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RED 6116: Foundations of Reading Instruction

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## **Introduction**

As an undergraduate student, one idea was consistently presented in all of my education classes: to be a good teacher, you need to keep learning. Since graduating with my Bachelor's degree seven years ago, I have tried to fulfill that ideal. I have continued my education through attendance conferences, meeting with fellow teachers formally and informally, becoming an active member of the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development and the International Reading Association, and reading professional education articles. Those ways of becoming an active educator work well for me in theory. The real learning and growth for my students happens when I reflect upon what I hear and read, and then adapt and change myself as a teacher in the classroom. Continuing education is only useful when it is active. In the following sections, I will summarize, reflect, and make goals for future teaching using six professional articles.

Allington, R. (2002). You can't learn much from books you can't read. *Educational Leadership: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*. Pgs. 16-19.

## **Summary**

In his "no nonsense" style of writing, takes on one of educators greatest battles in this article. So many struggling readers in grades 5 through 12 encounter textbooks that become the stumbling block to understanding content area knowledge. Allington consistently compares students' reading habits to those of adults in order to make his point—there is a grave need for an overhaul of content area materials in fifth grade and higher.

Adults won't read hard texts voluntarily—not because we lack character, but because we've had too many frustrating experiences trying to learn from texts that were simply too difficult, had too many unfamiliar words, and had complicated sentences that seemed purposely tangled in an attempt to frustrate us...Adults use the easiest texts they can find when

they want to learn about a new topic. Why do these same adults think that hard books are good for children and adolescents? (Allington, 2002, p.18)

The second half of Allington's article focuses on how to change the current trend of "harder texts are better." By observing excellent teachers, Allington states two main solutions: teachers need to dig for a greater variety of resources at lower levels and provide more instructional support to readers during content area class time. Allington also highlights the importance of student choice in materials as well as reciprocal teaching and individualized instruction in the content area. Allington closes the article with a bold declaration, "But for now, most teachers who want to teach effectively have to teach against the organizational grain" (p.19).

### **Response**

Throughout my graduate courses I have read a great deal by Richard Allington. I find his straightforward approach refreshing, inspiring, and memorable. This is the first article of Allington's that I have read that focuses solely on content area reading materials. *As I think back to my years in the elementary level I cringe as I recall my students' faces when I assigned readings for science or social studies. I failed my students by not providing engaging and **developmentally appropriate** reading materials that they could understand. I realized that I did not have to solely rely on the textbook (which was way too difficult most 97% of my students) but could not find the resources necessary to fill the gap. My students needed more instructional support for reading comprehension in the content areas and I left the explicit strategy teaching to our reading block.*

### **Application**

When I re-enter the elementary level classroom, I will take Allington's two possible solutions, put them on an index card, and take them into my plan book! I will be more active in my hunt for appropriate reading materials by becoming a best friend to the local librarian. I will expand my plans to incorporate picture books, magazine and online articles, firsthand accounts, and lower level textbooks. I also will commit to providing my struggling students will more instructional support for utilizing comprehension strategies effectively in the content areas as well. Taking it a step further, I will continue to go against the grain and be outspoken about the choice of content area materials in the higher grades.

Billman, L.W. (2002). Aren't these books for little kids? *Educational Leadership: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*. Pgs. 48-51.

### **Summary**

In this article Linda Webb Billman takes head on the task of opening the eyes of teachers to the vast world of picture books. Billman highlights some key components of picture books that make them an ideal supplement for content area instruction. With the combination of pictures and text working together and a readability level that is better than current textbooks, picture books can be effectively used to address complex, historical and current topics.

Billman also gives a list of criteria that teachers should follow when selecting picture books for content area studies. "Selection criteria for picture books include illustrations and stories that appeal to students, absence of stereotypes, authentic and current information, content that extends the topic being covered in class, differentiation between facts and opinions, and rich language with illustrations that reflect the text (Billman, 2002, p.49). Billman closes the article with examples of how picture books can be used to enhance and extend a World War II unit.

### **Response**

I have always been a huge fan of picture books. *When I taught third and fourth grade I used picture books as language studies, to talk about tough topics like bullying, and incorporated them into read alouds throughout the year. As I found with Allington's article, I did not utilize them nearly as much I could have. I cannot think of a time when I made picture books a genuine part of my social studies or science lesson. I did not realize the vast wealth of information that can be found in high quality picture books. The class discussions that could have taken place would have been a welcome change for any of my boring, textbook-driven lessons.*

### **Application**

Billman has brought to light that a perspective and mindset shift has to take place in my planning sessions. I have to open my eyes to the picture book libraries and make them a purposeful part of my teaching day because students deserve text they can read easily so that decoding is not a stumbling

block. My students deserve to be engaged in their social studies and science classes. I believe my students can have connections to history when text can tap into their emotions. This can all be done with picture books, if I make it a priority in my planning time.

Vacca, R.T. (2002). From efficient decoders to strategic readers. *Educational Leadership: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*. Pgs. 16-19.

### **Summary**

Richard Vacca starts his article talking about how his grandson, in an attempt to be a reader without his own reading material handy, picked up a bag for motion sickness and tried to read it. Frustrated, he gave up and asked his grandpa, "Why couldn't they just write: in case you have to puke?" Vacca's story lightheartedly shows how his grandson was already a reader even though he was just on the brink of passing the decoding stage.

Through this article Vacca explains readers do not go from being fluent decoders to strategic readers without instructional, scaffolded support. In order for students to become readers who "know how to think with text" teachers need to support them in content area instruction. "Content literacy instructional practices help shape the comprehension strategies students need to think deeply about texts" (Vacca, 2002, p.10) and without those practice opportunities, students will not be able to think and read independently in the content areas.

### **Response**

In reading this article I have realized that content area literacy needs just as much explicit instruction of comprehension strategies and modeling as regular reading and language arts classes. *Combining the two articles above with Vacca's writing, I see that my view of content area instruction needs a major change. Thinking back on my content area instruction once more I see that have to adjust my negative thoughts about social studies and science teaching. I need to view content area literacy as an extension of reading instruction.*

### **Application**

*By synthesizing all three articles I have reviewed, I now see the components that were missing in my instruction in previous years. I will explicitly teach comprehension strategies using graphic organizers in the setting of content areas. By modeling often and offering practice and scaffolded support to my students in the beginning of the year, the strategies can be better utilized with picture books and materials suitable for their reading levels. Shifting my viewpoint from content area teacher to that of “every teacher, a reading teacher” will make my lessons more purposeful and student-driven rather than ineffective textbook-driven, disengaging content area studies.*

Allington, R. (1998). Ten principles for looking at reading/language arts lessons in your classroom. *National Council of Teachers of English*. Non-paginated.

### **Summary**

Through this short article, Richard Allington lays down some simply-stated guidelines for effective reading and language arts instruction. Allington says student need to be reading and writing if we, teachers, expect them to improve. They need to have more easy material than challenging and see strategies explicitly modeled for them in reading, writing, decoding, and composing. There needs to be strong, purposeful link between reading and writing throughout the instructional day. Some lower-achieving students need extra, effective resource support that increases the amount of reading and writing done by the students. “Thoughtful literacy in the new general goal for reading and language arts instruction” (Allington, 1998). Students need large libraries that are easily accessible full of material for students of various abilities and interests. And finally, “good classroom instruction is absolutely central to student achievement” (Allington, 1998).

### **Response**

Allington gives a tall order in this short list. *I am somewhat overwhelmed as I reread summarized list above. I wonder how I can overhaul my content area teaching while keeping in mind and acting upon Allington’s ten principles. I suppose it comes down the thought that I need to make every minute of my*

*instructional day count—make it purposeful and worthwhile by planning effectively with these articles in mind.*

*I agree with all of Allington's principles but there is one that I find hard to change being just one, sole teacher. How can I possibly expand my students' library to encompass materials for all levels and interests? Perhaps with the help of grade level teachers who are like minded some driving power towards making classroom libraries bigger and of higher quality might happen. But isn't that the responsibility of the administration as a whole?*

### **Application**

Again Allington's straight-forward, lay-it-out-there style leaves me a summarized list of questions to ask myself as I plan. The reminder to explicitly model strategies and give students ample reading time is something that I will again have to rewrite and tape to my plan book or put on my virtual post-it on my desktop. For me, I believe I will need to reread these articles throughout the year in order to effectively change my previous teaching mindset. I need to remember that harder is not better when talking about reading and writing opportunities for my students.

Burke, J. (2000). Be a model reader. *Reminders: tools, tips, and techniques*. Heineman

### **Summary**

Burke's article very clearly lays out the role of literature teacher: to be a model of a reader. By sharing with students our "real life" reading experiences, i.e. the books we're reading and our thoughts about literature, we make visible what is invisible for students. By getting to know our students we can better provide them with materials and guide them toward their own book choices. Giving our students opportunities to be master readers themselves with younger students is the role of a literature teacher. Model again and again the way good readers read by thinking aloud. All these items are found in the job description of reading teacher.

### **Response**

*Show my love of reading and my reading habits is the thought that keeps coming into my head when I think about this article. Many authors I have read in graduate courses have brought up the idea that student reading class should mimic real life reading. What better way to do that than by my modeling through think alouds, sharing my personal favorite literature pieces, and getting to know my students' interests so I can provide them with material geared toward them?*

### **Application**

I love the idea of sharing this part of my life with my students on purpose! I would have loved to hear my reading teacher say that she got bored with a book and stopped reading it. Maybe I wouldn't feel guilty about putting a book down now as an adult...

The thought of making the invisible process of reading visible does not just apply to modeling strategies but also to reading habits and choices. My students will need to see that as a good reader I may choose a nonfiction novel one week and a fiction series the next. They need to see me reading, actually reading, for enjoyment's sake! (As if I needed an excuse!) Engaging students in simple conversations about book choice is one of my new goals, thanks to Burke's article.

Wilhelm, J.D. (2004). Inquiring minds use technology. *Voices from the Middle*. Pg. 45-46.

### **Summary**

Wilhelm writes this article to drive teachers to utilize the "vast untapped means of improving student literacy engagement and achievement" (Wilhelm, 2004, pg. 45) through inquiry based instruction supported by 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies. 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers who strive to work in an inquiry based environment need to teach students how to navigate the wealth of information on the Internet by explicitly teaching how to distinguish reliable web sources from the unreliable. Wilhelm ends the article with a checklist for evaluating websites that students can use when working in an inquiry-driven environment.

### **Response**

*I will admit that I had read a different article before choosing to respond to this as my sixth choice. I am still somewhat timid about integrating the Internet to its fullest potential in my classroom. Maybe it's*

*because no one ever taught me how to effectively evaluate websites as Wilhelm advocates in this article. I can see how it is my role to incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies into my classroom so my students can become the lifelong, in-depth learners I want them to be.*

**Application**

I think that overall I am going to have to practice...a lot to become comfortable utilizing the web with all it has to offer. I will probably have to attend technology centered workshops in order to meet my students' growing high-tech needs. I can start by working with my students to learn how to evaluate websites with Wilhelm's checklist. Opening myself up to students' suggestions and knowledge base is not out of the question either. No matter how, I need to commit myself to becoming more tech-minded and go out of my comfort zone to become the model my students need in this aspect of school as well.