



---

## Literacy Across the Curriculum in Urban Schools

Teaching reading across the curriculum requires a culturally responsive pedagogy.

**Leadership Compass** » Vol. 5, No. 3, Spring 2008

by Vivian G. Johnson and Jonella A. Mongo

“Reading in math ... why?”

“I don’t have time to read aloud! Plus my students are too old to be read to!”

“I’m a science teacher, not a reading teacher.”

We have heard it all. As colleagues in the field of education for more than 50 collective years, we have often worked together on staff development that focuses on content area reading. The goal has been to provide ongoing and intense in-service training on best practices for English language arts, as well as best practices for content-area teachers in small urban districts. To improve student achievement, teachers must view themselves as teachers of reading and possess the skills necessary to address the difficult task of teaching expository text.

We have identified concepts related to the reading process, the foundations of reading instruction, and research-based strategies to support content teachers in implementing literacy practices that will help cultivate schoolwide change. This article highlights strategies teachers can use to integrate reading in the content areas from a culturally relevant perspective.

According to Horning (2007), “Reading Across the Curriculum should mean that readers come to understand the reading process in ways that improve their reading activity.” This statement makes it clear that the reading process must be taught with an understanding that reading is applicable in all subject areas and should not be relegated to textbooks only. With this in mind, it is imperative that teachers and administrators understand what it means to read—that the reader must construct meaning from text, understand the foundations of literacy instruction (phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) as outlined by the National Reading Panel (2000), and understand how these influence reading at all levels.

Instruction in content areas such as mathematics, science, and social studies typically relies on textbooks as the reading source, yet engagement and comprehension continue to hinder literacy achievement. Textbooks lack relevancy for some students, which is a major concern in urban schools. Tatum (2005) notes that a culturally responsive approach to literacy teaching can lead to increased student achievement in all content areas. Efforts to accomplish this will require teachers to use “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse learners to make learning more appropriate and effective for them” (Gay, 2000). These teachers, according to Ladson-Billings (1992), use “cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” and recognize culturally responsive pedagogy as zones of proximal development (Lee, 2007). With culturally responsive pedagogy as a foundation for content teaching, integrating reading across the curriculum is easily facilitated.

### **Successful Reading Strategies that Support Content Learning**

Proficient reading skills are essential to learning mathematics, science, and social studies concepts. Teachers of content knowledge must also think of themselves, in the broad sense, as teachers of reading (Cramer, 2003; Reed, 2004). A variety of prereading, reading, and after-reading strategies must be accessible to content teachers to support students’ development as independent, strategic, and engaged readers of expository text.

The strategies below are meant to help all students to successfully transfer reading skills to other content areas, but they are particularly useful for urban students. Structured learning experiences that promote creative and critical thinking, provide opportunities for substantial

discourse, encourage deep knowledge, and make connections to the world as they know it are critical for these students. Cramer (2003) and Reed (2004) maintain that the more a teacher knows about literacy teaching, the more effective he or she will be at teaching content. The careful selection of reading materials also must be a priority of content teachers (Cramer, 2003; Booth & Rowsell, 2002).

Prereading Strategies	Reading Strategies	After-Reading Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activate prior knowledge;</li> <li>• Use culturally relevant materials to build background knowledge;</li> <li>• Use picture books and other literature to introduce concepts;</li> <li>• Support connecting knowledge and building schemata using graphic organizers; and</li> <li>• Make predictions about text.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconsider and confirm predictions about texts;</li> <li>• Ask specific questions;</li> <li>• Restate or summarize information in their own words; and</li> <li>• Outline, highlight, and draw on their own background knowledge.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss, elaborate, and clarify text;</li> <li>• Apply information they have read;</li> <li>• Use implicit questions related to text; and</li> <li>• Complete related projects, learning log, and retellings through poetry, lyrics, raps or other research activities.</li> </ul>

Using a thematic approach that incorporates culturally relevant literature, artifacts, graphic organizers, and other media to activate and build on urban students' background knowledge is vital. Prereading experiences that focus on content and relevancy will actively engage and empower students. Like the master of ceremonies or announcer who hypes the audience for a rap star's entrance, the teacher must set the stage for reading complex texts. The goal of reading is to make meaning, so teachers must remember what students take away from the text is based in part on what they bring to the text, including their ability to reason (Cramer, 2003).

Before and during reading assignments, teachers should encourage students to make and confirm predictions by asking questions to help them elaborate and refine their thinking. As the text is read, the teacher should plan to have students stop at strategic points to confirm or reconsider predictions and to cite supporting evidence from the text. Most students have seen popular television courtroom shows and can surmise right away if the defendant has not presented enough evidence to win his or her case. They sometimes enjoy predicting the outcome of the case before all the witnesses have completed their testimony. During reading strategies, foster this same attention to detail as students move through the text. Teachers should address difficulties while students are reading as much as possible. Occasionally, you may want to come back to an issue as a follow-up activity. Unlike the celebrity judges, the teacher's focus is not on what is right or wrong in terms of the predictions, but rather how students used their creative and critical thinking skills.

After a reading activity, it is important for students to have an opportunity to discuss, elaborate, and clarify key concepts (Cramer, 2003). New information should be related to real world experiences so students are able to synthesize, analyze, and evaluate the content. Teachers, of course, should ask appropriate questions through interviews, panel discussions, debates, or simulations to stimulate thoughtful discourse, promote higher-order thinking, and strengthen deep knowledge.

Again, it is critical to draw on students' cultural background, prior knowledge, and ability to make connections to the world as they know it. These "text to text," "text to self," and "text to world" connections are easily done through the use of Venn diagrams, cause and effect charts, text study organizers, and flow charts that help students make sense of the text and represent their ideas as they recognize key relationships among concepts. A poetic rendition or rap lyric might be a way for students to recap what was read in their own words and in their own way.

The ultimate goal for reading across the curriculum is student academic achievement in a school climate that understands and respects cultural diversity. For pedagogical practices to be successful, they must be implemented and supported through professional development with a community of learners who sincerely believe that success is possible. Tatum (2005) states that “such a community cannot be built without people believing in it so deeply so truly that the belief becomes contagious.” The results of this belief are likely to lead to more engaged students reading across the curriculum.

### References

Booth, D., & Rowsell, J. (2002). *The literacy principal: Leading, supporting and assessing reading and writing initiatives*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Cramer, R. (2003). *The language arts: A balanced approach to teaching reading, writing, listening, talking, and thinking*. Boston: Pearson.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research & practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Horning, A. S. (2007). *Reading across the curriculum as the key to student success. Across the disciplines, 4*. Retrieved January 2, 2008, from <http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/horning2007.cfm>.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1992). Reading between the lines and beyond the pages: A culturally relevant approach to literacy teaching. *Theory Into Practice, 31*(4), 312-320.

Lee, C. (2007). *Literacy and culture-cultural conflicts in classroom practices, culturally responsive pedagogy as zones of proximal development*. Retrieved February 15, 2008 from <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2191/Literacy-Culture.html>.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Reed, B. (2004). Practical advice on reading across the curriculum. *Northwest Education, 10* (1), 1-3.

Tatum, A. (2005). *Teaching reading to black adolescent males: Closing the achievement gap*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

---

**Vivian G. Johnson** is an associate professor of education at Marygrove College in Detroit. Her e-mail address is [vjohnson0@comcast.net](mailto:vjohnson0@comcast.net).

**Jonella A. Mongo** is an adjunct faculty member at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, and is the former superintendent for curriculum and professional development, Highland Park, Michigan, school district. Her e-mail address is [jmongo@oakland.edu](mailto:jmongo@oakland.edu).

#### On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. How do we assess the needs of our diverse students?
2. Where and how is reading instruction usually conducted at our school?
3. What strategies can we use to transfer reading skills across the content areas?
4. How do we know what is culturally relevant to our students and how can we find out?
5. What are some best practices for culturally responsive reading across the curriculum?