

MEMO SAMPLE

To: All Certified Wilson Elementary Teachers

From: Suzanne Kraft, Learning Support Teacher

Re: Content Area Reading

Date: April 23, 2010

Purpose of Memo

I recently completed a course through UW-Stout entitled, *Reading in the Content Areas*. The knowledge I have gained through this course will assist us as we work towards our goal of integrating more science and social studies into our reading and writing instructional blocks. Throughout this memo, I will take you through my journey in the course. My hope is that many of you are able to take a piece of this memo and implement it within your own classroom to increase student achievement. Any staff member, who is interested in the course, can see me at any time for more information!

The Beginning

When I first began the course, my strengths in teaching students how to read in content areas revolved around three points: text layout, prior knowledge, and purpose. I knew that non-fiction texts are often composed of factual information, multisyllabic technical words, and unique structures that often revolve around higher level thinking skills such as cause/effect, compare-contrast, or sequencing. Therefore, I always spent a lot of time with students previewing the text layout, so they could more easily read the text.

Along with text layout, I also knew that building background knowledge was important in content area reading. Without enough background knowledge, texts and articles are often too difficult for students to comprehend. Finally, setting a purpose for students as they read was also a strategy I was well versed in using. As I always set a purpose for every lesson I teach, it was just second nature to always make students aware of what I was expecting them to take away from the text reading they were to encounter.

As you know, we are all life-long learners in the field of education. Therefore, I knew that I needed to strengthen my knowledge in the area of content area reading. One of the course activities prompted us to create our own K-W-L chart for what we wanted to learn during our eleven module journey. I originally developed six questions I was looking for answers to, but eliminated one of the questions towards the end of the course. The five content area reading inquiries I had were:

- Many of my struggling readers are unmotivated. What type of strategies can I use to keep them motivated to read?

- The current vocabulary strategies I use in my classroom are not always effective for all students. What other types of research based vocabulary strategies can I try to implement to differentiate for all learners?
- I struggle with students not being able to go back and “find the answer” to literal comprehension questions in text. How can I change the way I approach teaching literal comprehension in the classroom?
- Making inferences is very abstract for my students. What processes can I take my students through so that they can develop their ability to make inferences more easily and accurately?
- I have used graphic organizers to help students summarize what they have read. However, students often have a difficult time transferring notes from the organizers into complete sentences for summaries. Is there a way to bridge these two tools together to make each one more effective?

My Quest for Answers

During the course, I experienced many valuable concepts and ideas. One of the most significant concepts I have incorporated into my instruction is to always have students interact with the text before, during, and after reading. My past practices had students interact with the text prior to reading only. In order for students to be successful in content reading, I needed to expand their interaction with the text.

Before reading, they must draw on their prior knowledge, set a purpose, and anticipate questions. During reading, they need a strategy that will keep them engaged in their purpose for reading. After reading, students must be given the opportunity to reflect, synthesize ideas across sources, and make further interpretations. As I proceeded through this course, I recognized that these components are what keep all students motivated to read content area text regardless of their reading abilities. Text interaction before, during, and after is also what students must encounter in order to make effective meaning, both literal and inferential, out of content text.

The second most significant concept I have incorporated into my instruction is giving students strategies specifically designed for non-fiction patterns, such as cause/effect. I have seen our students make significant gains on measures of reading comprehension versus other conventional instruction during my instruction with this practice. If we begin to teach our students the eight most frequently used informational text patterns: cause/effect, compare/contrast, concept/definition, goal/action/outcome, problem/solution, proposition/support, sequence, and description, our students’ reading comprehension and writing skills will increase. They will be able to organize their writing to match a real pattern and comprehend patterns authors use when reading. Students will struggle less with transferring their graphic organizer notes to actual paragraphs! We must expand this practice to our classrooms!

The best part of the course was that I got to field test a vast amount of graphic organizers and instructional strategies specifically geared towards content area reading. Here are two of my favorite field tests strategies/graphic organizers. I can’t wait to share more with you!

We work with many impoverished and impaired word learners; students who lack vocabulary development because of their ethnicity, socio-economic status, and/or disability. I found the student action words (SAW) activity and graphic organizer to be a great tool for vocabulary development. It is a motivational strategy because students get to self-select the words they will study and it causes students to remember vocabulary terms because they create their own personal dictionary.

Another strategy I found to be active and engaging was the half-asked questions used in conjunction with the question and answer relationship (QAR) strategy. Students use sentence starter to generate their own questions about what they want to learn about during content area reading lessons. This strategy allows students to work on literal and inferential questions of varying degrees of difficulty. Instruction can also be scaffolded so that students can learn how to develop questions on their own without the half-asked question starters.

Even though the course is over, it will continue to impact my instruction on a daily basis. There are many graphic organizers and strategies that I have not been able to implement in my instruction. Because we know that “one-size does not fit all,” I have to keep experimenting and reflecting with the content area strategies and graphics organizers I have not tried. I cannot, and you cannot, rely on the old stand-bys we are familiar and comfortable with. In today’s educational context, where no child is to be left behind, every content area teacher has a responsibility to continually help students successfully and productively access, read, and understand texts. We cannot be complacent!

Things I Still Want to Know

Though I found the answers to all of my questions I developed during this course, I still have a concern about content area reading in our building. How can I support you and reassure you that we can use content area subjects to teach reading effectively? I truly believe students can meet content area benchmarks set forth by the district and state while teaching content reading at the same time! As we move to fully integrating science and social studies within our reading block, I will continue to search for answers to your questions and concerns.

Overall Impact on My Instruction/Training and Our School/Organization

I have many resources at hand: two wonderful textbooks from the course, a wealth of content area strategies and graphic organizers for all ability levels, numerous professional websites that support content area reading, a communication arts curriculum director at the district level we can contact, and a support network of other learning support teachers just like me.

We are ready and able to take on this task! Let’s work together as we implement our vision of integrated social studies and science during the reading block! With the support of each other and our abundance of resources, there is nothing we cannot tackle!