

## Resistance to Content Area Reading Instruction: Dimensions and Solutions

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The proposal that every content area teacher should be a teacher of reading, popularized by William S. Gray some 60 years ago (Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983), was originally intended as a call to action for content area teachers to assume responsibility for helping students read to learn the subject matter in their various classes. This call has been, and continues to be, predicated on the assumption that if every content area teacher assumes responsibility for helping students learn through reading, broad educational goals across the curriculum will be met. The phrase, however, has come to embody much of what is presently viewed as resistance to content reading instruction. In this paper, we will explain why; then we will offer some ways to counter the resistance. First, we will discuss explanations for resistance to content area reading instruction commonly reported in the literature and content area textbooks before exploring more fundamental, foundational explanations for resistance tied to the culture of schools. Second, we will present some ways to comprehensively counter the resistance by offering a new framework for content area reading instruction.

### Commonly Reported Explanations of Resistance to Content Area Reading

Preservice and inservice teachers resist content area reading instruction for a number of reasons: they are not necessarily convinced that special training in reading in the content areas will improve their teaching (Bean & Harper, 2006; Dupuis, 1984; Bean, Readence & Baldwin, 2007; Siedow, Memory, & Bristow, 1985; Singer & Donlan, 1989); nor are they convinced that reading is an optimal medium for learning in various disciplines (Fisher & Ivey, 2005); and they often misunderstand the purposes and goals of content area reading (Stewart & O'Brien, 1989). This resistance has typically been framed as a problem to be solved by content reading professionals who, after arming themselves with an explanation of how preservice and practicing teachers misunderstand content area reading—due to one or more of the above misconceptions or misunderstandings—strive to change the attitudes of these doubting educators.

A host of attitude instruments and attitude studies of targeted content reading over the years (e.g., Askov & Dupuis, 1982; Smith & Otto, 1969; Vaughan, 1977). These instruments and studies stand as a testament to an ongoing concern with the intractability of the resistance problem. Nonetheless, framing the problem as a series of misunderstandings or misconceptions that can be *remediated* via attitude adjustments misses an important aspect of the resistance: The culture of schools and schooling account for a more fundamental, deeply-seated resistance to content area reading than that attributable to negative attitudes resulting from misconceptions or misunderstandings. Before we turn to the issue of school culture, however, we will first

explicate three primary explanations of resistance typically addressed in content area textbooks and reading periodicals.

### **1. Responsibility for instruction**

Content area reading professionals strive to help preservice and inservice content teachers to better understand their instructional responsibilities with regard to the role of reading and text materials. A bias that we share with other content reading professionals is that content teachers should assume primary responsibility for teaching their students to view reading as an important learning tool by helping students to use textbooks and other texts in content area classrooms. Through the use of these texts, meaning is mediated through interactions students have with the content, each other, and the teacher (e.g., Herber, 1970, 1978; Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000; Sturtevant, Boyd, Brozo, Hinchman, Moore & Alverman, 2006).

Content teachers resist content reading instruction, however, because they mistake what is actually a typical instructional responsibility (e.g., teaching content information) with what they feel is an added instructional burden. They confuse reading-to-learn with learning-to-read and perceive reading instruction as basic skills instruction or remediation to be delivered by specialists like Chapter I teachers or special education teachers in special classes using special remedial or corrective materials. Hence, to their way of thinking, reading skills should be mastered in the primary grades and once these basic skills are mastered, the skills can and will be applied by students to meet a variety of reading demands in content classes; moreover, secondary content area teachers assume that students lacking these basic skills should be remediated by reading specialists, not guided by content area teachers.

### **2. Value of textbooks and reading**

Secondary teachers may also resist content reading instruction because of their concerns about the quality of reading materials they must use. Recent studies have documented the poor quality of textbooks (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2000; Tyson-Bernstein, 1988a; 1988b) and teachers' negative feelings about textbooks (Welsh, 2005). Under such circumstances, even if teachers did value reading, the poor quality of the text materials available to them might restrict them from incorporating more reading into classroom instruction. Furthermore, in some curricular areas, text-based instruction is often criticized as a second-rate approach to other instructional approaches such as hands-on, discovery, or other more direct encounters with content. Hence, because of the poor quality of materials or specific content area pedagogical practices, some secondary teachers feel ill-equipped or disenfranchised when dealing with content area reading instruction.

### **3. Content-centered pedagogy**

A common perception we have as educators is that secondary teachers are content-oriented, whereas elementary teachers are child-oriented. The perception is rooted in a commonly held belief that at the secondary level content knowledge is the only important prerequisite to good teaching (Good, 1990). In fact, secondary teachers are concerned with content; the majority of them are pressured to cover content, often downplaying the

teaching and learning processes often necessary to make conceptual understanding of content available to students.

Thus, under the pressure to cover material within tight time constraints (Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1985) in an increasingly fragmented curriculum (O'Brien & Bauer, 2005; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986), many content area teachers understandably resist the idea of accommodating students with a range of reading abilities and interests because such individual attention would be an inefficient use of the valuable time they need to disseminate content. In addition, content area teachers and preservice teachers who themselves understand their content as facts and conceptual frameworks in which facts are organized, may neither know how to use, nor desire to use diverse ways to effectively represent that same content to students, including the use of alternative texts and reading. The consequence of this restricted view of pedagogy is teacher-centered classroom environments where lecturing is the predominant mode of instruction (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990; Bullough, 1987; Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1985; Sturtevant, Boyd, Brozo, Hinchman, Moorse & Alverman, 2006).

Content area reading is one of the diverse ways to represent content to learners and broaden content area teachers' pedagogical repertoire. As teachers develop content reading approaches in their classrooms, they alter their posture toward content and pedagogy; an emphasis on more text-based instruction effectively removes the teacher from the position of sole or primary purveyor of content. Thus, in a sense, guided, purposeful reading may be given the opportunity to do the *talking* in place of the teacher. Such a change in the mediation of content and pedagogy requires teachers to pay attention to their pedagogical content knowledge (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, Collazo, 2004), the knowledge by which teachers take their own understanding of content and structure it so students can learn it. Nevertheless, many teachers with advanced subject area knowledge have difficulty transforming that knowledge so students can understand it.

To summarize, because of subject-centered pedagogy, content area teachers continue to resist content area reading because content reading is viewed as one of many demands on them to teach in ways that are radically different from their pedagogical style; in addition, they feel that they are not adequately equipped with pedagogical knowledge specific to reading, and lack the time they need to use a variety of pedagogical avenues, including reading, within the externally imposed constraints to cover content.

Thus far, we have outlined three primary sources of resistance to content reading: (a) misunderstanding of the responsibility of instruction, (b) lack of value placed context-based learning, and (c) content-centered instruction. The diversity of the three sources substantiates the complexity of the resistance issue. Secondary teachers have deeply-rooted beliefs and practices that tend to exclude a variety of pedagogical approaches except for an almost relentless covering of content. We are not criticizing secondary teachers; on the contrary, we want to acknowledge how resistance is intimately tied to the institutional context and constraints under which they work. To further explain this institutional context, we now turn to a discussion of how school culture supports resistance.

## **Resistance Related to the Culture of Secondary Schools**

As in any profession, membership in teaching constitutes membership in a culture with deeply rooted values. Even preservice teachers enter teacher education courses like content area reading armed with perceptions about teaching accumulated from all of their experiences in schools (Britzman, 1987). Britzman refers to these perceptions as “implicit institutional biographies—the cumulative experience of school lives— which, in turn, inform their knowledge of the student’s world, of school structure, and of curriculum” (p. 221). In terms of content area reading instruction, preservice and inservice teachers have institutional biographies, some aspects of which are incompatible with instructional approaches content reading advocates are asking them to apply. For example, institutionalized practices include compartmentalized curricula transmitted in a cost-efficient manner by teachers who strive to maintain social control, maintain or raise standardized test scores, and appear to be experts on the content they teach (Giroux, 1988).

Content area teachers are members of schools as institutions. These institutions are difficult to change (Cuban, 1982, 1984, 1986, 2003; O’Brien, 2006); they are often controlled by persons who wield political power aimed at reducing teachers’ control over what they teach and how they teach it (Giroux, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1987). Although teachers do want to help their students learn, their hands are often tied by compliance with institutional goals. Thus, resistance to content reading instruction is as intractable as the global problem of how change is resisted within any institution.

Hence, secondary schools, as workplaces, are driven by seemingly immutable institutionalized routines (O’Brien & Stewart, 1990; O’Brien, 2006; Stevens, 2002). Even when teachers value reading and see the textbook as the center of their curriculum, their values and wishes related to reading cannot be articulated in classroom practice in the face of the daily demands placed upon them. Classroom-based, observational research focusing on day-to-day instructional and organizational routines in content area classrooms shows a disparity between how content area teachers *value* reading and how they *attend* to it. For example, research has shown that even though textbooks are considered central to instruction in most secondary classrooms, content teachers often displace textbooks as the primary source of information (e.g., Goolsby, 2006; McNabb, 2006; Ratekin, Simpson, Alvermann, & Dishner, 1985; Stewart, 1989; Valenza, 2006; Wilder & Dressman, 2006); moreover, teachers seem to view reading as something that readers do automatically to acquire content (Hinchman, 1985; Smith & Feathers, 1983b; Sturtevant, Boyd, Brozo, Hinchman, Moorse & Alverman, 2006).

## **Countering Resistance to Content Area Reading**

We would like to preface this section with a caveat. Our recommendations for countering resistance are offered to content reading professionals and preservice and inservice teachers who are interested in more fully using reading as a learning tool while maintaining the integrity of their instruction, not as a guarantee that they will be better teachers and their students better learners if they rely more heavily on texts and reading than they currently do. In fact, through our own ethnographic and qualitative classroom-based research (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, Collazo, 2004; O’Brien, 1988; O’Brien & Stewart, 1990; Sturtevant, Boyd, Brozo, Hinchman, Moorse & Alverman, 2006), we have realized many of the limitations of content area reading

instruction in which teachers are offered cognitively-based routines or strategies proposed by university-based researchers, so-called outside-in approaches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990) developed with little knowledge of the day-to-day complexities of the classrooms in which the strategies are to be employed. For example, we have worked on several projects with excellent teachers who offer logical, practical reasons for not emphasizing reading; their classrooms function well, students enjoy the classes and learn the content. Furthermore, the teachers in these classrooms are concerned, caring individuals who are respected by their students. Obviously, in order for these teachers to insert reading and more text-based instruction into their classrooms, significant changes would have to be made in the way they view the curriculum and instruction; there is no guarantee, however, that such changes would improve their instruction or their students' learning.

Finally, in light of our qualitative work, the phrase every teacher a teacher of reading takes on new meaning. Perhaps only certain types of teachers, with certain teaching styles and goals, can be successful as teachers of reading (or, as we interpret it, teachers who emphasize reading-to-learn). Change is not warranted for change's sake, and it is premature to encourage particular teachers to change without some intimate knowledge of those teachers' beliefs, goals, motives, and the classroom cultures in which they work (Beach & O'Brien, 2005). Hence, our recommendations for countering resistance to content area reading focus on sensitizing content area teachers, preservice teachers, and content area professionals to the potency of school tradition and classroom culture in reinforcing resistance to change so that individuals will be able to make informed decisions about changing their current practices or, in the case of preservice teachers, planning their future curriculum and instruction. We have begun to do this by collaborating with secondary teachers in an attempt to understand the complexities of schooling, teaching, and learning in which reading is embedded (e.g., Dillon, O'Brien, & Ruhl, 1988, 1989; O'Brien, Dillon, Ruhl, & Volkmann, 1990; Stewart, 1989).

Qualifications aside, our advocacy of content reading strategies is based on the belief that we can equip teachers with better ways to foster students' learnings from text materials. Through content area reading, practicing teachers may allow students a more active role in their learning; they may also confront the complex decisionmaking involved in restructuring lessons (Conley, 1987). In addition, content area reading approaches represent a call for prospective teachers to give pause not only to what they will do when they assume their own classrooms but to question what practicing teachers are doing. Preservice teachers who extol the instructional logic and intent of content reading, are likely to simply conform to the actions of their practicing peers unless they confront issues of resistance related to institutionalized practices (O'Brien & Stewart, 1990).

Below we offer a framework for restructuring content area reading courses based on our qualitative work exploring resistance (O'Brien, 1988; O'Brien & Stewart, 1990; Stewart & O'Brien, 1989). Following the framework we draw some broad conclusions about content reading courses and change projects embedded within the culture of secondary schools.

## **Framework for Restructuring Content Area Reading Courses**

Popular content area reading textbooks typically devote the first portion of their overall content to the presentation of a rationale for content reading instruction. This rationale often includes discussion of the common misconceptions that we discussed previously. These texts then present specific instructional strategies, making some attempt to show how techniques can be adapted to a variety of subject areas. Such a format, given the duration of a semester length course, dictates that misconceptions be cleared, resistance be countered, and attitudes toward content reading be altered in a period of about two instructional weeks, with the remainder of a course devoted to the presentation, modeling, and application of various instructional techniques. Given the limited time frame of typical courses, we believe that less time be spent demonstrating and modeling strategies and more time showing how instructional frameworks associated with content reading fit into the existing culture and curricula of secondary schools.

The following four components are suggestions of possible topics we have generated for content reading professionals to explore with practicing teachers or students in preservice content reading courses. These topics call attention to how an individual teacher's instructional framework must be weighed against a backdrop of the broader curriculum and culture of secondary schools. One approach we have taken with moderate success is to discuss these issues at the beginning of content area courses, augmenting discussions with articles and book chapters addressing each component and using illustrative videotape from a variety of secondary content area classroom settings.

1. *The predominant organizational structure of secondary schools.* This component should include a brief overview of the constraints imposed by the typical organization of the school and the work day with an emphasis on the effect these constraints have on how teachers teach and how they use the tools of their trade (e.g., Sizer, 1985). Moreover, the reasons for the immutability of this organizational structure should be discussed (e.g., Cuban, 1986).
2. *Curricular fragmentation and tracking.* Preservice teachers should have an opportunity to read about and discuss the explicit and implicit purposes of tracking and how it compromises the methods, materials, and management techniques they use with students (e.g., Franzak, 2006; Oakes, 1985; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986). Discussions on this topic would include the dichotomization of so-called academic and vocational curricula and the way tracking accounts for individual differences among students.
3. *Explicit and implicit curricula.* Middle and secondary level teachers are preoccupied with the explicit curriculum—getting through the prescribed content (Bullough, 1987; Goodlad, 1984; Sedlack et al., 1986; Sizer, 1985); they are often so preoccupied with covering the prescribed curriculum that they fail to reflect on why the curriculum is prescribed and how certain topics are judged as more important than others. To address this fixation, they should discuss how the present curriculum came about, what constitutes knowledge, and who defines knowledge (Giroux, 1988). Preservice teachers should also discuss the complexity of this implicit curriculum, its power, its sanctions, and its impact on what they

are willing to teach, how they are willing to teach it, and to what extent they are willing to revolt against it in the interest of innovation.

4. *Subject subcultural values.* All content subject areas are defined by sets of values—subcultural values that give them definition and uniqueness within the larger school culture (Ball & Lacey, 1984; Dillon & O'Brien, 2004; Kozol, 2005; O'Brien & Stewart, 1990). For example, in the field of vocational education both preservice and inservice vocational education teachers characterize their discipline as a hands-on discipline that requires demonstration and is so rapidly changing that print materials cannot keep pace and, therefore, are not an efficient means of instruction. Similarly, science educators present a case for why discovery learning is more potent than text-based instruction, also contending that texts cannot keep pace with rapidly advancing scientific and technical knowledge. Finally, even teachers in text-based disciplines like English, although recognizing the importance of reading, do not always concede that some students cannot read with the comprehension necessary to understand literature.

Within the realm of content reading instruction, both preservice and inservice teachers are faced with pedagogical choices that are often incompatible with subject subcultural values. They need to be apprised of how these subcultural values impact what will be taught and how it will be taught regardless of the pedagogical soundness and the relevance of the instruction. In short, preservice teachers need to be equipped with content reading pedagogy that they can assimilate into their existing subject subcultures; however, they also should be willing to try new ideas that may not be acceptable with the subculture in which they assume membership as beginning teachers. Further, practicing teachers need to examine how membership in a particular subject subculture restricts unnecessarily the instructional choices they make.

As content reading professionals, we must acknowledge that we have our own biases bred in our own subculture. These biases, perhaps perceived by content area teachers as a sort of reading chauvinism, may give some sustenance to the misunderstanding that we are asking all teachers to assume an additional burden when we ask them to be teachers of reading.

Our suggestions for modifications to content area reading courses are not comprehensive. They are, however, ones that are the most strongly warranted by our research, underpinned by sociological and anthropological perspectives on schooling. Perhaps we leave content reading professionals with the feeling that the problem of resistance cannot be adequately addressed in content area reading courses. This is probably true. Nevertheless, although the issue of resistance may be complex, we believe we have had moderate success in helping to define it so content reading professionals can address issues that might have previously gone unaddressed. Moreover, both our research and the ever-present discussion of resistance in the literature point to the dangers inherent in a narrow perspective on content area reading that excluded global issues of school culture, teaching and learning that help to explain why teachers resist what we propose in content area reading courses.

## Conclusions

Content area reading courses and inservice change projects must address more global issues of resistance to change within the immutable structure of secondary schools. Teachers and inservice teachers must confront the culture of schooling; moreover, they must examine their own institutionalized beliefs associated with the subculture of the content discipline to which they belong. We believe that this institutional confrontation must take place as a precursor to having preservice and inservice teachers confront misconceptions about content area reading. We must continue to work with teachers as they confront their misconceptions about content reading instruction, but we emphasize that discussing misconceptions is a necessary but not sufficient approach to countering resistance. In short, a broader rationale for content area reading is in order.

Finally, university-based professionals must gain a more intimate knowledge of why teachers teach the way they do, depending on teachers to inform them about their individual rationales and goals, so that university personnel may more effectively work with teachers to change practices teachers want to change. Further, in order to counter resistance to change, university-based content reading professionals must have a better understanding of beginning teachers' initial encounters with the workplace—encounters that shape what they do and inhibit approaches they have learned in preservice courses. Such information needs to be shared with preservice teachers. Likewise, more research is needed to validate or invalidate the transfer of many pedagogical approaches university-based persons recommend to teachers from a variety of subject disciplines requiring that those teachers make complex decisions and changes in their routines to be successful with newly-acquired pedagogy. In addition, we must continue to strive to gain a better understanding of teachers' attitudes and practices relating to reading in the day-to-day enterprise of teaching.

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