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Reading and Writing in the Content Areas

From Efficient Decoders to Strategic Readers

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Content literacy programs are beginning to emerge as education policymakers become more aware of the literacy needs of adolescent learners.

As students enter the middle and high school years, many of them do not receive the instructional support they need to become strategic readers—readers who can activate prior knowledge before, during, and after reading; decide what is important in a text; synthesize information; draw inferences during and after reading; ask questions; and self-monitor and repair faulty comprehension. The author sees evidence of a growing awareness that content-area reading instruction is the responsibility of all teachers. He describes how a high school history teacher incorporates two common literacy strategies—graphic organizers and word exploration—into his instruction. With increased professional development, the author predicts that content-area teachers will make more effective use of strategies to support students' content-area literacy.

My grandson Simon and I had just boarded a Delta flight on our way to Florida for a week of fun in the sun. It was the spring break of Simon's 1st grade year, and his confidence in himself as a reader was still somewhat shaky. Although he liked being read to, he was ambivalent about reading on his own. If he had his druthers, he would rather floss his teeth nightly than engage voluntarily in the act of reading.

As soon as we boarded the plane and settled into our seats, I fumbled through my travel bag for a sports magazine. A 4th grader from Atlanta, seated on the other side of Simon, reached into his backpack for a *Captain Underpants* book. Simon hadn't brought anything to read. But now, sandwiched between two readers, he began to feel uncomfortable not reading something. So he started rummaging through the pouch of materials in front of him, pulled out the bag for motion sickness, and began reading it for what seemed an interminable amount of time.

I couldn't help but observe how intently Simon focused on one side of the bag where the phrase, "for motion discomfort," was written in eight different languages. Call it the researcher in me, but I wanted to understand what he was doing. I asked, "What are you reading?" He replied tersely, "This." Pointing to the lines of print on the bag, I asked him, "What's this?" Simon shot me an incredulous look, but responded by saying, "Papa, these are different languages." Impressed, I asked him whether he knew what the different

languages were. He gave me another look—the type that sinks ships—but explained with an air of authority that the first line of print was English. He ventured a guess that the second line was Spanish. He couldn't identify the lines that were written in German, French, and Italian, but when he pointed to the lines with Korean, Japanese, and Chinese characters, he guessed, "I think these are all Chinese."

I pushed on, asking Simon to read the line of print written in English that signified, "for motion discomfort." He began, "For mo. . . , for mo. . . ." He stopped, looked perplexed, and asked, "Papa, why couldn't they just write, 'In case you have to puke!'"

At this point, I knew that my grandson was on solid ground as a developing reader. Although he was still struggling to develop decoding skills, he was already constructing meaning, making sense, questioning the author of the text—doing all the things that a thoughtful reader should do. Nearly 16 months later, he reads fluently, and I can say with reasonable certainty that he would rather read than floss.

Simon will likely continue to grow as a reader and writer—*if* his schools support his ability to read and write strategically as he progresses through the grades during his adolescent years. Unfortunately, too many older students do not receive the support they need to help them grow from fluent decoders into strategic readers—readers who know how to activate prior knowledge before, during, and after reading; decide what's important in a text; synthesize information; draw inferences during and after reading; ask questions; and self-monitor and repair faulty comprehension (Robb, 2000). To put the matter simply, strategic readers know how to think with text (Vacca & Vacca, 2001).

Unmet Adolescent Literacy Needs

The Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association recognized the importance of literacy in the lives of adolescents in a position statement advocating a "bill of rights" for adolescent literacy learners:

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed. (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 3)

Unfortunately, as students move into the middle grades and high school, they often receive little or no instruction in how to use reading and writing strategies to learn with texts (Vacca, 1998). Although individual teachers may incorporate content literacy practices into their subject-matter instruction, literacy programs are usually limited to specialized courses for low-achieving students. After 7th grade, few schools provide comprehensive literacy programs for the majority of students who have learned to decode words easily and read smoothly in elementary school.

Public policy on literacy, especially in recent years, has focused primarily on the literacy learning of young children. Although I wholeheartedly support the importance of building an early foundation in literacy, it often comes at the price of a lack of resources and attention to the needs of adolescent literacy learners. An early literacy emphasis assumes that once children learn to read and write, they will be able to use reading and writing to learn for the rest of their lives. From a developmental perspective, such an assumption is tenuous at best.

The awareness that effective early reading programs are not enough has begun to work its way to the policy-making arena. The RAND Reading Study Group concluded in a report prepared for the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement,

A child who successfully develops beginning reading skills may not automatically become a skilled reader. Large numbers of children who have successfully acquired beginning reading skills later fall behind in their ability to deal with school reading tasks—a phenomenon that experienced teachers call the "4th grade slump." . . . The recent federal investment through the [Reading Excellence Act] and its successor programs, Reading First and Early Reading First (totaling more than \$5 billion over the next five years), will be lost unless the knowledge base on reading comprehension is further developed. (Snow, 2002, pp. 7–8)

A recent report by the Carnegie Corporation of New York found that more than half of the students entering high school in the 35 largest cities in the United States read at the 6th grade level or below. By the middle grades, the majority of students may appear *skillful* in the mechanics of reading but aren't *strategic* enough in their ability to explore and interpret meaning. They often just go through the motions of reading and writing—saying the words or putting the words on paper. As many content-area teachers would attest, more and more of today's middle and high school students abandon reading altogether as a way of learning.

Moreover, students develop a one-dimensional view of writing. They often receive explicit instruction in English classes on how to write essays for rhetorical purposes—for example, to explain, describe, or persuade. But students rarely connect writing with learning by using writing to explore and interpret meaning that they encounter in texts and class discussions.

Content Literacy Instruction Makes a Difference

In response to the problem of adolescent literacy, content literacy programs have begun to reemerge in the middle grades and high school. Content literacy is often defined as the level of reading and writing skill that learners need in an academic subject to comprehend and respond to ideas in texts used for instructional purposes. Content literacy instructional practices help shape the comprehension strategies students need to think deeply about texts.

In the past, content literacy instruction did not easily find its way into subject-matter classrooms, despite the attention given to it by literacy researchers and educators (Ratekin, Simpson, Alvermann, & Dishner, 1985). Traditionally, the responsibility for

teaching reading and writing has rested with English/language arts teachers and reading specialists.

Although they have important roles to play in adolescents' literacy development, language arts and reading teachers need content-area teachers to show students how to read and write like a scientist, historian, or mathematician. All teachers in all subjects share the responsibility for literacy development in middle grades and high school. Today, more and more content-area teachers recognize this responsibility and are incorporating content literacy into their teaching through a variety of instructional strategies.

Example: Embedding Content Literacy in Teaching

Daryl, a high school history teacher in northeast Ohio, embeds content literacy instructional strategies in his teaching of U.S. history. One of the instructional strategies that he uses in his classes throughout the school year involves showing students how to construct graphic representations, popularly known as *graphic organizers* (Jones, Pierce, & Hunter, 1988/1989). Daryl teaches his students how to construct graphic organizers to reflect over-arching text patterns that authors in the social sciences use to organize ideas, such as problem-solution, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, description, and sequence. Graphic organizers enable students to identify what ideas in an expository text are important, how these ideas are related, and where to find specific information about these ideas in the text.

Beginning early in the school year, Daryl gradually introduces, explains, and demonstrates different graphic organizer formats based on common text patterns in course materials. Students use course materials to practice and apply their understanding of each graphic organizer format that Daryl has taught.

In one class that I observed, Daryl's students discussed the legacy of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Students read an article posted in 1998 on the *Washington Post* Web site. "Is Mission 'Pinpricks' or Punitive?" contends that the Persian Gulf War, although commonly viewed as one of the most successful military campaigns in U.S. history, had limited objectives, limited results, and unintended consequences (Atkinson, 1998).

Before reading the text, Daryl engaged the class in a content literacy practice called *word exploration* (Vacca & Vacca, 2001). He asked his students to think about the author's use of the word *murky* in the article by "quickwriting" a definition based on their prior knowledge, associations, and understandings of the word. A quickwrite involves brainstorming with paper and pen. Students were given two minutes to explore the meaning of the word *murky* by writing whatever thoughts came to mind. After some of the students shared their quickwrites, Daryl led the class in a prereading discussion of what the author meant by a "murky ending" to the Persian Gulf War.

Then, Daryl assigned students to read the article in class and discuss the author's main points in small groups, with each group responsible for constructing a graphic organizer

depicting the important ideas in the text. Each group selected a student to display its graphic organizer on an overhead transparency and to explain the group's thinking.

As Figure 1 shows, several of the small groups decided to use a "spider map" graphic organizer. A spider map helps students organize descriptive information about a topic (for example, "relations with Iraq") around main ideas and supporting details. The spider maps varied in shape and substance from group to group. The variations led to a lively discussion of the students' perceptions of important ideas in the article.

Figure 1. Small Group-Constructed "Spider Map" Organizer

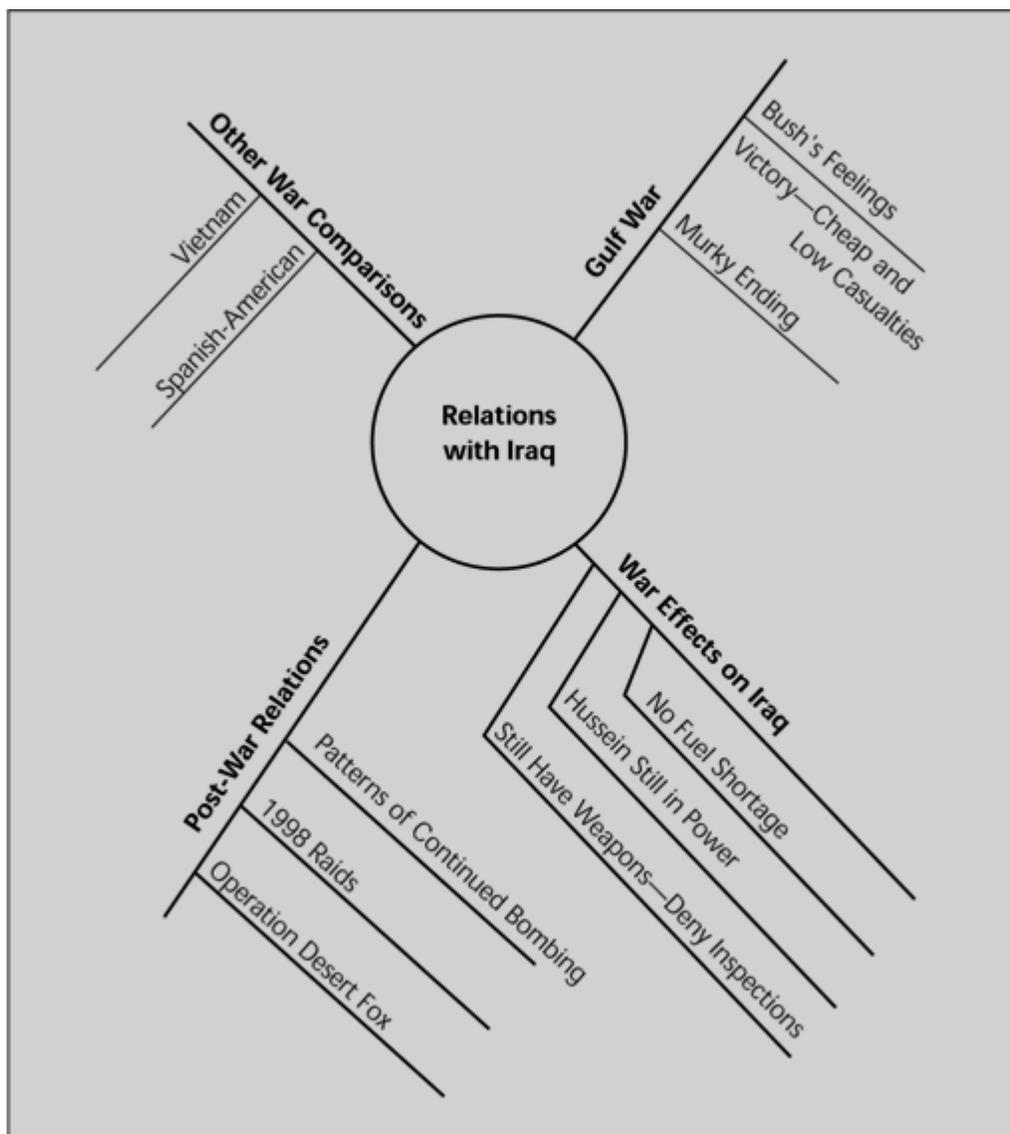
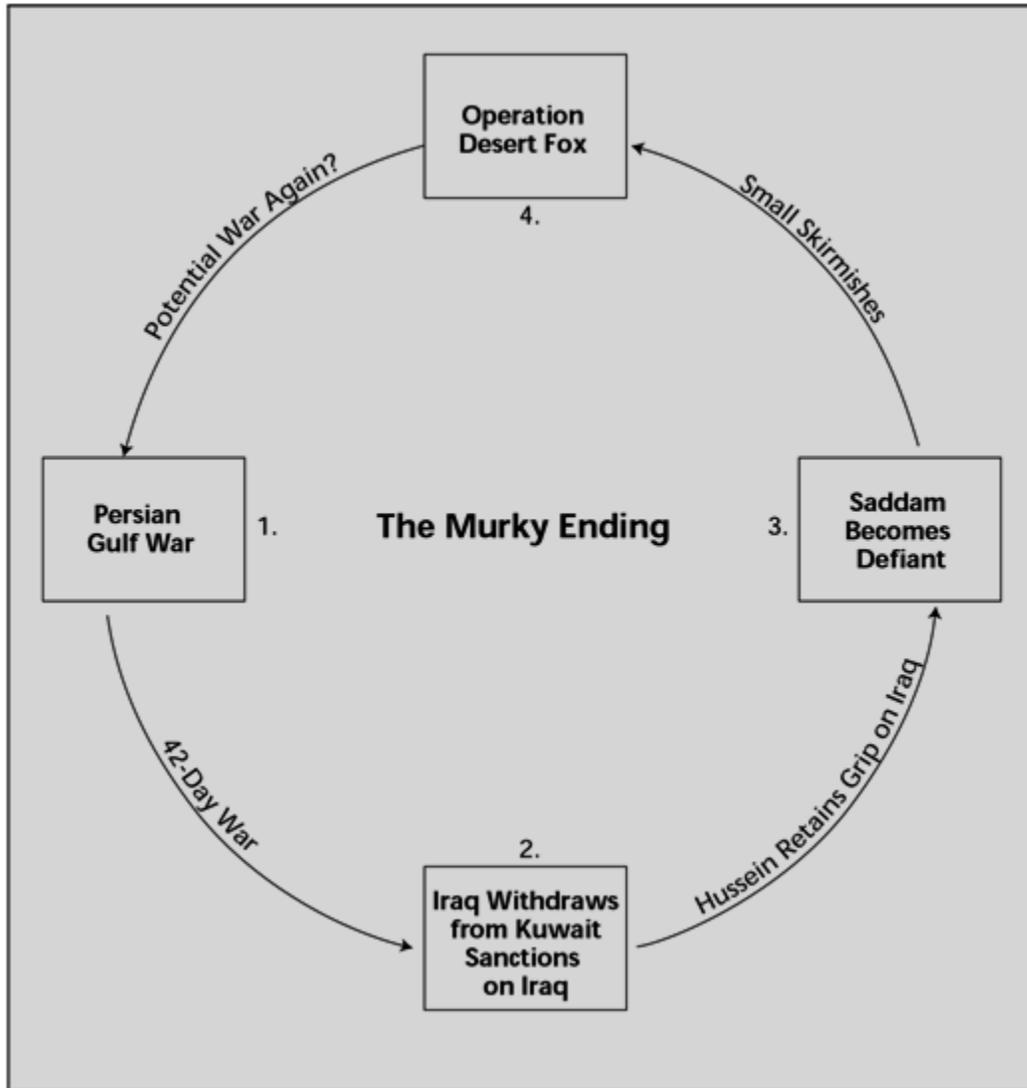


Figure 2 depicts a "cycle" graphic organizer in which a series of events beginning with the Persian Gulf War interact to produce a set of results that may lead full circle to another potential war with Iraq. The students whose group created the cycle organizer transformed the ideas encountered in the text into a powerful way of thinking about the consequences of a war with limited objectives.

Figure 2. Small Group-Constructed "Cycle" Organizer



The word exploration quickwrite and graphic organizer instructional strategies are just two of many that Daryl uses before, during, and after text assignments to support students' literacy needs in a content learning situation. Daryl learned about these strategies in a series of workshops on content literacy practices offered in his school

district. The workshops were part of a long-term staff development effort in the district's middle and high schools.

Such supports for content-area teachers are crucial. Schools must provide classroom teachers with reading specialist services, including resource support and current research on literacy and learning. In addition, schools need to implement ongoing staff development efforts, including instructional strategy workshops, self-study, teacher inquiry projects, and action research in the various content areas in the middle and high school curriculums.

The Time Is Right

The concept of content literacy is firmly rooted in the traditions of the literacy field. Unfortunately, content literacy practices have not made their way into content-area classrooms on a wide scale. As the focus of public policy begins to broaden to include not only beginning reading but also reading comprehension, the time is right for a reemergence of content literacy programs in school districts across the United States. Perhaps "Every teacher, a teacher of reading"—that perennial hope—will become a reality.

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