

Introducing Newspapers in Developmental Reading Classes

ROBERTA KARSTADT
KEAN UNIVERSITY

VICTORIA M. REY
KEAN UNIVERSITY

Newspapers are an effective educational and motivational tool in developmental reading classes. However, many students are unfamiliar with newspapers and read them infrequently. In order to foster newspaper reading and familiarize the college freshmen enrolled in their developmental reading classes with newspapers, the writers of this article developed and successfully used the seven strategies presented in this article.

“I hate my textbook!” Jason’s (not his real name) face clouded when asked how he was progressing in his psychology class. Unfortunately, Jason is not unique. Many of the college freshmen enrolled in the developmental reading classes taught by the writers of this article share his negative reaction to the textbooks they use in both their academic and developmental reading courses. Our students frequently complain that their textbooks are boring and hard to comprehend.

We reviewed pertinent literature to identify a better means of engaging our students. The literature suggested that newspapers are an effective educational tool and identified several psychological and cognitive factors that make them appealing to students. Based on our findings, we decided to incorporate newspaper reading in our developmental reading classes.

Academic Benefits

The literature suggests that newspaper reading enhances students’ academic growth. Several researchers found that newspaper reading helps students build their knowledge base and acquire the background information they need to succeed in school while preparing them for their future roles as workers and citizens (DeRoche, 2004; Knowlton, 2004; Pescatore, 2007).

A number of researchers also reported that newspaper reading strengthens students’ literacy skills (Braunger and Lewis, 2006;

Davis, 1997; Vockell and Cusick, 1995) and their achievement in academic courses (Allan and Miller, 2005; Newspaper Association of America, 2007). Robinson (2004) adds that newspaper reading enables many students to see timely applications of principles they study in their academic courses. McGrath and Hamer (2007) suggest that educators can facilitate transfer by having students compare and contrast two short newspaper articles that present two sides of an issue that is relevant to them.

The Appeal of Newspapers

It has been suggested that newspapers appeal to students for a variety of reasons. Street (2002) observes that choice is inherent in newspaper reading, noting that students relish the opportunity to select items that interest them. Worthy (1998) adds that newspapers can accommodate students' rapidly changing interests and tastes. Cheyney (1992) concludes that students find newspapers motivating because they present information and introduce issues that are relevant to their own lives. He notes, "Poor readers are more apt to carry newspapers—and read them—than textbooks written at their reading level" and that newspapers motivate students "to find out about events in the world and how they might be affected by what's going on" (p. IX).

Street (2002) also contends that the reading levels of newspapers are generally below those of college textbooks, thus making them "a less intimidating source of information" (p. 131) for struggling readers. Researchers assessing the readability of a broad spectrum of newspapers support Street's contention. Stasz and Schlagal (1994) report that many newspapers are written at about the sixth grade level. McCormick (2007) notes that readability levels vary from newspaper to newspaper and also from section to section within the same newspaper, ranging from approximately sixth to twelfth grade. After assessing a variety of business news articles, Jung (2003) reported an 11.8 grade level for the *New York Times* and a 10.5 level for the *Wall Street Journal*.

Allan and Miller (2005) contend that many students like the writing style and format used in newspapers, noting that students generally prefer the short selections characteristic of newspaper articles. The authors add that students find the graphics, photo-

graphs, and interviews presented in newspapers both interesting and useful in helping them gain a fuller understanding of the content. McCormick (2007) agrees that students respond positively to the shorter selections found in newspapers. In addition, she contends that many struggling students do not associate newspaper reading with the past failures many of them have encountered with their textbooks.

There is substantial agreement among researchers that students regard newspaper reading as a prestigious, adult activity (Belzer, 2006; Erickson, 1995; Harvey, 2002; Kortner, 1988; Nickse, Speicher, and Buchek, 1994; Taylor, 2006). The widespread perception of newspaper reading as an adult activity predisposes students at all levels of reading ability to accept the use of newspapers in both their reading classes and academic courses. This positive reaction is especially true for struggling, academically underprepared students who experience difficulty with their textbooks but are often embarrassed to read simplified textbooks or materials intended for younger readers.

Lack of Familiarity

Despite substantial agreement that newspapers are an effective educational tool, several surveys and reports analyzing the public's newspaper reading habits indicate that many college-age students are unfamiliar with newspapers and read them infrequently. In a national survey of 1800 randomly selected subjects, Patterson (2007) found that only 16% of the 18 to 30 year old subjects claimed to read newspapers on a daily basis. In another survey, Edmonds (2007) reported that only 35% of the 18 to 24 year old subjects claimed to read a newspaper during an average week. A survey conducted by the Newspaper Association of America (2007) reported that newspaper reading by 18 to 24 year olds has declined steadily since 1964. After reviewing pertinent literature, the National Endowment for the Arts (2007) also noted a steady decline in newspaper reading among teens and college-age Americans. In light of students' widespread lack of familiarity with newspapers, McCormick (2007) warns that certain students may find it difficult to read them without help. Brandes (2008) and Stein (2004) agree that many students must be introduced to newspapers and taught

how to read them in order to use them effectively.

Strategies for Incorporating Newspapers in Reading Classes and Academic Courses

When we first introduced newspapers in our developmental reading classes, our students' reactions supported the findings in the surveys. Although they expressed positive reactions, it soon became obvious that many of our students had limited experience with newspapers and needed guidance to acquire basic familiarity with them. The remainder of this article describes seven strategies we developed and used throughout the semester that were successful in familiarizing our students with newspapers and fostering newspaper reading in our classes.

Newspapers and Me

The following strategy helps students examine and articulate their feelings about newspaper reading. Introduce this strategy by pointing out that people have different interests and experiences with newspapers. Describe one of your own early experiences with newspapers and encourage your students to share some of their experiences orally.

Point out that there are many other aspects of newspaper reading to examine. List the following suggestions as examples of areas they may want to explore. Explain that they may examine any area of newspaper reading that interests them, including, but not limited to, the items on the list.

1. Early newspaper reading experiences
2. How often they read newspapers
3. Which newspapers/sections they like to read
4. What they expect to learn by reading newspapers
5. How reading newspapers can help them academically
6. How reading newspapers can help them in their personal lives
7. Where and how they obtain newspapers
8. What they particularly like or dislike about reading newspapers

Have your students briefly freewrite about their own personal experiences and reflections. Emphasize that they will not be graded and encourage them to express their true reactions, negative as well as positive. When your students are finished writing, invite them to share their responses.

Have a Good Laugh: Read the Newspaper

Unfortunately, many students suffer from the misconception that all newspaper articles are dry and boring. To counter their negative mindset, collect and share a variety of humorous articles and encourage them to do the same. Articles about “dumb” criminals who lose their driver’s license or other forms of identification at crime scenes are perennial favorites, and students can sharpen their critical thinking skills by examining the factors that led to the perpetrators’ ultimate downfall. In addition to finding humorous articles in newspapers, students can obtain a variety of brief comical articles by keying in Strange News in their internet browser.

What’s In It for Me?

Use this strategy to demonstrate how newspaper reading can fulfill a variety of purposes. Begin by having students identify and discuss their current academic goals along with some of their personal and practical needs and interests. Point out that newspapers contain information that will be of value to them. Next, distribute copies of What’s In It for Me? (Appendix) and encourage students to identify items of interest. As a follow-up assignment, have them self-select and examine newspapers in order to collect articles and other features of value to share in class.

When and Where Can I Find It?

Bring in one week’s worth of daily editions of a particular newspaper. Have students examine the newspapers, noting how they are organized by section and day of the week. Point out that many newspapers print special-interest sections, such as science, health, decorating, cooking, weekend events, or expanded sports coverage on given days of the week. Explain that these sections frequently include items which can satisfy individual academic or

personal interests. As an example, explain that the Tuesday edition of *New York Times* includes a science section appropriate for students who are enrolled in science classes or who have a strong interest in the subject.

Have students (individually or in groups) choose newspapers of interest and track their content and organizational patterns for one week. At the end of the week, have them create charts or graphic organizers to show the type of information included in each section on a daily basis.

Types of Articles

Many students mistakenly assume that all newspaper articles are objective, factual accounts of important, timely situations and events as they are actually breaking or developing. While this may be true of many news articles, students can improve their critical thinking and comprehension skills by learning how to identify different types of articles.

List the following types of articles on the board and inform students that they can improve their reading skills and their performance in academic classes by learning how to identify and analyze each article type:

1. News Articles
2. Feature Articles
3. Studies
4. Profiles
5. Obituaries
6. Editorials
7. Columns
8. Letters-to-the Editor

Divide the class into groups. Have each group discuss what they already know about each type of article and then freewrite on the topic. Point out how articles differ according to their timeliness, the purpose for which they are written, the writer's objectivity or subjectivity and the characteristic writing pattern used to create them. After students have become familiar with the characteristics of each type of article, present each group with a packet of newspaper articles that include samples of each type of article. Have

students analyze and identify each type of article in their packet.

Going Beyond the Textbook in Academic Classes

The following strategy helps students expand their knowledge base and performance in academic classes. Prepare by building a collection of articles relevant to various academic areas. Since newspapers are virtual treasure troves of information relevant to different content areas, educators can easily build collections of articles by simply clipping and filing potentially useful articles whenever they read newspapers.

Introduce this strategy by pointing out that newspapers can supplement the information contained in textbooks and presented in academic classes. Emphasize the specific benefits to be gained by reading articles relevant to academic courses. Indicate that newspapers often

1. Are easier to understand than textbooks;
2. Present timely, up-to-date information;
3. Offer readers the opportunity to self-select items of interest;
4. Frequently present and develop ideas more fully than textbooks;
5. Present interesting, unusual topics;
6. Present opportunities to explore different points of view and examine controversial issues;
7. Introduce noteworthy people;
8. Expose readers to multicultural perspective on issues;
9. Present practical, as well as theoretical, information.

Bring in various types of newspaper articles which are relevant to your students' academic courses for them to examine. For a follow-up assignment, have them collect and share articles related to their own academic courses.

Preposterous Articles

Far too many students believe that everything printed in newspapers is the absolute, unvarnished truth. Build on the popularity of tabloids to develop students' critical reading skills. Dis-

tribute copies of an absolutely ridiculous tabloid article and have them identify statements and claims that fly in the face of common sense and their own prior knowledge of the subject. After students identify the outlandish statements in the article, encourage them to articulate the reasons the statements they selected are illogical.

Conclusion

Newspapers add excitement to the teaching of developmental reading and enable students to sharpen their reading and thinking skills. Unfortunately, many developmental students lack experience and familiarity with newspapers. The strategies for introducing newspapers presented in this article were successful in providing our students with the prerequisite background knowledge they needed to use newspapers to acquire information in their academic courses and personal lives.

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Appendix: What's In It for Me?

1. Find an article about something that happened close to where you live. (local news)
2. Find an article about something that happened far away from where you live. (state, regional, national, or international news)
3. Find an article with information that is relevant to one of your classes.
4. Find an article that deals with a controversial issue.
5. Find an article dealing with crime.
6. Find an article about people who live outside of the United States of America.
7. Find an article that makes you feel good.
8. Find an article that makes you angry.
9. Find an article that makes you sad or deals with a topic that worries you.
10. Find an article that deals with a topic that affects your life now or might affect your life in the future.
11. Find an article about education.