

*If you're not interested in teaching for understanding, don't even bother working to improve student reading.*  
—Vicki Jacobs, Harvard University

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## READING TO LEARN IN VERMONT

**Nick Boke**

### **A new statewide initiative doffs its hat to Mortimer Adler**

After more than three years of meetings and workshops and trial runs, Vermont's Strategic Reading Initiative is set to go. All that remains is some last-minute tidying up. We just changed the project's name, for example, after recognizing that calling it "Reading Beyond Grade 3" might be a turn off to some middle and high school students. Quite a few of us were reluctant to give up a title that actually described what the program was about, but we acquiesced. After fleshing out the week long summer institute we'll use to set everything in motion, we're making last-minute budget adjustments. There's some staffing to be taken care of, and a few other minor issues remain unresolved.

But basically, we're all set. We've come a long way since early 1998, when the state commissioner of education authorized a small group of people to investigate Vermont's low reading scores. The English Language Arts New Standards Reference Exam indicated that our 8th and 10th graders weren't very good at understanding what they read, to say nothing of their even weaker abilities to analyze and interpret the reading. Then, in the winter of 1999, almost 100 reading specialists, content-area teachers, higher education folks, special educators, literacy and curriculum coordinators, principals, superintendents, and high school students met to discuss the question "What do good readers know and do?"

That group drafted a white paper on the subject and circulated it for comment among hundreds of other Vermont educators. I passed the final document along to the state board of education, and in January 2001, the board approved an effort to attack the problem.

A steering committee was established under the shared leadership of the state department of education and the Vermont Reads Institute. The committee elaborated on and modified the previous year's work and reviewed the literature—from the International Reading Association's Commission on Adolescent Literacy to the findings of local scholars and the conclusions of the National Reading Panel. This past September, the steering committee came up with a plan, which it circulated for comment throughout the reading community in Vermont. The plan was revised, recirculated, and now—with the blessing of two subsequent commissioners of education—is about to bear fruit.

The Vermont Strategic Reading Initiative calls for a three-pronged attack on the problem. First, we'll work intensively for three years with a half-dozen upper-elementary and secondary schools that have already committed themselves to improving adolescents' literacy skills. Second, we'll work with a group of local and regional literacy leaders, supporting their efforts to foster change in their schools and districts, while providing them the opportunity to learn from one another. Third, we'll create and provide professional development and technical-assistance opportunities in response to requests from local schools and districts.

At the end of each year, we'll review what we've done, revise it, and publish and disseminate what we've learned. The initiative's central goal is to determine the most effective and efficient ways of helping students beyond grade 3 become independent readers, strategic readers, reflective readers—people who can understand, analyze, and interpret the material they're asked to read in school.

We're ready to go. State funding is nailed down. Supporting grants have been received. Fees have been established for the various levels of participation. The site for the summer institute has been reserved. Materials are being revised. The cadre of reading consultants is being trained.

*Now comes the hard part: keeping in mind what it is we're really trying to do.*

It will be easy to forget. There are lots of ways we can lose our way, even while it might look as if we're right on track.

The simplest way to go off track would be to think that our job is merely to teach content—area teachers to teach reading strategies—to think, in other words, that supporting local mandates for every teacher in a school to be trained to teach think-alouds. ques-

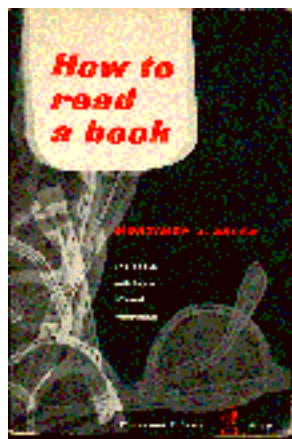
tion-answer relationships, fix-up strategies, and all the rest is enough. Such an outcome is certainly an important component of what we need to do, but it's not, in itself, enough to aim for.

There's another level of mistake we might make. We could think our job is simply to ensure that all students' scores on the reading components of the New Standards Reference Exam rise to or above grade level. In other words, that our goal is merely to teach to the test, and be satisfied when students have performed to the standard. While accomplishing this is important, it is, like loading up the kids with reading strategies, still not enough.

So if the point of all this work is not to provide students with reading strategies, or to enable them to demonstrate their ability to understand, analyze, and interpret text as measured by our state-wide assessment, what is it?

The larger goal has been here from the start. I was first made aware of it by the keynote speaker at our first meeting in January 1999. Harvard University educator Vicki Jacobs, who has been involved with adolescent literacy for many years, began her remarks with this simple statement: "If you're not interested in teaching for understanding, don't even bother working to improve student reading." I, like everyone else in the audience, nodded in assent.

But the longer I've worked on the project—the more classrooms I've visited, the more administrators I've spoken with, the more workshops I've led—the more I've been struck by the significance of that statement. And only a few days ago, I really began to understand its relevance to the work at hand.



The late Mortimer J. Adler brought it all together for me. A colleague in the project had sent me a copy of Adler's 1940 work *How to Read a Book*, and when I unearthed it in my stack of reading material and began studying it, I realized something: Most of the excellent work done in recent years to examine the problem of adolescent literacy is redundant. Adler hit it all.

Mortimer Adler reminds us that reading is always interactive, and the more active, the better the reading. He reminds us that since reading gets harder as one progresses through school, every teacher must learn how to help students apply comprehension strategies to the material they're asking them to read.

He reminds us of the crucial importance of a strong vocabulary, of the need to hone the reader's interpretive skills, and of the fact that some things can be understood only after several rereadings.

Finally, Adler reminds us of what's really going on when we read:

*The art of reading, in short, includes all the same skills that are involved in the art of discovery: keenness of observation, readily available memory, range of imagination, and, of course, a reason trained in analysis and reflection.*

And this is what we might forget, as we implement the three strands of our reading initiative. We might forget that the reason we're doing all this is to help students learn to learn better—to gather information independently and to become capable of thinking about the information they've gathered. We're trying to get them, as the saying goes, to "read to learn" after grade 3.

This raises some pretty fundamental questions about what currently goes on in our classrooms. Ruth Schoenbach and her colleagues at WestEd have described the current situation in many classrooms succinctly in *Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms*:

*The strategy of teaching content without having students read or by asking them to read only small amounts becomes a self-perpetuating instructional practice. When students are unprepared to approach reading assignments independently, many teachers give up any thought of holding them accountable for reading. Then, because these students do not have to read in some subject-area classes, they resist expectations that they will do so in other classes. Finally, the teachers of other classes begin to give up their expectations that students will read academic texts independently.*

In other words, teachers replace independent reading with some type of lecture, whether this comes in the form of an oral presentation by the teacher about the material "covered" in the reading, or by way of a pseudo-Socratic "discussion" of the material, or through guided small-group cooperative-learning activities.

I use the word "lecture" to describe these substitutes for reading very intentionally. The word comes from the Latin *lectura*. It means "a reading."

As an academic activity, the lecture came into being before the advent of the printing press. It was developed as a means of transmitting information, since it was not feasible for all students to have access to written material about the subject at hand. The professor read the lecture (sorry for the redundancy) because that was the only way book-less students could get the information.

With the advent of the printing press and the gradual democratization of the availability of print in subsequent centuries, the lecture came to fill another role. The teacher could use it to analyze and interpret the material the students had just read. The student would read, and the teacher would extend the knowledge provided in the reading. Students, thus, had two opportunities to, as Adler puts it, use the "skills that are involved in the act of discovery": first, as they read on their own, and second, as they listened to the lecture about what they had read.

But that's not what's going on in most of our classrooms today. Today, most lecture-like activities either duplicate what the students were supposed to have read, or replace the act of reading entirely.

The vast majority of American educators have, unwittingly and with the best of intentions, destroyed their students' incentive to read difficult material. We have either rendered it redundant or eliminated it entirely. We have replaced it with an activity that was developed because there wasn't enough printed matter to go around.

We seem to have decided that telling students the information about the subject—much of which is in textbooks, articles, and a variety of other readily available sources—is all that matters. We tell them this material so that they can memorize it: the causes of the Civil War, the process of mitosis, the function of alliteration in poetry, the structure of the Pythagorean theorem.

We tell them these things, rather than enabling them to introduce themselves to information about these things on their own. In doing so, we eliminate the possibility that the students and the teacher could use their time together to dig in to the information: to analyze it, to compare it with other information, to question its validity and wonder at its implications. We have decided that it's more important that students be given and asked to retain this information for a specific length of time before they'll be tested on it than that they be provided with the skills they'll need to acquire this and subse-

quent information on their own. This all adds up to a situation in which we are not—by a long shot—teaching for understanding.

So what, then, should be the goal of our work with the Vermont Strategic Reading Initiative, as we try to get more and more teachers in all subject areas to pay attention to reading beyond grade 3? Do we want students to learn how to apply the full range of reading strategies? Of course. Do we want them to demonstrate that they can successfully understand, analyze, and interpret grade-appropriate material on statewide assessments? Of course.

But what we really want is to transform Vermont's upper-elementary, middle, and high school classrooms. We want to provide teachers with the insight and skills they need to help their students understand and contemplate the material they are asked to read. By doing this, the teachers will enable students to come to class with the two things that are necessary for real learning to take place.


First, they will have new information. New information about mitosis, or Native American cultures, or fractions, or religious symbolism in art. They will have read this information on their own, and will possess the skills necessary to understand and analyze what they have read.

Second, they will have questions about the new information. Having the skills to understand and analyze what they read, they will also have the skills to be clear about what they're not understanding, and about where their analysis may fall short.

How does this transform the classroom? Information presented in class will be new information, extending the facts and concepts introduced in the material the students will have intelligently read. If there is lecture, it will be lecture that provides information and analysis not present in the reading. When there is discussion, it will not be a dull rehash of the reading material, but will be based on genuine questions posed by thoughtful readers—students and teachers alike.

At the risk of being overly simplistic, enabling teachers to provide their students with the skills they need to successfully understand and analyze what they read will basically double the amount of learning that can take place in the typical classroom.

If the Vermont Strategic Reading Initiative succeeds, several years from now our upper-elementary, middle, and high school class-

rooms will be very different places from what many of them are today. Teachers will help their students learn how to learn from the materials they ask them to read. As a result, students will become more capable of learning through independent reading in all subject areas. And, as a final result, a heck of a lot more learning will take place in a heck of a lot of classrooms. All because the classrooms will be filled with students who know how to read a book. 

*Nick Boke is the co-director with Geof Hewitt of the Vermont Strategic Reading Initiative. He is a former director of programs at the Vermont Center for the Book*

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

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