The Clearing House, 86: 32–36, 2013
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ISSN: 0009-8655 print; 1939-912x online
DOI: 10.1080/00098655.2012.731021

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Taylor & Francis Group

Teaching Strategies to Support Vocational Education Students' Reading Literacy

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Abstract: Arguments regarding the need for reading skills in career and technical education exist, but far less attention has been given to teaching strategies that can help support vocational students' growth as readers. Based on a review of literature, this article highlights the importance of reading literacy in career and technical education, and argues that students from the various content areas in vocational education can benefit greatly from teachers incorporating reading instruction into the curriculum. This article also provides educators with six powerful, practical strategies to use in classrooms to facilitate students' reading comprehension.

Keywords: reading comprehension, literacy, teaching strategies, career and technical education

Vocational Education and Reading

Vocational education represents a unique community within the field of education, and teachers in this area are responsible for facilitating learning environments that involve students directly with hands-on learning so that they can develop competency in a particular occupation (Gordon 1999). A general example would be a student in nursing, who must acquire a different set of job-specific literacy skills as compared to a student enrolled in a culinary arts program. Despite that, simply acquiring specific workplace literacy skills is not enough to function successfully in societies and labor markets that are rapidly changing in the 21st century (Levesque et al. 2000; Hamby 1992). Seeing that vocational education is dedicated to developing the minds and skills of the future workforce, it is necessary for educators to be aware of the different kinds of knowledge students will need to possess to be well prepared for the various jobs they will find themselves in.

Each day the work place, and indeed our world, is becoming more saturated with texts. Diverse types of texts exist, such as academic, expressive, informative, instructional, multimodal, and so on. Being able to make sense of a wide array of texts is essential to functioning in the 21st century (Duke 2004; Kist 2009). In other words, reading comprehension is a vitally important skill today for all people regardless of their profession. According to Barton (1999), the demand for literacy skills in the workforce is growing. Similarly, the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) (2007) confirms the need for proficient readers. The NCEE views reading as "more important than ever" and "an indispensible foundation" in order to meet the challenges of globalization in American education and the job market (National Center on Education and the Economy 2007, 29). Herein lies the crux: vocational students need to possess the ability not only to comprehend a variety of printed materials but also to "learn how to adapt reading and thinking processes to meet the peculiarities and text demands of each discipline they study" (O'Connor, Bintz, and Murray 2009, 2). To address these concerns, practitioners in all career and technical education content areas need to be aware of the importance of reading in the professions and lives of their students.

The need for vocational students to be proficient, independent readers and comprehend written texts is not a new mission in career and technical education, and evidence supporting this idea can been found in a number of early publications. In 1978, Evans and Herr argued for the importance of reading skills along with other general education subjects, such as writing and science, as a foundational skill for success in all occupations. In the decades that followed, the ideas of literacy were discussed by an assortment of stakeholders in vocational

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education classrooms as well as in the workforce. Through an exploration of the instructional approaches to reading and a variety of "job-related reading tasks," O'Donnell (1982, 474) confirmed reading as a requirement of job literacy. Evans (1971) and Hall (1997) also considered reading an essential, foundational skill for successful on-the-job performance. Through a study of vocational educators' perceptions of reading, Darvin (2006) investigated how to integrate reading into the curriculum and partner it with hands-on learning experiences. With research conducted on workplace literacy skills and scholars within vocational education in favor of enhancing students' reading abilities, how can educators in specific content areas foster students' growth as strong, competent readers?

Understanding Reading as Transactional

Reading is a very complex, even messy, meaning-making process that is different for each person, and reading comprehension is a process of constructing and extending meaning from a given text (Beers 2003; Rasinski, Padak, and Fawcett 2009). In order for vocational practitioners to foster students' growth as readers, teachers need to first see their students as readers and become mindful about what the process of reading entails. One theory that can help educators begin to see students as readers is called *reader response*. Rosenblatt's (1978, 1996) transactional theory of reading is central to reader response because with it she articulated the process of engagement that takes place as readers encounter texts. According to Rosenblatt (1996), there is a reciprocal nature between a reader and a text, which is unique to each individual, as well as each encounter with a text. Every person's understanding of a text is not only different, but also fluid. Each time a reader encounters a text, she or he will perceive and interpret that text differently based on particular lived experiences brought to the reading experience. A reader will also develop understandings specific to how he or she is positioned in a particular time and space. In essence, readers make three types of connections: text-to-text connections, text-to-self connections, and text-to-world connections (Keene and Zimmerman 1997). Understanding reading and comprehension is important for content-area vocational educators to picture their students as readers and to help both students and teachers better understand why, when, where, and how they read on both a personal and professional level.

Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension

Even though countless teaching strategies exist to help enhance students' interactions with and comprehension of written texts in the spheres of English language arts and reading instruction (Beers 2003; Rasinski, Padak, and Fawcett 2009; Gills 2008; Outsen and Stephanie 2002), this section presents a set of generic strategies that can transfer between grade levels and be adapted to any academic discipline. Each of the teaching strategies to come can cultivate different components of the comprehension process by engaging students in more than one of the following: summarizing, sequencing, predicting/hypothesizing, retelling, extending information, finding information, comparing and contrasting, giving opinions, and evaluating (Beers 2003; N. Padak, personal communication, October 13, 2009). The descriptions of strategies that follow draw from a synthesis of literature as well as the additional resources of Atwell (1998); Beers (2003); O'Connor, Bintz, and Murray (2009); Kist (2009); and Rasinski, Padak, and Fawcett (2009).

Strategy One: Agree or Disagree Statements

An agree or disagree statement is a very simple, yet powerful, activity to initiate discussion about any type of text. The strategy's purpose is threefold: to help students construct opinions and elaborate on how and why their beliefs relate to a text, to compare and contrast multiple perspectives, and to evaluate opinions. This activity can be done at any stage of the reading process from before starting to finishing. If the activity is done pre-reading, the teacher should develop the statements. If the activity is done during or after reading a text, students can develop statements. This activity involves three steps. First, a passage is identified in a text and is written out on a piece of paper. Doing this engages the writer in the comprehension processes by retelling and finding information. Second, a statement or question is developed in relationship to the selected passage from the text. The statement or question is written in such a way to allow for multiple opinions and to stimulate discussion. Last, the statement is shared and a whole-class or small-group discussion takes place where people consider why they agree or disagree with the statement.

An example of how this strategy might be used could be within a nursing class where students are asked to read an article about a real-life situation involving an Alzheimer's patient, family members, and medical and health care professionals. With this example, the teacher might develop a question based on the text, such as: Do you agree and/or disagree with the article that doctors should work with family members to determine the best course for care for a patient and why? After reading the article, a discussion would unfold where nursing students have to navigate through a pool of opinions from classmates and the text in order to articulate how and why they came to a certain decision.

Strategy Two: Discussion Webs

Discussion webs are a good post-reading strategy for helping students graphically represent the content from

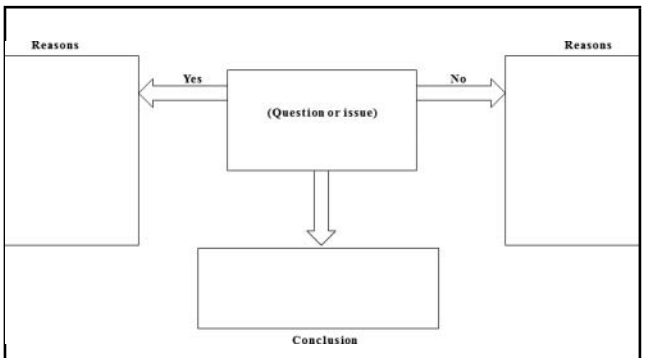

FIGURE 1. Illustration of a discussion web layout.

texts, and this activity works nicely with a variety of texts (Alvermann 1991). To begin, the teacher provides students with a skeleton of the discussion web (see Figure 1). This is important because students need the opportunity to document the activity's evolution in a written format. The first phase is done with a partner with whom students write down a question or issue that has been given by the teacher. The question or issue is placed in the box labeled "question or issue." The teacher then supplies students with a reading, which the student can read individually or with his or her partner. Afterward, the students generate notes on the web for as many "yes" and "no" reasons as they can. In the second phase, the teacher asks the pairs to partner with another pair of students to share their "yes" and "no" reasons. The goal of this small-group discussion is to try to produce a consensus among the group of agreement or disagreement with the teacher's original statement. To end, the students are asked to summarize and share the outcome of their conversation with the rest of the class.

An example of using discussion webs from a culinary arts course might be to analyze the content, format, and readability of various local restaurants' menus. The teacher might provide a question or statement regarding the overall effectiveness of the menus; for example, all of these menus are too cluttered with pictures and words and lack original, local dishes. From there, the teacher would give the students the menus, and the students would examine them and fill out "yes" and "no" reasons on the web. Afterward, the students would partner with peers for further discussion on the teacher's statement. To conclude, the whole class would share and discuss their conclusions on the menus' usability.

Strategy Three: Prevoke and Possible Sentences

Prevoke and possible sentences are two very similar pre-reading and post-reading comprehension strategies. Prevoke lends itself nicely to fictional texts, while possible sentences works better for nonfictional, informative texts. Both activities have two phases and can take place in groups of two or three students. For both activities, the teacher selects a range of 12–20 words and/or phrases from a text that the students have yet to encounter. In phase one the teacher distributes his or her selections to the students. With prevoke, students are asked to arrange the preselected words into two or three categories predetermined by the teacher (e.g., plot and setting). With possible sentences students are asked to create sentences, which might appear in the text, out of the 12–20 words. In phase two students are asked to read the text. Once they have done so, with prevoke students are asked to rearrange the preselected words with the new information acquired through reading, and with possible sentences students have the opportunity to revisit their sentences and verify, adjust, or correct them.

Both possible sentences and prevoke not only enhance reading comprehension through comparing, contrasting, sequencing, predicting, evaluating, and retelling, but they also allow for students to look closely at the role of words and their meanings, which is an important factor in developing vocabulary as well as analyzing the tone and purpose of texts. For instance, in a marketing course the teacher could collect a series of advertisements from the students' various fields of interest (e.g., pharmaceuticals, fashion, online gaming). The teacher could then compile a list of words and/or phrases from the ads and go through the stages for either activity. Doing either prevoke or possible sentences can allow students to become familiar with how other professionals use language to market specific products.

Strategy Four: Sketch-to-Stretch

Sketch-to-stretch is an after-reading strategy created by Harste, Short, and Burke (1988) and can be partnered with a wide range of texts. This strategy allows students to create nonlinguistic representations of a text though cooperative learning, which according to Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) enhances student learning. Nonlinguistic responses can take many forms depending on the activity's structure, but some approaches may include creating drawings, collages, sculptures, dances, or pantomimes. In this activity, students are asked to respond to a text they just read or the teacher can provide the students with words, quotes, or passages from a text as guidance for creation. Whether this activity is done individually or in groups, students engage in the comprehension process through summarizing material, retelling, extending information, giving opinions, finding information, and more.

The sketch-to-stretch strategy can be applied in any class, take, for example, an automotive course that requires reading instructions to complete practical tasks. The teacher might ask all the students in the class to read the same step-by-step passage from a manual (e.g., how to change a tire). The teacher would then ask groups of students to work together to visually represent a specific set of stages from the passage. The teacher could move

from group to group asking the students who are not enacting the stages to interpret and discuss the actions taking place. The group performing the actions could then verbally confirm and/or elaborate on the steps they were enacting.

Strategy Five: Important Words

Important words is an activity where students are asked to keep documentation of words they feel are important while reading and why. Students can keep a running list in a journal, on scraps of paper, on sticky notes, or on note cards. After they have completed a text, students are asked to share and discuss the different words they wrote down with other students in small groups. Through sharing words and reasons, students engage in comparing and contrasting, giving opinions, and retelling, all of which can enhance reading comprehension. The second part of this strategy can take a myriad of forms depending on how the teacher wants to structure the students' encounters. Some of the possibilities teachers might consider could be: asking students to individually or collaboratively create sentences with the words, sorting the words into categories, organizing words from most to least important, creating a web of the words to show their relationship to each other, picking five or so important words and telling why, or combining words with those from other students and organizing them according to given principles.

This activity promotes many of the same comprehension elements as the other strategies, such as summarizing, hypothesizing, extending and finding information, comparing and contrasting, giving opinions, and evaluating. The important words activity will not only develop comprehension skills but also will help students broaden their vocabulary through looking closely at words by hearing and using them (Blachowicz et al. 2006). Using this activity could prove effective in paralegal courses since students in this profession are often required to review, organize, research, and summarize legal documents. For example, paralegal students could be asked to read a series of depositions while keeping a list of key words they encounter. The list could then help students when creating summaries of the depositions or when doing a research project on a court case. Using this activity with paralegal students, or in any vocational area, will help students' reading comprehension as well as their understanding of the professional language used in their fields.

Strategy Six: Linear and Nonlinear Reading

The use of technology in society is growing, and students need to be prepared to use technology with confidence in everyday life and in the workplace (Snyder, Jones, & Lo Bianco, 2005). Both Kist (2009) and Kress (2003) argued how digital technologies have impacted the ways people read. Typically, print-based texts (e.g., a novel) are read linearly; that is, a reader gleans information from a text through the way it is sequenced. In contrast, people tend to read nonlinearly with digital-based texts (e.g., Facebook) with images, audio, and words that are generally read nonsequentially. Kist's (2009) strategy encourages students to move around the classroom, using their bodies to represent the different ways people read in the digital age. Following are step-by-step instructions for Kist's activity:

1. Ask the students to stand and line up in any order in a straight line.
2. Tell the students that on your mark they are to rearrange themselves from left to right by month of birth. So the students born in January, for example, will stand at the left of the line while the December students would stand at the right of the line. Explain that no speaking is permitted during the activity, only communication using body language and facial expressions is acceptable.
3. When the new line is complete, ask the students to call out the month of their birth to check the accuracy of the line.

While this strategy could be applied to many different courses, it might work particularly well in a course designed for computer and Internet literacies. For example, the instructor could pick a popular web-related story that the students may already know. The teacher would have the students arrange themselves in a line putting the events in the correct order from left to right. As the teacher reviews the event as a group from left to right, she or he can facilitate a discussion about how print texts are usually read linearly from beginning to end. Afterward, the instructor walks down the line and pulls random people forward a step (e.g., start with the 5th person, then move onto the 14th, and so on). Each time a student steps forward they represent a link that might be followed on another website. Through this activity, students can visually see and physically experience the differences between linear and nonlinear ways of reading. Following the activity the teacher can engage the students in a group discussion that centers on the students' experiences of reading both ways. Following are potential questions for discussion facilitation (adapted from Kist 2009).

- In what situations have you used each approach to reading texts?
- When might there be occasions where you read print-based texts nonlinearly and online materials linearly?
- How do you feel other people read the kinds of texts you write?
- Is there one way of reading that you prefer or most often engage in and why?
- What does it mean to write in print-based and online-based texts?

Concluding Thoughts

All too often institutions submerge individuals into certain inquiry communities, which consequently isolate people from interdisciplinary dialogue, and the field of education is not exempted from this process. Gordon (1999, xiii) urged those within the vocational and technical education community "to keep current in the materials they use to help tomorrow's workers" and to look beyond content-specific knowledge to do so. In order to successfully navigate our future in the 21st century and beyond, educators need to break out of isolating patterns of doing and to whatever degree possible become engaged in crossdisciplinary dialogue with one another. This was the aim of this article; that is, to bring together literature from both vocational education and literacy education to reveal the importance of considering how reading can impact vocational education. Understanding what reading entails and what researchers, teachers, and theorists have learned about the reading process is important for vocational education teachers because all too often they "know less than they need to know about reading in general and specific aspect[s] of teaching reading within their own subject" (Dupuis as cited in O'Connor, Bintz, and Murray 2009, 29). The reading comprehension strategies presented in this article can be influential, practical methods for educators to both engage students in reading as well as strengthen themselves as readers. Seeing the changing face of society in the 21st century, reading is undoubtedly one facet of education that must be woven across curricula and the classically constructed boundaries of academic disciplines.

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