



Time for Building Background Knowledge: Scarcity or Scare?

By Donna Alvermann

Two days prior to writing this piece, I read with dismay that yet another large-scale government report (Pianta et al., 2007) has taken teachers to task—this time, ironically, for spending too much time on basic reading and math skills. According to the report, *Opportunities to Learn in America's Elementary Classrooms*, teachers are spending insufficient time on science, social studies, reasoning, and problem solving. “Little wonder,” I heard myself mutter, as I read further. It seems that in fifth grade, for example, only 24% of teachers’ instructional time is focused on science or social studies, compared to 62% on literacy or math. Although reports that shed light on real-time instructional practices are needed, in fact welcomed, this particular one seems harsh, especially given the current emphasis on accountability in reading and math under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation.

Nonetheless, I opted to open with this rather disturbing report because it points to a situation that has worried me since the inception of NCLB. That is, with the increased emphasis on basic reading and math in the lower grades, how could anyone not have foreseen the impact such emphasis will likely have on students’ background knowledge in science and social studies at the middle and high school levels? The contexts for content area learning are undeniably important, as Moore (1996) demonstrated in an in-depth synthesis of the qualitative research on strategy instruction more than a decade ago. Teachers working within contexts that are conducive to learning provide students with adequate background information and relevant hands-on experience as a means of preparing them to read a textbook, view a video, listen to a tape, or search the Web for related content (Alexander and Jetton, 2000). They also look for ways to integrate reading, writing, reasoning, and problem solving because they know each of these processes reinforces the other and can lead to improved comprehension and retention of course content.

Not surprisingly, the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) found similar support for these integrated processes in the experimental and quasi-experimental research literature on comprehension instruction, as did a recent review of the literature on effective reading instruction in classrooms where regularly-assigned content area teachers, not a team of researchers from the outside, taught reading strategies within the context of ongoing curricula (Alvermann, Fitzgerald, and Simpson, 2006). The strategies teachers taught were often embedded in larger efforts aimed at establishing and maintaining collaborative learning environments, teaching for conceptual learning, and connecting youth’s knowledge and experiences across time and space. In keeping with the findings from Langer’s (2001) large-scale study of the characteristics of exemplary literacy instruction, effective middle and high school teachers in the Alvermann, Fitzgerald, and Simpson synthesis of the literature encouraged students to work together to develop deep conceptual understandings of subject matter texts and to make real-world connections between old and new knowledge across the curriculum.

What this body of research does not provide, however, is an in-depth look at how young people may acquire background knowledge from interacting with information available on the Web and in multimedia formats that do not privilege print. With few exceptions, researchers interested in studying young people’s academic literacies have worked in classrooms where the curriculum is primarily print driven and necessarily constrained by school-based norms for teaching and learning. Thus, it remains unclear as to whether any attempt at engaging youth in reasoning and problem-solving activities using symbol systems outside print-centric contexts can compensate for what seems to be increasingly scarce in schools these days—time for building background knowledge in content areas that require not only basic skills in reading and math, but also reasoning and problem solving, such as those learned in science and social studies.

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Opportunities to Learn in America's Elementary Classrooms:
<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/summary/315/5820/1795>

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