

## Teacher to Teachers

As a high school teacher I often was amazed by student statements when we discussed in class a previous night's independent practice reading assignment. I remember one day three years ago when I assigned an article on financial planning from the Wall Street Journal for students in my Investment Management class to read in preparation for the next day's lesson. When I asked them, all students said they had read the article and I honestly believe they did read the words on the printed page.

During the discussion, however, I questioned whether they had all read the same article. Their identification of the key concepts and analysis of the facts in the article were so different. I thought that many of the students must have read an article other than the one I assigned. How could students read the same article and have completely different interpretations of the author message? Many of the students had totally misunderstood the main points the author was making in this article, and yet they had all read the same article.

In talking with students one-on-one after class I began to realize that although they were able to read and pronounce all the printed words in the article, they were unable to identify the key concepts, connect the information in the article to the world that they knew, or to understand the meaning of the author's message. They were all readers but not all of them could read and comprehend the assignments I was giving them.

This day was a major turning point in my teaching career. I no longer assume that because the students were all high school juniors and seniors that they read on grade level. Although I was not trained as a reading teacher, I could learn and use strategies that would help students master the reading assignments in my content area. I not only would help them develop the content knowledge and skills needed for success in their chosen career field but also the strategies they would need to successfully read and comprehend the reading materials of an entry level employee.

Most academic, career, and citizenship tasks involve reading efficiently and effectively for information. Yet, no other "critical" skill is as neglected after elementary school as content-area reading.

What may be viewed as a student's lack of knowledge or proficiency in a subject or on a test may, in fact, be the result of readability requirements that exceed the student's mastery level.

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In working with our counseling staff, I was able to learn each student's reading level, to convert their reading level to the Lexile scale and select a textbook that was at an appropriate level for each student. In my management class I used three different textbooks, all covering the same topics and concepts but written at different reading ability levels. Students, with some guidance from me, selected the textbook that they could understand what they were reading. Three different assignments were given each night but all three were on the same topic. In class discussions the next day all students could participate and contribute pertinent information. It was one of the best teaching decisions I made in my 38 year teaching career. It was a win-win situation for everyone. Students felt successful, active participation in class increased, and test scores went up, especially for my lowest level readers. And it was cost efficient for the district. It was no more expensive to purchase 36 copies selected from three different textbooks than to purchase 36 copies of the same textbook.

Have you experienced a similar situation in your classroom? Most of us are not trained as reading teachers. Yet, we all know that many of our students cannot understand what they need to read in order to learn in our classrooms. We need to help them overcome this primary obstacle in their education. We need to show them how to approach our textbook so they understand and remember it better. We need to help students grasp the full meaning of their researched materials. We need to teach all students the strategies that successful readers in the class use to comprehend the text.

Few high school students have the opportunity to sign up for a reading course. They are not required to learn strategies for approaching the texts they are required to read and understand. The unspoken assumption is that these students are proficient secondary-level readers. But it becomes evident very quickly that this is not the case.

Who, then, must become accountable for teaching reading to secondary students? The answer is a resounding "everyone" — **all teachers in all courses.**

## Reading Strategies for Career Academies and Career-Technical Education

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The idea of teaching reading in career and technical education classes probably runs counter to what you feel you should be doing. After all, you have standards to teach, and your students have knowledge and skills to master. So, perhaps instead of thinking about teaching strategic reading in the content areas, we can think, instead, of teaching strategies to improve **comprehension in context**. Our purpose is to train students in strategic *thinking skills* to use when approaching new course topics and materials. As they *apply the strategies*, students will become independent and take control of their reading material, regardless of the content.

This kit includes a broad selection of the best research-based and classroom-tested comprehension strategies, applicable and adaptable for all students in all courses. These strategies work well in all career and technical education classes as well as in the arts, math, science, language arts, and social studies classes. Years of research on student growth, as well as teacher testimony, point out the tremendous advantages of training students in comprehension skills. We know that:

- Comprehension strategies that are taught and practiced in every classroom can change the way a student learns.
- Student achievement, as measured by high-stakes tests and other indicators of academic rigor, can be improved through attention to strategic comprehension skills.
- Comprehension skills related to reading for information, skimming, and reading directions, textbooks, tests, reference sources, and real-world documents can and *must be taught in all career and technical education classes*.

Research also shows that time spent reading in class — independent reading and instructional reading — is critical for learning. No matter what subject you teach, you can boost the achievement of your students by incorporating these best practices:

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### **Increase**

- time for independent reading with leveled text selections matched to the students' reading levels
- evaluation that focuses on higher-order thinking skills
- use of writing before and after reading
- collaborative activities
- teaching comprehension as a process
- teacher modeling

### **Decrease**

- exclusive use of whole-class reading
- teacher selection of all material for reading
- solitary seatwork
- selection of a course text without regard to reading difficulty.

Research shows that these best practices improve students' interest, understanding, and performance. By spending as little as 15 minutes a week focused on key strategies, you can significantly increase achievement. In addition, when students become better readers, re-teaching is unnecessary, so the actual teaching process becomes more efficient.

Because the practices and strategies in this kit are effective vehicles for delivering content instruction, you'll improve reading skills and teach content at the same time. As you become familiar with the strategies, they will help you shift the responsibility of learning to your students. This kit is a tremendous resource for restructuring your classroom for success. The strategies will enable your students to increase their understanding so they can succeed in academic, adult, and workplace roles. What better reason could there be for training students to use comprehension strategies?

One of the greatest gifts you can give students is the ability to comprehend and apply the material they read. I hope this kit will help prepare you and your students for lifelong success.

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