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The Promotion of Critical Reading Skills in the High Schools

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The great influx of new knowledge in all areas and the ability of the media to convey it has brought about an increased need for greater levels of literacy for society. A greater specialization in texts and reading materials is a result of this vast profusion of knowledge and has thus created frustration and confusion among those readers who are trying to deal with it.

There is also a growing concern over the inadequate writing, reading, and thinking skills of students today. A broad gap exists between the skills that they possess and the greater levels of critical thinking and reading skills required of them. A study conducted by the NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS, as described in an ERIC/RCS Report (**Language Arts**, Nov/Dec 1983), dealt with nine, thirteen and seventeen year old students across the United States. Their study indicated that these students, even at high school level, had trouble thinking and interpreting what they had read. They were generally unable to interpret or explain what they had read and were unable to draw conclusions or formulate ideas about the reading material. The conclusion was that students are learning to read (decode) in our schools, but they are not learning to think. Junior and senior high school students and college students are being expected to read and think critically, to evaluate a vast amount of new knowledge; yet they are rarely being taught how to do this in the classroom.

Critical reading is aggressive reading; the reader uses specific skills and methods to evaluate and analyze a text, with cognition, or "knowing" what one has read, as the specific goal. Critical reading involves a composite of many different skills and processes, which might change depending on the type of material being read and the reason for reading it.

Another concern regarding the lack of critical thinking and reading skills is that, not

only has reading material become more complex, but people must also learn to deal with an assortment of sophisticated media. This media not only distributes this knowledge, but also bombards us every day with propoganda, advertising, political persuasion, and interpretation of news and current events. Shirley Fehl states, in a report to the Claremont Reading Conference in 1983, that students must develop a "media literacy." Critical thinking and reading skills must be taught to help students evaluate critically the knowledge and information which is put before them.

The Reading Process: Five Steps

In order to train students to think and read more critically we need to change the way in which they read. According to Anne Bradstreet Grinols in **Critical Thinking: Reading Across the Curriculum**, we need to have an understanding of the reading process, itself, before we can find specific ways in which to sharpen students' reading skills. According to Grinolos, there are five areas to the reading process which need further understanding more fully: cognition, schema, technique, thesis and format.

Cognition is the goal in the reading and learning process. Simply to read something does not necessarily mean that one "knows" it or has mastered the information. Grinols refers to Benjamin Bloom, whose learning theory states that true mastery comes when one can translate, apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate a concept. This learning theory can be applied specifically to the reading process. It is not enough to simply read material in order to know it. Students must question and evaluate material as they read, put the material into their own words and determine how the information fits into things they already know. They must analyze the material for its relevance and accuracy; they must form their own ideas about the concepts they have read.

Schema is the part of the reading process which has to do with how students relate new materials and ideas with things already known or ideas already established. As students read, they accept or reject information according to their existing knowledge; therefore, students

must be taught to evaluate information carefully, since their opinions and conclusions will change as they add or reject information. If students have little previous knowledge or ideas about a subject, then they will formulate a schema as they read.

The reader's technique is an important part of the reading process. Several authors have different approaches to reading steps: to skim, to read, and to reinforce. Students first should skim the material to get an overview of what is covered and to determine what is the author's main idea and purpose of writing. Then students should read the material in depth in order to comprehend the material covered. In order to really master what is read, students must then reinforce what they have read by using it. Grinols suggests that readers use the information by making concept maps, taking notes, answering questions or by discussing the information with others.

The thesis is the part of the reading process that has to do with the author's message. It is essential for students to be able to locate and determine the main idea of the material. Readers must be aware of the author's purpose in writing before they can begin to organize and assimilate the information they are reading.

The final component of the reading process which students need to understand is that of the format, the way in which authors have organized ideas. In order to read and evaluate material critically, students must be aware of the bias, style, tone and structure in the material.

Bias has to do with the viewpoint that a person has on a certain subject, and both the reader and the author will be biased in some way. To evaluate material critically, readers must try to determine what the author's bias is on the subject. Then they must keep an open mind and try to relate this to what their own bias is. Readers will then either retain or change their own point of view, depending upon the conclusion drawn.

Style and tone have to do with how authors write about their subject and the attitude towards it. Examples of different kinds of style would be analytical, expository, conversational, narrative,

formal, technical or colloquial. An author's tone might be optimistic, pessimistic, cynical or skeptical, concerned, impersonal, romantic or angry.

The reader should also be familiar with the different structures or ways that authors might organize their materials. Different kinds of structure might include instructional, narrative, chronological, thesis-proof, descriptive, problem-solution and many others. By being aware of the different formats used in writing, readers can better analyze and evaluate what they read.

Skills Involving Critical Reading

As well as understanding more fully the various components of the reading process, students must also learn to master a variety of many different specific skills. Various researchers may have a slightly different set of skills involved in critical reading; there is considerable overlapping, however, in the varied lists of critical reading and thinking skills. Goodwin Watson and Edward Glaser have formulated a test for measuring the abilities involved in critical thinking and critical reading called the **Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal**, a test designed to measure a composite of various skills deemed necessary to think and read critically: (1) the ability to recognize and define a problem; (2) the ability to draw inferences or conclusions from supposed facts; (3) the ability to understand the nature of valid inferences, abstractions and generalizations; (4) the ability to recognize stated and unstated assumptions; (5) the ability to draw logical conclusions from a given situation or problem; (6) the ability to interpret what is said; (7) the ability to formulate and choose a relevant hypothesis.

Hess, Shafer and Morreau in **Developing Reading Efficiency** approach critical reading through questioning. This technique would be particularly effective when dealing with high school and even middle school students. According to the authors, effective readers are questioning readers. Readers should first skim the material to determine the author's main idea, to formulate any questions they might want answered and to think about any expectations they might have in reading the selection. The

critical reader should ask the following types of questions:

1. What is the source? Is it reliable? Is it up to date?
2. What is the main idea or author's purpose?
3. How is the information presented by the author?
4. What is the tone of the material?
5. Does the writer use persuasive or emotional language?
6. Is the material based on fact, inferences, or opinions?
7. Are there any weaknesses in the author's reasoning?
8. Was my way of thinking changed by what the author said?
9. Was my interest aroused in what I was reading?

Conclusion

It has been established that students graduating from school are lacking in critical reading and thinking skills necessary for them to deal with information presented to them through the media and through complicated written material. It is a necessity in today's society, then, that students be able to read and think critically, whether involved in formal continuing education, career preparation or merely trying to be a responsible member of today's complex society. Researchers have established that critical reading and thinking skills can be improved by specific classroom instruction. But the questions arises as to when and how students can begin to develop these necessary reading and thinking skills in the public schools.

To help answer this question, Jeanne S. Chall in **Stages of Reading Development** describes five stages of reading development. As early as the fourth grade, when readers should shift from merely decoding words to reading for new knowledge, young readers can begin to practice critical reading skills. They can begin to read for content and information. In the high school grades 9 through 12 reading becomes more complex and students are expected to deal with multiple viewpoints, as they must confront new facts and concepts,

fitting them into their own established points of view. Chall states that Stage #5, which is usually attained after the age of eighteen with post high school studies, is the most mature stage of reading. Here the readers create knowledge for themselves by critically evaluating and synthesizing what is read. The reader then accepts or rejects what's written and constructs an understanding and knowledge of the material. Chall points out that some readers may reach this point in reading maturity earlier than others, some may reach it at a later point, and some will never attain this level of reading sophistication.

Due to the complexity and abundance of specialized knowledge in today's society, a person must be able to deal with information effectively. Therefore educators are obligated to try to prepare students for their lives after their high school years. Since all high school students are not necessarily bound for college where they might attain the most mature level of reading proficiency, more should be done in the reading programs of our public schools to help students to attain better critical thinking and reading skills.

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