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Rhetoric and Reading Comprehension or Reading Skills in Search of a Content

One of the tasks of what Robinson[1] has called the "inventive methodologist" is the creation of new teaching models. Such models may be drawn from the original research of the methodologist concerned, or they may be formed by drawing together, from various sources, ideas and principles that seem to provide guidelines for new ways of thinking about teaching. The teaching model discussed in the following paper is based, not on the original research of the writer, but on a drawing together of ideas from such psychologists as Bruner, Ausubel and Robinson, such linguists as Pike, and such inventive methodologists as Herber. The resulting amalgam, it is hoped, will provide a frame of reference for some of the skill-building practice being given in the name of teaching reading, and which, it seems, is seldom translated into "real" situations because teachers do not understand well enough the context within which they are teaching.

value of organizing principles in learning

Both Ausubel and Bruner have made important statements about the significant effect on learning of the teacher's conveying to the pupils a sense of the structure of any discipline being studied. In this context, Ausubel suggests that verbal learning has been unnecessarily maligned and that it need not be so meaningless as some critics would suggest.[2] He makes a number of suggestions, however, about the conditions needed to make verbal learning meaningful and states:

> One important variable affecting the incorporability of new meaningful material is the *availability in cognitive organization of relevant subsuming concepts at an appropriate level of inclusiveness* to provide optimal anchorage.[3]

He suggests further that relevant subsuming concepts should be introduced into learning at the beginning of a learning sequence so that these concepts, acting as "advance organizers,"[4] may provide the "anchorage" needed.

In another context, commenting on the search for "big ideas" in the development of physics curricula, Ausubel pursues the principle of subsuming ideas:

> The power of the big ideas is in their wide applicability and in the unity they bring to an understanding of what may appear superficially to be unrelated phenomena.[5]

Although Bruner and Ausubel do not agree in all aspects of their thinking about the psychology of cognition, some of Bruner's statements about curricula are remarkably like Ausubel's. Commenting on the problem of constructing curricula, Bruner maintains:

> The teaching and learning of structure, rather than simply the mastery of facts and techniques, is at the center of the classic problem of transfer.[6]

applying new organizing principles in new curricula

Statements like those quoted above are widely accepted and are the basis for many developments in "new" curricula — new science, new math, new social studies. In each of these school subjects, it is considered, there is knowledge to be acquired, knowledge that has structure; and that structure gives the subject its shape. With that basic principle in mind, teachers of physics think that they have failed if they teach their pupils "bits" of physics knowledge without conveying to them an insight into the structure of the discipline itself. The essence of the revolution in mathematics or science is not, then, that the content of each subject has changed so much but that *approaches to the content* have changed. The thrust has been in the direction of clarifying the subject by putting its content into new frames of reference.

existing organizing principles in the teaching of reading

Probably the tables of contents of texts on reading are the best source of information about how the reading methodologist presently organizes his subject. Most texts, after saying something about the importance of reading in the world today, make a fairly lengthy statement about (1) readiness (which almost invariably seems to mean readiness for beginning reading and assumes that the child is six years old), and then go on to discuss (2) word skills in the primary grades, (3) comprehension skills in the primary grades, (4) word skills in the intermediate grades, and (5) comprehension skills in the intermediate grades. Of late years, as a recognition of the fact that reading in the subject texts has been neglected, a chapter or two is likely to be included on "Reading in the Content Areas."

The impression given by the study of such tables of contents is that reading is a process one can talk about *in general,* without being specific *about what is to be read.* It is assumed, apparently, that reading is simply a process of adapting basic skills already learned to different kinds of material. No wonder teachers in grades four and up wonder why children who have been *A* students in the primary grades cannot read their science or social studies texts. These teachers think that if they use the basal reader regularly they are teaching "reading." They leave it to the children to transfer skills to the content areas.

But basal readers are almost entirely made up of narrative materials and, when the child learns to read the narrative pattern and think about it in certain ways, he is not learning to read other patterns which demand quite different ways of thinking. He really must be taught to read *the most common patterns of writing* and develop ways of thinking about them that are appropriate.

The fact is that the skilled reader has as "advance organizers" his previous experience with patterns of written English. His thought processes are structured, even before he begins to read, by his expectations about the way the pattern will operate to convey ideas. He does not need to read with prior knowledge of the subject matter (although this is, of course, an advantage if he has some), so long as he has prior expe-

rience with similar patterns of writing. His advance organizers provide the "anchorage" Ausubel mentions. The trouble is that good readers have a talent for seeing structure in writing and have taught themselves to use it. Without specific help, some people never learn it.

proposal for a new organizing principle in reading teaching

The revolution in organizing subjects for teaching is long overdue in reading. "New" reading should be based on an approach to teaching that uses the common structures of written English as its frame of reference. Linguists have moved from word structures to sentence structures. Their move beyond the sentence seems to have moved very little further than the paragraph, it is true, but some of Pike's[7] work, and that of other tagmemicists, seem to bridge the gap between the paragraph and the forms of such whole "language units"[8] as essays, poems, stories. Obviously the linguists are getting to where the students of literary form have been for some time and reading, linguistics, and literature are finally beginning to coalesce! If it is fair to expand the term "rhetoric" to include the notions of unity and order within a form, then we can say that the "new" reading should centre on rhetoric as its organizing principle.

Having studied the teaching of reading with such frames of reference, a teacher would have a precise idea about which reading skills and subskills would be needed within each writing pattern and would not give children practice in subskills that were not appropriate to the pattern being studied. Teachers could be much more efficient in their questioning if they understood the kind of thinking each pattern of rhetoric demanded.

interviews with teachers of "new" reading: building a mind set

Teacher One

Q. What kind of reading are you teaching today?

A. Well this is a grade two class, so we work mainly in narrative materials.

Q. Do you think that narrative is the most appropriate material to use with beginning readers?

A. That's hard to say. We make the assumption that children want to learn stories when they come to school. Perhaps they are more ready for this form than any other. On the other hand, some children may find it hard to follow a time sequence and remember it. I suppose a different writing pattern might be easier for them.

Q. Why do you mention time sequence in relation to narrative?

A. Oh, mainly because one has to teach reading in relation to the basic organizing principles in the material to be read. The basic skill in comprehending stories is following the plot and using that as the thread around which the concepts about character, setting, and theme are wound.

Q. What materials do you use for teaching narrative reading?

A. I use basal readers for groups and narrative trade books for individual instruction. I try to show them that the same kinds of questions are appropriate in each type of book, so that they are constantly building what I call "the mind set for reading narrative."

Q. Are they developing that mind set, do you think?

A. Yes, I think so. Yesterday I gave them a whole story to read by themselves. It was at their independent reading level and I asked them to read and pretend I had asked them some questions before-hand. When they had finished, I asked them what kinds of questions I would ask. They predicted very well the plot, character, setting, theme questions, just from their experience with stories.

Teacher Two

Q. What kind of reading are you teaching today?

A. This is a grade four class, so I've been introducing them to the idea of information reading.

Q. How is that different from narrative reading?

A. Well, since information materials are organized in topical outline patterns (that is, a main idea — details pattern) reading in sequence from beginning to end is not appropriate. Robinson[9] has pointed out that this kind of pattern is much more efficiently read in what he calls the SQR pattern. This involves a *survey* technique, in which one reads title, introduction, summary, headings throughout before attempting to read details at all. This preliminary survey

gives one a frame of reference around which to structure one's thinking.

Q. I thought I heard a teacher say last week that she was using the SQR as a pattern for story reading.

A. Yes, unfortunately, that is an example of some teachers' habit of seizing something good in one context and applying it in another where it is not appropriate.

Q. Do I understand, then, that the SQR method of reading is appropriate only for materials organized in a *logical* pattern?

A. Yes.

Q. Does it apply in science books?

A. It did apply in the "old" science texts, a type still being used a good deal in elementary schools. But it doesn't apply in senior high school in any of the "new" sciences. Actually, one of the major problems in new biology, chemistry and physics is that the scientist-writers have developed what is essentially a new text-writing pattern. The reader has to be aware that the writer is presenting a "proposition-proof" kind of thinking and that he must grasp each stage of that proof as he reads.

Q. But can't a reader expect to skip a step or two, just as a reader might skip a detail or two in information reading?

A. No. In information reading, the main ideas are most important and a few details left out are not crucial. In new science, every step is important in the development of the single big idea being presented.

Q. How well is this kind of reading being taught? Is it important to students learning the new sciences?

A. From what teachers say, it is absolutely crucial to the subjects, and it may be one of the most important reasons for the admitted difficulty in teaching them. We might note that many lists of reading skills in science are now at least partly out of date. They are built on an analysis of old science texts.

Q. We started talking about your information reading, actually, and I wanted to ask a question about teaching such reading. But perhaps the same question applies in each subject area. Are there materials easily available for practising the reading skills of each subject area?

A. There are some workbooks that give practice in getting main ideas of paragraphs, reading experiments, map reading, and so on, but unfortunately they treat these skills in isolation from the total context of the reading material of

which they are a part. The teacher has always to be putting these exercises back into the total frame of reference within a "real" text.

Q. You don't think, then, that reading skills can be taught unless the teacher understands their application well enough to work into the text regularly?

A. Definitely not.

Q. What do you think about the materials that use a great many pictures and only a little print these days?

A. They seem like a way to get more directly at concepts. The trouble is, they may be difficult reading because a little print with many pictures may mean a good deal of "gear shifting" mentally and then you have another process to be learned!

Perhaps these two interviews have made the point. The teachers involved have a very clear grasp of the importance to reading of the rhetoric of the material to be read. They know that one cannot talk about the skills of literal comprehension or the skills of critical reading without saying what is to be read.

explicitness in teaching

As will be evident in the reference to the SQR method above, some books on study reading do suggest that children should be taught to read information in specific patterns. But very little has been done to explore each pattern of writing specifically or to make the concept an important organizing principle in teaching reading. Herber, who has probably been the most innovative of the writers on the subject of reading in the content areas,[10] seems to feel that teachers should not start with statements about structure, or attempt to make explicit the importance of rhetoric in reading. He thinks that teachers should know a good deal about rhetoric, but should convey it to their pupils through carefully structured reading activities called "reasoning guides."[11] These reasoning guides, Herber suggests, should be designed to expose the structure of the material without making any statements about it. He insists that a grasp of structure must be gained inductively or not at all.[12]

This attitude seems unnecessarily rigid. In another context, he has found value in advance organizers and others of Ausu-

bel's ideas and so might be persuaded that this statement has merit:

> ...in meaningful learning situations, it is advisable to introduce suitable organizers whose relevance is made explicit rather than to rely on the spontaneous availability of subsumers.[13]

Even Bruner, who is sometimes thought to be completely committed to the idea of discovery learning, has this to say in a comment on math teaching:

> It has also been pointed out by the Illinois group that the method of discovery would be too time-consuming for presenting all of what a student must cover in mathematics.[14]

However the approach is to be made, tangentially or directly, a study of rhetoric would seem to be an important avenue to reading comprehension. The idea is submitted as a new model for teaching reading, for teaching teachers of reading, and for research.

footnotes

1. Floyd G. Robinson, "The Contribution of Educational Psychology to Teacher Training," in David P. Ausubel, ed., *Readings in School Learning*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969.
2. David P. Ausubel, *The Psychology of Meaningful Verbal Learning*, New York: Grune and Stratton, 1963, p. 15.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
6. Jerome S. Bruner, *The Process of Education*, New York: Vintage Books, 1960, p. 12.
7. Kenneth S. Pike, "Beyond the Sentence," in *The Study of Units Beyond the Sentence*, Champaign, Illinois: National Council of the Teachers of English, 1964.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
9. Francis P. Robinson, *Effective Reading*, New York: Harper and Sons, 1951.
10. Harold L. Herber, *Teaching Reading in Content Areas*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970.
11. *Ibid.*, Chapter 7.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
13. Ausubel, *The Psychology...*, p. 84.
14. Bruner, *op. cit.*, p. 21.