ago. Because we have new resources and new demands, we need to help students think deeply about what strategies they can use to become more effective learners.

We're seeing quite a renewed interest in teaching reading strategies. What is driving this interest?

The standards movement is helping us refocus attention in reading at the high school level. Also, the assessments at the state and national level are making faculty realize that reading and writing are serious business. We want students who can read information, make critical decisions about it, form their own opinions, and respond intelligently. We also want students to take information from unverified sources on the Web, evaluate it, and use it effectively.

Why do so many of today's students lack those basic skills?

Today's students don't choose to read in their independent time very much because there's so much out there for them to do. When students haven't had experience in reading widely, they don't have the wealth of background knowledge that teachers assume they have. And if you don't know much about the content, you're also going to struggle in reading because vocabulary is crucial in reading text. When students don't have familiarity with reading textbooks, they need help getting involved in the content and thinking about what they do know. They need help to become more strategic readers.

What can teachers do to help students become more strategic readers?

They can spend more time observing and listening to students, diagnosing the strategies that students need to learn and what engages them. Teachers can analyze how to use resources. They can build students' background knowledge and vocabulary. A lot of students, even at the high school level, don't have a clear idea of what it takes to improve in reading. We need to lay out some strategies that help them think about the content before, while, and after they read.

What are some strategies that get students thinking about the content before they read?

Before students learn any new content, they need to think about what they already know about it. Unless students activate their background knowledge, they don't connect what



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they already know with what they're learning in school.

We also need to help students identify the structure and the organization of ideas in text. With fiction, most students can anticipate the structure of the story, but when they read informational text, even if it's about frogs and toads, readers don't know how the information will be structured. If students preview the materials and get a sense of why an author is choosing to write about that topic and how the author decided to organize the information, then they can use that sense of organization and priority in their own learning.

What can they do to mentally process information while reading?

A number of good strategies help readers monitor and keep moving forward with text as they're reading and learning. These strategies help students engage personally and respond to text, consolidate ideas, and find a reason for the sequence of the information. Some of these strategies include making graphic organizers, creating semantic maps of the reading, making marginal notes, and drawing pictures. Reading is a recursive process that requires active engagement. All of these are tools that allow us to be more actively involved while we are reading.

This is quite different from the way we used textbooks in the old days.

Yes, we know now that in preparing to read, readers must be engaged. When I was in high school, the teachers would never let us write in the books. The textbook was a revered object. We thought that if we could memorize some of the text, then that was the best way of learning. When I got to college and bought my own books, I started marking them up all over the place, highlighting the text, underlining, and writing notes to myself in the margins. My boyfriend and I used to compare each other's textbook markings. The more we could actively think while we were reading, the more we felt like participants in the process. When students are actively engaged with the

text, they are in control of their own learning, and they don't feel that learning is a game that the teacher controls.

Many secondary school teachers say that they don't have the time to teach both the content and reading strategies.

Reading strategies are not difficult to incorporate into a lesson. Something as simple as encouraging students to take notes in three columns to relate what they're learning in lectures and lab experiences with the text materials can help them see how the information connects together.

Reading is a recursive process, one that also involves strategies for remembering what you've read?

Absolutely. The reading task is not finished when the student has read the pages; it becomes even more intense then. The reader thinks, Did I understand? Does this compare favorably with what else I know? How can I use this and relate it to other learning? After reading, we engage differently with the author, the ideas, and our own learning from other sources.

How might schools that would like to improve their overall student achievement scores start to think about putting a reading-to-learn program in place?

Schools could think about the development of a reading program in terms of the three phases of reading—before, during, and after. Before getting started with a new reading program, it's essential to assess what's already in place at your school. Where are we and what are we already doing? What do we feel competent doing? How are we helping students become better readers? Then we need to look outside the school to

see what other schools are doing and what the standards documents say is important in the field. Then we can set our goals, considering our purpose—where we want to be when we're done and how we will assess the effectiveness of our efforts.

When you say "we," I assume you include a broad representation of teachers in this process.

Of course. In many school districts, teams of teachers get together in study



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groups to learn more about what a district could do. Many high school and middle school educators don't feel at all comfortable with teaching reading. They've never been trained in it. They don't even have a way of thinking about how reading fits with what they're doing. The initial phase is incredibly important for building a base of understanding.

Once schools establish their goals, they're ready to move into the implementation phase?

Right. The implementation phase of building a program requires a rich commitment on the part of the whole faculty, not just from one teacher or one department, because reading occurs in all areas of learning. We need to teach reading strategies important for each discipline. Teachers and administrators

need to look at data about how students are doing so that they can see where the program is effective and where it's not. Then they can retool their efforts.

Time to talk, to reflect, to try new things, to think aloud about what we're doing and what the students are learning—these are part of building the program in the “during” phase.

And in the “after” phase?

When we read, we reflect, evaluate, and compare and contrast. So, too, when developing a reading program, there's that reflection and evaluation phase. Once you have a new program in place, you need to research what is more effective and reflect whether you've met your goals and expectations and whether you've created something even richer and better than you imagined.

No program is ever finished. We just keep adding new things that need to be learned. The technological revolution has added a new component to literacy. How do we use technology to construct learning across the curriculum? How do we help students become critical thinkers when they use technology? How do they know how to evaluate Web sites? Each year, there are new demands placed on us to help kids be better learners. Our programs have to be alive and vibrant. Even as we evaluate, we keep reading, reflecting, and fine-tuning the criteria of our program so that we can make it better and more responsive to the needs of our students.

And, perhaps, even anticipate the future needs of society?

Oh, definitely. The pace is so fast now that we are constantly adding new things to what we need to do. The reflection phase is where much of this work is done. Right now, as a result of our high-stakes assessment programs, many high schools are almost pushing students to drop out of school. We need to rethink how we're helping kids. We



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need to seriously evaluate what we're doing to support those who haven't been successful. If tests exclude them from participation in high school, then we're doing something very wrong. We need to find ways to consistently assess students' progress and help them increase their own level of achievement.

What about the time issue? All this doesn't happen automatically.

No, it doesn't. Implementing good reading programs takes an enormous amount of work and energy on the part of a faculty. It takes staff development time away from other things that are also high priority, and yet there's nothing more significant than preparing kids well with the tools they need to think, to learn, and to use multiple literacies in their lives. We're not just preparing them for high school. We're preparing them for life, and if they can't read and write well, if they can't speak well, we haven't done our job.

Can we be sure that we'll achieve a result that's worth the investment?

I know for sure that if we're serious about developing a secondary reading

program that's significantly beneficial for the students, it means a team effort. You need a trained, committed leader in the reading and learning process. Then, you need each one of the departments in the school to make the commitment to ensure that students learn the strategies that they need to be successful. You need to look across the curriculum areas for the faculty's commitment to use basic strategies regularly with students.

In short, it means an all-school effort and sustainability over time. There have to be rewards for the faculty, too. Teachers have to see that their students are using processes of learning more effectively than they did in the past. Seeing results is important and makes the goal significant and worth the effort. ■

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