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Literacy demands have changed significantly over the last several decades, with technological transformations leading us into a world of new possibilities and new challenges. In the past, high school graduates with minimal reading and writing abilities could secure well-paying manufacturing jobs, solid employment that would last throughout their working lives. Today's economic and technological realities, however, reveal that many jobs offering high wages and good benefits to high school graduates are no longer available. Consider the employment situation in Michigan. According to a report from the Michigan League for Human Services, available jobs (such as those in retail and the service sector) pay low wages, causing nearly twenty five percent of the state's workers to struggle with a poverty level existence (Yung). The obvious question relates to the availability of higher paying jobs and the skill levels of the workers. If workers could qualify, are better jobs available?

Two new studies of Michigan businesses, as reported by *The Detroit News* (January 10, 2008), indicate that thousands of jobs requiring skills in math, science, and communications are unfilled because qualified workers are unavailable. The studies note that the state's economic slowdown means that a strong technical education is becoming critical to Michigan's economic future ("Technical Skills"). The evolving job market is sending a clear message: Young people must look to some type of postsecondary education, either through college or workforce training programs, to secure the promise of earning a reasonable pay check and achieving a satisfactory standard of living. It's evident that our secondary school curriculum must prepare students for the challenging realities of life after high school, requiring greater academic achievement to keep pace with the literacy demands of the twenty-first century.

American College Testing (ACT) examined the types of skills and general knowledge students need for success in college and in job training programs and concluded that the levels of readiness are comparable. The findings, as reported in "Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?", support a rigorous curriculum for everyone whether students' goals lead them to the campus or to the workplace, noting that "we must move the agenda for high school redesign in a direction that will prepare *all* students for success no matter which path they choose after graduation" (ACT). This means that all students, not just those who are college bound, must develop the literacy skills necessary for success after high school. This challenge is not restricted to the English/language arts curriculum: all content-area teachers bear the responsibility for helping students develop their literacy skills, a task that can be approached through content-area reading instruction.

Literacy Demands for the Twenty-First Century

Think about the literacy demands facing today's young people. High school graduates are expected to read, analyze, interpret, and write about material from a variety of sources, independently processing the content and making connections between new information and existing knowledge. In addition, they need to be computer literate, with the ability to locate, evaluate, and use materials in varied formats from a wide range of sources including electronic documents and multimedia texts. Educators recognize that today's workplace requires creative and critical thinking, good communication skills, and the ability to read, "in order to learn in a range of contexts" (Gomez and Gomez 224). These literacy tasks are more complex than those required of previous generations because the technological revolution has added new variables in the quest for knowledge.

Researchers tells us that citizens in a democratic society are required to read, interpret, and evaluate a wider range of materials than ever before (Vacca 6). Even though the rapid, unrelenting pace of the Information Age puts a strain on the already overburdened secondary curriculum, students must meet new literacy standards if they are to achieve their academic or career goals.

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Are today's students able to meet these expectations? Educators recognize that many students experience difficulties with basic reading skills, failing to understand materials on their grade level. Reading content-area textbooks presents problems because sixty percent of all high school students do not have the skills to comprehend these instructional materials (Hock and Deshler 27). The 2005 report from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) notes that seventy three percent of America's twelfth grade students are "basic" readers who have the low level skills to retrieve information from a detailed document, but not the higher level abilities to make critical judgments about the material (National Center). Students' scores on the ACT test of reading readiness for college and workforce training tell a similar story of weak reading skills. From the 2007 high school graduating classes in Michigan, only fifty six percent of the tested students met the standard for reading proficiency ("2007 ACT").

This means that a considerable number of students who graduated from Michigan high schools last year were unable to demonstrate the ability to read and process information on an appropriate level, revealing that they are not using reading as a tool for learning because they do not read well enough to fully comprehend the material. Educators note that when students struggle with basic reading and thinking skills, they are more likely to experience learning problems in all content-area classes. In science classes, for example, students' weak comprehension skills and inadequate background knowledge interact with sophisticated content, a demanding text, and specialized vocabulary to create challenges for both students and teachers (Santa et al. 238).

The Need for Content Area Reading Instruction

As we move through the twenty-first century, technology will continue to develop, revealing a greater and greater need for effective literacy skills and the accompanying instructional practices to help students develop these skills. The purpose of this article is to explore the case for content-area reading instruction in the secondary classroom, an argument that examines the importance of reading proficiency and presents strategies teachers can use to help students develop their skills.

Reading competence has a significant impact on students' futures, affecting their level of education after high school as well as their career choices and ultimate life styles. Students with strong literacy skills have promising educational and career options, while most students with weak skills face a future of being undereducated and underemployed as they struggle with undeveloped personal goals and unfulfilling, low paying jobs (Hock and Deshler 27-28). Reading difficulties—whether they are caused by limited proficiency or by poor motivation—are linked to behavior problems and academic failure, often resulting in dropping out of school. For some young people, it means facing a lifetime of negative consequences involving criminal activity, financial problems, and welfare dependence (Joseph and Schisler 11). These devastating outcomes signal a serious concern regarding the literacy needs of secondary students.

Even though educators recognize that reading proficiency is needed for learning across the curriculum as well as for success in the workplace, reading instruction is neglected in the secondary classroom (Moje 224). Some secondary teachers erroneously believe that reading instruction should not be a part of the secondary curriculum, claiming that students should master the basic literacy skills in the

primary grades before moving into middle and high school (D'Arcangelo 12). In today's technological era, however, the traditional practice of relegating reading instruction to the elementary grades is misguided and outdated. The support for literacy needs to be evident in all grades and in all content-areas because the basic decoding and comprehension skills required in elementary school are only the starting point for effective, efficient reading. If these skills are not developed in the early grades, students experience problems when they are required to take a reading-to-learn approach in secondary content-area classes (Joseph and Schisler 12). Students will not develop higher level reading and thinking skills if their entry-level strategies are not mastered as beginning readers and then refined in later grades through specific content-area reading instruction, guided practice, and meaningful interaction with the content (Bell 38). The cognitive demands of informational textbooks, such as secondary level history and science books, present sophisticated content loads that exceed the skill level of many secondary students, yet few high schools offer programs teaching advanced reading skills because students are expected to learn the strategies independently.

Student Responses to the Challenges of "School Reading"

How do students and teachers respond to this situation? Very simply, students don't read their textbooks, so teachers find other methods to present the content. To explore the reading behaviors of some Michigan students, I surveyed 622 high school students from six districts in southeast Michigan and found that approximately sixty percent of the students do not complete their reading assignments. A frequently offered explanation indicated that they "really weren't expected" to read on their own because teachers "always explain the material [in class] so why read it?" Many students commented that they prefer to listen in class, rather than read because it's easier, and they still get good grades. One student explained that reading the textbook is a "fallback" if the teacher doesn't cover the material in class, claiming that the teacher doesn't expect students to learn the material through reading.

Approximately twenty one percent indicated that reading was frustrating and confusing, citing reasons such as "hard textbooks," "don't have time," and "too boring"

for their failure to read the assigned material. A high school reading specialist and English teacher from California reports a similar finding after surveying forty high seniors and learning that only eight (twenty percent) regularly read their content-area textbooks. She explains that most of these students resort to time-honored strategies such as copying from a friend and listening to the teacher's explanations to avoid reading the text (Rose 13-4). A disturbing pattern seems evident: Teachers don't expect students to complete reading assignments, and most students don't feel responsible for reading the material.

Teacher Perspectives on the Challenges of Students Reading

These reports suggest that reading the textbook does not play a prominent role in student learning, a discouraging yet realistic finding I further explored by interviewing twenty-two teachers in secondary content-area courses including English, biology, history, and psychology. Seventeen of these teachers (seventy seven percent) explained that their instructional strategies and tests did not require students to read the textbook or other materials, even though they may assign reading, because they present the material in class through lecture and discussion and follow-up with worksheets and study guides. They offered a variety of explanations for not requiring reading, with reasons ranging from the students' poor skills and low motivation to the shortage of books to take home for reading. Many of these teachers claim that class discussions are more lively when the students are not required to respond to textbook readings that were assigned for homework, explaining that students "just need to pay attention during discussions" and complete the assigned review sheets to do well on the tests. Teachers comment that they prefer to present lecture material and explanations of the content because they know that this approach exposes students to the information, whereas assigned reading rarely gets done. Some teachers were troubled by the instructional strategies they use to replace reading, recognizing that their methods neither challenge proficient students nor support the development of student literacy, yet they felt constrained by the realities existing in their school districts involving students' attitudes and skills. When teachers regularly use study guides and worksheets

in place of reading, they allow students to engage in the low level cognitive activity of searching for answers while neglecting higher-level engagement with the content. As noted earlier in this article, the basic ability to locate facts in a text is one of the few skills most secondary students have mastered (National Center).

My interviews found that teachers have good intentions, yet their approach to covering the content is short-sighted because this method of "teaching around the text" denies students the academic experiences they need to become independent readers and learners (Schoenbach et al. 137). Very importantly, this approach does not encourage students to develop the skills needed for proficient reading. Teachers send the message that reading isn't an important component in learning when they don't require students to complete assigned readings, thus failing to give students the practice they need to become lifelong readers of informational materials.

Some Reasons for Overlooking Content-Area Reading Instruction

Why is content-area reading instruction overlooked in the secondary classroom? The main reason centers on the teachers' perspective: Secondary teachers view themselves as content specialists, not as reading teachers, because their content is priority in the classroom (D'Arcangelo 13). This viewpoint suggests that teachers do not recognize the importance of reading as a tool for learning, a message they convey to students when their tests focus on discussions and lectures but not on assigned readings. When content-area teachers are asked to including reading strategies in their content instruction, they respond as if they were asked to teach additional content, indicating that they do not acknowledge the connection between the content and the learning process (Jacobs 57). Their perspective may be justified because they are pressured to prepare students for state assessment tests by covering an ever-expanding body of knowledge from textbooks that students either can't read or don't read. The reality, however, is that content-area teachers should not expected to *teach* literacy, but they should be expected use instructional methods to *support* literacy within their content area.

The lack of research and curriculum development for secondary content-area reading creates problems for secondary educators. The authors of *Reading and the High School Student: Strategies to Enhance Literacy* write that research and funding during the past two decades concentrated on early learning and beginning reading, much to the disadvantage of adolescent literacy, causing a shortage of instructional strategies and appropriate materials for classroom teachers. They conclude, "adolescent literacy has been neglected for too long" (Irvin et al. 6). The failure to promote secondary content-area reading instruction suggests a deeply rooted misperception that "literacy learning ends in childhood," a belief allowing society to devalue the education of teens while focusing on childhood and adult literacy (Moje 224). This perspective denies that reading is essential to content learning, with literacy demands increasing as students move from elementary school into middle and high school. To meet these academic challenges and to be prepared for life after high school, students need direct instruction and monitored practice in their content-area classes.

Launching *Reading to Learn*

A reading-to-learn approach in a content-area course means that some teachers may have to learn new classroom strategies, creating difficulties for those using lectures, worksheets, and the rote memorization of facts. This new orientation requires teachers to serve as learning coaches, offering directions for reading and processing content area materials from a variety of traditional and electronic sources. Most content area teachers acknowledge that they view literacy instruction as an overwhelming task because they don't know how to teach these skills, yet they recognize the need for reading instruction (Sulzer et al. 38). Their technical knowledge may be limited because their teacher preparation focused on content knowledge and may have included little coursework in content-area reading. Through a well-planned in-service training program, however, teachers could develop the expertise to incorporate reading-to-learn strategies into their content-area curriculum without sacrificing the time needed to cover the content (Rose 16).

Of course, the best approach to content-area reading instruction is to launch a district-wide program advocated by concerned administrators, supported by

additional reading specialists and curriculum coordinators, and sustained by an adequate supply of resources, materials, and teacher training opportunities. This program would be based on monitoring early literacy development in the elementary grades, including appropriate intervention and assessment for at-risk students. In this ideal program, all content-area teachers at all grade levels would be taught practical methods for effective classroom instruction and then receive ongoing professional development and support as they try new techniques (Rose 14; Phillips 22). The truth, however, is that budget concerns limit new programs no matter how educationally promising they might be, but lean financial times should not prevent districts from developing the programs needed for student success.

Concluding Thoughts

As we continue into the twenty-first century and witness the increasing impact of technology, we can't deny that direct literacy instruction using authentic materials in all content areas is needed to prepare students for the future (see Appendix, "Suggestions for Teachers"). The ability to extract information and meaning from texts is a foundational skill for all learning, whether in a school environment or in the workplace. If students do not master strategies for reading content-area texts, they will not be successful, independent learners, a deficiency that has a significant impact on their success after high school (Bell 36). Parents, taxpayers, and employers expect schools to prepare young people to be competent and competitive in the job market, and students can't meet this challenge without good reading skills. Through content-area reading instruction, teachers achieve their instructional goals while giving students opportunities to become strategic readers and critical thinkers.

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Appendix
Suggestions for Teachers

Teachers can help their students develop content-area reading skills by considering the following suggestions:

- **Develop a clear, realistic understanding of your goal as a content-area teacher**. Begin by acknowledging that you will never be able to teach *everything* about your content, so your best approach is to teach students how to be independent learners who have the skills to retrieve, read, analyze, and apply content information. By adopting this perspective, you are encouraging students to become lifelong learners.

- **Identify the types of reading and thinking required in your content-area**. If it includes reading charts, graphs, maps, statistics and a variety of electronic sources, take the time in class to review how to approach these sources. Keep this point in mind: Don't believe that students can accurately read and interpret online materials just because they have the skills to locate them on the Internet. Reading and processing specialized material is challenging for most students, so use class time to provide explanations and examples of how to approach these resources.

- **Evaluate the cognitive difficulty of your content, and be prepared to explain how students should process the material.** Sequence reading assignments so you begin with the easier assignments to help students gain confidence as readers before moving into more difficult materials.

- **Demonstrate that reading is important by explaining again and again that reading is a tool for learning.** Make reading assignments a regular part of your instructional plans. When you assign reading, make students accountable for actually doing the reading. Follow-up by conducting class discussions or by giving reading quizzes. Some teachers deal with the problem of students' not doing the reading by limiting the number of times each week or the number of pages that reading is assigned, but they balance this by making students accountable when reading is assigned.

- **Prepare guided reading activities if the text is too difficult for students to read independently**. Note that these activities require higher level thinking, not just filling in the blanks, by requiring students to write about how they are processing the material. Offer step-by-step instruction beginning with pre-reading activities to encourage students as they access prior knowledge. Provide supplemental materials such as related articles from magazines and newspapers to enhance students' learning of the content. Use learning logs before, during, and after reading as a way to promote a connection between the students and the material.

- **Remember that the textbook or your lecture does not need to be the focus of your instruction.** Encourage active engagement with information and ideas by setting up debates, discussions, quiz shows, trials, group projects, and other types of less traditional learning situations that require students to read and process the content and demonstrate their understanding of the content. Use the textbook as a reference book.

- **Establish a positive, productive atmosphere for learning by offering encouragement and support while maintaining high standards for student achievement.** Increase student motivation by creating a student-centered learning environment in your classroom.

- **Design realistic learning tasks centered on your content-area that require students to research, read, and evaluate a variety of sources including textbooks, newspaper and magazine articles, reports, manuals, graphs, charts, and various on-line resources.** The tasks should identify a specific purpose and audience and should be based on a real world issue, giving students opportunities to develop their literacy skills by working cooperatively to solve a problem. Do not assume that students know how to

access and comprehend information from specialized materials. Recognize that they will need guidance and instruction to process the content.

- **Allow time for reading and provide a range of reading materials including informational texts as well as newspapers and magazines.** In many schools, the Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) approach of the past has been abandoned due to time constraints and curricular demands, but research shows that purposeful silent reading is important to students' growth as readers when teachers create a classroom climate that promotes reading as a meaningful social activity (Moss 214-5).

- **Promote the growth of strong reading skills and a sense of confidence with unfamiliar material by presenting prereading activities to help students activate their background knowledge prior to reading.** As a post reading activity, encourage students to reflect on the content to determine how it relates to their lives. Encourage students to assess their own reading performance, evaluating areas such as their concentration and comprehension. Emphasize the value of task commitment by explaining that reading requires focused effort and active engagement with the text (Bell 36-7). Remind students that even good readers struggle at times with difficult material.

- **Become aware of the behaviors and attitudes linked to poor reading performance.** Struggling students often display a passive or dependent orientation to reading and are easily frustrated when faced with challenging or unfamiliar material. They may have poor concentration and are easily distracted when they should be reading. Remember that students don't become poor readers in high school. Most have struggled throughout the early grades and may demonstrate a sense of helplessness and embarrassment. Talk to a reading specialist about strategies for assisting individual students.

- **Pay attention to vocabulary, but avoid requiring the rote memorization of words and definitions.** Develop strategies for introducing students to technical terminology. Research tells us that vocabulary growth involves more than reading a dictionary definition or lifting a word from its context. True word knowledge involves a "complex process of integrating new words with ideas that exist in the schema of the reader" (Greenwood 258). This means that students need to process the words mentally, manipulating them to determine similarities and differences and to understand how various contexts influence the meanings.

- **Model appropriate reading strategies by reading aloud to your students. Select a passage from the textbook and explain how you process the content.** Offer suggestions for working through challenging passages. Attempt to demystify the reading process by explaining the behind-the-scenes thinking required for good comprehension. Remind students that they will face challenges with content-area materials, and encourage them to use their reading strategies to overcome the difficulties.

- **Encourage metacognitive awareness by prompting students to think about their own thinking.** Asking them to reflect on their methods for approaching unfamiliar and challenging content helps them gain insights into their strategies as learners (Joseph 33).

- **Incorporate purposeful writing activities into your classroom to reinforce the value of good reading by using strategies such as quick writes and reader response journals.** Students' writing skills will improve when they understand the reading-writing connection (Phillips 25). Help students connect writing to learning by explaining that writing is used to examine the content they covered in the text or through class discussions. Well-designed writing assignments help students develop their reading and writing skills while expanding their content knowledge. Avoid using rote fill-in-the-blank worksheets because this type of activity requires little cognitive effort and has limited value.

- **Teach students to paraphrase and summarize material from their textbooks, prompting them to work for accurate, clearly worded content.** Explain that when students process the content through these activities, they are enhancing their comprehension and retention while developing their vocabulary and writing skills (Roe 241-2). Demonstrate strategies of paraphrasing and summarizing by doing some sample passages in class.

About the Author

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