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Implications of a Content Area Reading Inservice Project for Training Teachers

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For the past two years the authors of this article have been collecting data on the effects of content area reading inservice instruction on teacher behavior. Our motivation for doing this research derives from the increasing discomfort we feel toward teaching content area reading courses without the empirical evidence that strategies learned in the course are being implemented in classrooms. A review of the research on inservice education reveals a dearth of studies that document the effects of inservice training on teacher behavior. Most inservice training evaluates the success of the inservice through attitude questionnaires and surveys after the conclusion of an institute and rarely are the teachers followed back to the classroom (3). This kind of follow-up is necessary in order to determine if teachers will apply the strategies they have been taught, and to provide them with feedback regarding their implementation of the strategies. The purpose of this article is to describe our inservice education project, summarize what we have learned from the research, and offer conclusions regarding the inservicing of content area reading teachers. These conclusions, in turn, suggest an inservice model for teacher training.

INSERVICE EDUCATION PROJECT

Instructional Component

Our inservice project consisted of two research settings. The first was a two-week institute conducted with 33 secondary teachers, and the second was a fifteen-contact-hour reading course for 18 vocational education teachers. The goal of both the institute and the course was to involve these content area teachers in the development of their students' reading abilities. Participants met numerous objectives in the areas of

readability, informal reading assessment, motivation, vocabulary development, comprehension development, individualization of instruction, study approaches, reading flexibility, and directed reading assignments. During four days of follow-up institute activity, the secondary teachers were observed implementing vocabulary and comprehension teaching strategies in their content area classrooms. Two scheduled follow-up visits for the vocational education teachers were built into the course outline, and these teachers were expected to implement in their classrooms at least one of the activities or strategies learned during the course.

Research Component

We conducted two studies, one with the secondary teachers and another with the vocational education teachers, which investigated the effects of content area reading instruction on teachers' attitudes, planning, and classroom performance. The data for the studies were collected using three distinct instruments: a) an attitude questionnaire designed to reveal which content area reading strategies teachers believe are useful, b) a simulated teacher planning activity constructed to discover which strategies they employ in their teaching, and c) a real-time observation system (RAMOS) designed by Robert Calfee and Kathryn Calfee (1) to record the strategies teachers use in their classrooms.

At the beginning of the institute and the course, the teachers were given a pretest planning task which required that they plan a unit of instruction in one specific area of competence and develop an introductory lesson for the unit. The participants were provided with brief vignettes which described

their students' reading abilities and general socioeconomic backgrounds.

Accompanying the vignettes was a series of questions to guide the participants' thinking as they engaged in the planning. Teachers' written protocols were then analyzed to determine the number of content area reading strategies employed and the appropriateness of their use. The simulated planning activity was administered immediately before and after the instruction to measure the participants' growth in the use of content area reading strategies.

At the end of the institute and the course, the teachers were also administered an attitude questionnaire which measured their perception of the content area reading strategies presented in the instructional phase. On a 7-point Likert Scale, the participants were required to rate the value of 15 teaching strategies in content area reading by indicating which strategies they would use in their future teaching. By comparing responses on the attitude questionnaire with the other two instruments, the investigators were able to gain some understanding of what strategies teachers claim are valuable versus those they actually plan to use and subsequently do use in their classrooms.

Classroom observations were conducted only for the vocational education teachers since extreme driving distance precluded any systematic observation of the secondary teachers. Each of 16 vocational education teachers was observed for three hours, and the total observation time was 3,840 minutes. Teachers were observed immediately after the close of the course, and delayed observations continued for several weeks. Classroom observation data were collected to determine what instructional strategies learned in the

inservice were subsequently used by the teachers in their teaching.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The two inservice training programs clearly had an impact upon the instructional planning and classroom performance of secondary and vocational education teachers. We learned that, after extensive inservice training, teachers included content area reading strategies in their plans, and they used these strategies in their teaching. Participants in the program found it easy to include in their plans strategies for the preassessment of reading skills, preteaching of vocabulary, motivating of students to read, and grouping for instruction. There were some differences in the strategies planned to be used by secondary teachers; these differences were due, in part, to the relative degree of instructional emphasis in the two instructional settings. There were also differences in the frequency with which teachers included strategies in their plans, and their ability to integrate the strategies with the teaching of their content. Many of the content area reading strategies that were included for use in teachers' instructional plans were not used appropriately in their planning.

The classroom observation results for the vocational education teachers were as positive as their instructional planning results. Observation data on classroom performance collected after the inservice clearly indicate that the teachers were implementing reading strategies learned in the inservice. The reading strategies were implemented, for the most part, within the context of directed reading assignments. They included (with varying degrees of frequency of use) prereading activities such as those used for preteaching vocabulary and motivating students, reading activities such as the use of reading guides, and postreading activities such as teacher-led discussions.

While the participants were generally willing to use content area reading strategies, there were some predictable instances where strategies were not applied. We learned that secondary and vocational education teachers are reluctant to apply strategies which de-

mand major changes in their classroom routine. For example, English teachers use reading guides (these are not to be confused with worksheets which include questions for discussion purposes) infrequently, and instruction in the use of reading guides did not alter their plans. The designing of reading guides is an apparent disruption to the routine in English classrooms. Conversely, instruction in contextual and structural analysis as strategies for preteaching vocabulary resulted in the inclusion of these strategies in the English teachers' plans. This finding was not surprising since the teaching of suffixes and prefixes and context clues is a part of the English curriculum; consequently, English teachers are willing to use these strategies for the preteaching of vocabulary.

Of major interest to us throughout the inservice project was the question of which is the better predictor of teachers' performance in the classroom, their attitudes toward teaching reading or their instructional plans. We learned that teacher attitudes are more predictive of classroom performance than are teacher plans. Many more of the content area reading strategies that received a positive attitude ranking were implemented in vocational education teachers' classrooms than were strategies that had previously been included in their instructional plans.

A PROPOSED INSERVICE MODEL

Studies of this type are necessarily structured upon a view of inservice education. In this research the pattern was to preassess participants, provide theoretical instruction and modeling of key instructional techniques, design instructional materials, and implement content area reading instruction with supervision and feedback. The results clearly reveal a degree of success. They also suggest a revised model as a prototype for future research.

Joyce and Showers (2) have reported and validated an effective generic model for inservice training. This model includes the following steps:

1. Presentation of theory or description of skill or strategy to be learned,
2. Modeling or demonstration of skill or strategy to be learned,

3. Practice under simulated conditions,
4. Structured feedback,
5. Open ended feedback, and
6. Coaching for application.

In the present studies, steps one, two, four, and five were implemented during the instructional phase, and practice was provided in regular classroom situations.

Several findings in the research suggest a modification of the Joyce and Showers' model when applied to inservice training in content area reading skills. Three findings are of major interest in this research. First, teachers who had passed the awareness stage in their understanding of content area reading strategies and who mentioned use of these strategies in their plans, failed to implement many of the strategies and integrate them with content instruction. Second, such strategies as those used for preassessing students' reading abilities which were clearly related to the problem and easily manageable were readily accepted by the teachers. Those strategies that were more complex and more time-consuming such as the teaching of reading flexibility and the establishment of reading skill centers were rejected or used infrequently at best. Third, teacher attitudes proved to be a better predictor of their classroom performance than their written plans.

Taken together, these findings underscore the developmental dimensions which must undergird any inservice training model. Implicit in the Joyce and Showers' model is participant movement from the awareness stage, to simulated practice with feedback, to actual practice with feedback, to regular integration of the content and processes with a coaching support system. In fact, participants should be eased into use of the skills until the model becomes part of their behavior. The findings from the present studies suggest ideas that must be integrated into the Joyce and Showers' model if it is to apply to content area reading instruction. Teacher attitude represents the key to success in this effort. When enthusiasm has been gained through new input and successful performance (indicated both in terms of execution and measureable student growth), commitment and integration into behavior is more likely to follow. The present inservice

research may be challenged for not using a plan to systematically build and reinforce teacher attitudes toward more complex content area reading strategies. Similarly, it may be challenged for attempting to lead teachers to absorb too much at one time. As a consequence, implementation suffered. This experience leads us to postulate the following steps for future inservice efforts of this kind:

1. Presentation of theory or description of skills to be learned: this should be reserved for strategies for assessment of reading skills and readability of material and the construction of directed reading activities — tasks which teachers more readily accept. Instructional techniques must lead to improved participant attitudes.

2. Modeling or demonstration: this step should include two phases: (a) instructor modeling in the classroom, (b) visiting or viewing videotapes to observe the strategies being applied in the classroom setting.

3. Practice under simulated conditions: this step should be implemented with a small group of students in a regular classroom. Such a group can provide a basis for comparison with similar students in the same class who have not received the instruction.

4. Structured and unstructured feedback: this feedback mode should involve a fellow teacher as supervisor, a step which becomes important in building a "coaching" support relationship among faculty members. Interaction should occur under observation of the instructor.

5. Theory testing: this stage should have instructor and participants review where theory and practice match under simulated conditions and why. New corrective plans should be developed with reading skills integrated into a content unit.

6. Classroom implementation with structured and unstructured feedback: this step should have participants implementing learned strategies under the supervision of a "coach" from their building. Course instructors should make random visits to monitor coaching exchanges.

7. Coaching for integration: participants should design and plan a building model for integration of content and reading skills and for assisting one another as coaches. They should also identify long range goals of such activity. This last phase should provide the basis for more advance instruction.

The above inservice model has critical components some of which were omitted from the original research but obviously necessary if future inservice research is to be effective. First, steps must be designed to gain and maintain favorable teacher attitudes toward the strategies to be learned. Realistically, this objective can be achieved only upon demonstration that significant achievement gains cannot be made without significant compromises in content coverage or teacher time investment. Second, the inservice must organize content that is matched to participants' readiness to learn. Consequently, some valuable but complex tech-

niques must be reserved until teachers request additional help. The diverse responses of teachers in our inservice project to content area reading strategies suggest that all inservice planning be preceded by an analysis of the strategies we would expect teachers to implement after instruction. This is not a needs assessment, but a realistic estimate of the changes teachers are willing to make. Finally, the model must transfer the reinforcement feedback function from the course instructor to a peer "coach" available in the same building. When this delicate function has been achieved, the inservice model has the potential of survival after the Hawthorne effect provided by the presence of the instructor has been removed. Inservice, then, will have become self-sustaining and regenerative.

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