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# Content Area Reading: A Functional Concept

by Richard T. Vacca

More than forty years ago McCallister (1930) reported that pupils enrolled in junior high subjects had to perform numerous kinds of reading activities depending on the nature of the subject matter and the teaching techniques appropriate to a particular subject area. Some time later Artley (1944, 1948) studied the relationship between general reading comprehension and reading comprehension factors specific to a subject area, social studies. Evidently, the ability to read generally is related to the ability to read social studies; but, an absence of a near perfect correlation, Artley concluded, indicated a "high degree of specificity" in the factors associated with reading comprehension in a subject matter area. Shores (1943), likewise, observed that by ninth grade reading seems to be specific to a content area. Numerous other studies also have correlated scores on various types of reading and achievement tests. For the most part investigators have concluded that there were skills common to different subject areas, but some of these skills held special relationships to achievement in each of the areas.

No doubt, the notion of content area reading instruction has been around for a long time. Ten or so years ago, however, you would have been hard pressed to find "Reading in the Content Areas" listed as a college course offering for preservice/in-service teachers or, for that matter, on the agenda of the annual IRA Conference Proceedings. Today the idea is exciting people in many quarters, but as the cry rings louder and clearer than ever before for every teacher to be a teacher of reading, a *functional con-*

*cept* of content area reading instruction remains clouded in a blanket of confusion.

Understandably, teaching reading through content should thrive in the secondary school setting, although it begins to establish firm roots in the intermediate grades. Part of the confusion over such instruction has been a continual desire to impose what is known about elementary reading skills development onto the secondary curriculum. As a result, there is a heavy emphasis on direct skills instruction in secondary grades at the expense of application of basic skills where it really counts, in content classrooms. The issue is muddled further when reading teachers attempt to use commercially prepared "content area materials" to teach skills under the guise of application. Artificial materials used in artificial settings become exercises in themselves and little else.

Recently, Herber (1970) contended that skills taught in reading classes are applicable to content materials, but students must adapt the skills to meet the peculiarities of each subject they study. He articulated a need for a "... whole new strategy in teaching reading through content areas, a strategy that uses what we know about the direct teaching of reading but adapts that knowledge to fit the structure and responsibilities ... in each content area (p. 16)." One component of such an approach requires instructional guidance on the part of the content teacher, both in the development of concepts (content) and of skills (process). As part of total lesson structure, guidance is facilitated

through the use of guide material, "reading guides." The essence of reading guides is to give students a "conscious experience" in the application of reading skills, and at the same time an understanding of course content. In effect, a functional concept of content area reading instruction is one that recognizes that the application of basic reading skills should be incorporated into the teaching strategies of subject matter teachers without sacrificing the teaching of content.

Needed, then, is a widespread attitude which recognizes that content determines the process by which students should read class assignments; that content area reading involves a set of unique circumstances, one that does not ask already belabored classroom

teachers to do what reading teachers couldn't do. Coupled with this attitude is the need for functional approaches to instruction which recognize that classroom teachers are in the most logical and strategic position to show students how to apply those reading skills implicit in their subject matter materials.

The star-crossed cliché, "Every teacher is a teacher of reading" need not cause furor or confusion among content teachers. Every teacher is a teacher! Let's leave it at that. But as part of every teacher's repertoire, his proverbial bag of tricks, there should be the means and the know-how that will enable him to be as responsible for the process of content learning as he is for influencing the learning of that content.

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