RASE Special Issue Article

Providing the Context for Intentional Learning

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This article is written in response to Sharon Derry's article "Remediating Academic Difficulties Through Strategy Training: The Acquisition of Useful Knowledge." The features of effective strategy instruction, to which Derry refers, are illustrated by examining the nature of the decisions the teacher confronts; specifically, determining the purposes of instruction, the context in which instruction occurs, and the roles of the teacher and students in instruction.

I RECENTLY OBSERVED a resource room teacher working with two fifth graders, identified as learning disabled. The children had a workbook page that was entitled, "Studying main ideas and details in paragraphs." The page consisted of 10 brief, unrelated paragraphs. From each paragraph there was a word deleted. The children were to read ahead and complete the cloze task by choosing the best alternative of three possible choices. The teacher introduced the page by telling the students that they would be studying main ideas and details in paragraphs. The teacher completed the first item by reading the paragraph aloud; he then read each of the possible choices for the deleted word and asked the children to help him select the correct one. The children selected the first option, which happened to be the correct one. Without further ado, the teacher suggested that the children work together to complete the page, and he would help them with those words they found difficult. The children painfully began decoding the next paragraph, up to the deleted word. They then examined their three choices. Tentatively, one child, looking at the teacher, selected the first choice. "Prove it to me," the teacher replied. As though on cue, the second child identified the second choice, which happened to be the correct one. The children and teacher continued in this manner until the page was finished. As attentive as the children were to the completion of this page, there was no indication that they had so much as a clue as to what they were doing.

In reacting to Derry's thoughtful piece on the remediation of academic difficulties through strategy training to acquire useful knowledge, I would like to focus on the lesson mentioned above, illustrating how the lesson might have transpired had it reflected the characteristics of instruction to which Derry refers. This is not an exercise in criticizing the teacher; in fact, this teacher cares very much about his students, and his classroom routines reflect many positive features. It is, rather, to illustrate how classroom routines become automatized at the expense of the thought and reflection necessary for intentional learning, which is at the heart of Derry's discussion.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1989) used the term *intentional learning* to refer to "those cognitive processes that have learning as a goal rather than an accidental outcome" (p. 363). Teaching for intentional learning means cultivating those general abilities that will facilitate lifelong learning in an array of situations. Let us examine this lesson to determine its potential for enhancing intentional learning. We will examine the purpose of the activity, the context in which it occurred, and the roles of the teacher and students in the instruction.

First, what are the general abilities such an activity fosters? The goal of reading is the construction of meaning. This construction occurs through the interplay among graphophonemic, syntactic, semantic, and schematic analyses of text (Idol, 1988). The completion of cloze activities affords the student the opportunity to engage in each of these analyses. The way in which this particular worksheet was constructed emphasized semantic and schematic analyses. To figure out the missing word, the children were expected to read ahead and determine, from the additional content, which word would make the best sense. Indeed, reading ahead and rereading are important learning tactics that successful readers use for the purpose of comprehending text, and

less successful readers fail to engage (Garner & Reis, 1981).

Interestingly, it is not that difficult to teach students the tactics that Derry refers to. Children can be taught, within several lessons, to reread or read ahead for information. What is difficult is teaching tactics or strategies such that *they make a difference in how children generally approach learning situations,* that is, such that children enlist these tactics for the purpose of enhancing their understanding of text in an array of situations. I am referring, of course, to the thorny issue of transfer, to which Derry makes passing reference and with which teachers are well acquainted. To achieve transfer it is necessary to attend to the context in which instruction and practice occur; transfer is likely to occur to the extent that there are common elements between the situation in which the children are learning this tactic and the situations in which such a tactic would be useful (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983).

There are several dimensions of context that are problematic in this lesson, including the use of multiple choice responses, author-designated cloze items, and abbreviated paragraphs. It is difficult to imagine any occasion in the activity of "real reading" in which children would encounter a similar situation. Had the tactics of rereading and reading ahead been taught in the context of the children reading extended, coherent text in which they experienced the need to reread and read ahead by virtue of what they, rather than the publisher, determined to be obstacles and without the benefit of artificial choices, there would have been multiple elements shared by the instructional/practice context and the demands of authentic reading. Furthermore, the reading of extended, coherent text would have provided the children the occasion to acquire *useful* knowledge to bring meaning to the text.

Derry has suggested that the motivational problems exhibited by students with learning difficulty can be addressed through attributional retraining and training in self-management of motivation. Contextualized practice is yet another motivational component we must attend to. The motivation to persist in an activity might well lie in the recognition that the activity is worthwhile and in the chance to evaluate its worthiness in meaningful contexts (cf. Resnick, 1989).

To conclude the discussion regarding context, observational research suggests that the fragmentation and incoherence marking this lesson may be particularly characteristics of practice in special education and remedial settings. Allington (1986), Hiebert (1983), and McGill-Franzen and Allington (1990), among others, have demonstrated (a) "individualized instruction" often translates into children working alone on low-level skills tasks, (b) remedial materials do not comprise interrelated activities, and (c) the reading and writing of extended texts rarely appear in the lessons of these learners. Examining the context in which we attempt to remediate academic difficulties is an essential endeavor for those who work with special needs, at-risk, and remedial students.

For the moment, let us return to the context in which this lesson was conducted and discuss the roles of the teacher and students. What activity on the part of the teacher and students is likely to promote intentional learning on the part of the students? The extent to which the child becomes an intentional learner depends on the extent to which the child is invited to collaborate in the learning activity and subsequently feels in charge of learning. This has numerous implications for how the lesson might have proceeded.

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First, attempts need to be made to understand the child's representation of the activity. Students experiencing academic difficulty often display an impoverished conceptualization of learning. Before the teacher provided instruction, he would have found it very informative to ask the children what they thought would be the most useful way to complete the page. This would have given the teacher the chance to understand how the children represented the task. The children in this lesson appeared to equate learning with a product (completion of the worksheet), in which case they are more likely to engage in incidental rather than intentional learning. In addition, the teacher would have a sense of what tactics the children might enlist in the completion of this activity. The children could then refine or revise these tactics as they attempted to apply them to the completion of the page.

Let us assume that the children had an inadequate understanding of the activity and little sense of an appropriate approach. It was incumbent upon the teacher to provide this information by describing the purpose of the activity and procedure. To illustrate: The teacher might have said, "Sometimes when we are reading, we come to a spot where we don't understand what we are reading anymore. This may be because there are hard words or the author has not given us enough information. When that happens, it is often helpful to go back and read again or to read ahead and see if the author gives us more information that helps us to make sense of what we are reading. In this lesson, the author has left certain words out. To figure out which word best fits in the blank, we will practice rereading and reading ahead."

After this type of purpose-setting, it is useful for the teacher to model the activity, in order to make "visible"

the ordinarily invisible processes of problem solving that Derry refers to: knowledge construction, comprehension monitoring, and recovery from misunderstanding. For example, rather than have the children guess which word best fit in the first cloze task, the teacher might have demonstrated the process of reading ahead to determine which word would fit and then have modeled self-checking by matching his selection with the three that were suggested by the authors.

Following the modeling, the teachers would provide the students guided practice. Interestingly, the teacher's prompt to "prove it" after they had made their selection could have provided an excellent means of guiding their practice. Unfortunately, in this lesson, "prove it" became a cue that the children had made the wrong selection, rather than an invitation and challenge to justify their answer and make visible to the teacher as well as themselves the processes they used to complete the cloze tasks.

Finally, if this activity were conducted in the cloze context, at best it might serve as an introductory lesson to using rereading and reading ahead as fix-up tactics when comprehension falters. Guided practice in the use of these tactics would then need to occur in the reading of extended text.

Derry raises another issue, which cannot be addressed within the context of analyzing the cloze lesson but that has significant implications for those who work with special education students and those at-risk for academic difficulty. Important to the application of strategy instruction is an understanding of the specific knowledge and skills that underlie performance in the academic areas. This trend toward specificity entails a different kind of knowledge on the part of the educator. The teacher needs to be aware of the knowledge and cognitive processes that are recruited by specific academic tasks; it is particularly important that special and remedial educators (who are in many respects generalists) work closely and effectively with content area teachers to identify this knowledge and process.

Conclusion

In the special education and remedial literatures there are now numerous ways in which strategy instruction is represented (cf. Harris & Pressley, in press; Palincsar, Winn, David, & Stevens, in press). For example, the following are models of strategy instruction that have been investigated with special education and at-risk populations to improve reading comprehension. The models are based on varying assumptions regarding the teaching and learning processes; however, each model has as its premise the belief that academic difficulty can be remediated through strategy instruction.

There are direct instruction models (cf. Bauman, 1988) that place a heavy emphasis on the task analyses to which Derry refers, as well as the guided practice of isolated steps in strategy acquisition. Cognitive behavior modification (cf. Ryan, Weed, & Short, 1986) represents an approach in which students come to regulate their performance by means of internalizing a prescribed set of monitoring statements (once again determined through task analysis) before, during, and after performing a task. The Strategies Intervention Model (Deshler & Lenz, 1989) shares many characteristics with direct instruction and cognitive behavior modification, to the extent that strategies are taught as a series of sequenced steps. However, the Strategies Intervention Model occurs in two phases. In the first, or acquisition, phase the focus is on teaching students the knowledge to apply the strategies in a supported setting, outside of the general classroom; in the second, or generalization, phase students learn to apply the strategy in the classroom setting.

The direct explanation approach (Duffy et al., 1987) postulates that any skill can be recast as a strategy by explicitly providing students declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge about the use of skills. In this instruction, there is particular attention to thinking aloud the mental processes involved in using the skill as a strategy.

Finally, in reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1988), there is less emphasis on teacher explanation and practicing the steps of a strategy (characteristic of the previous models) and more emphasis on students collaborating with teachers to use strategies in a wholistic fashion to understand text.

Research on each of these models supports, at least to some degree, the benefits of strategy instruction. Unfortunately, classroom observational studies suggest that strategy instruction has not yet assumed prominence in special education or remedial settings (Swanson, 1984; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, O'Sullivan, & Christenson, 1989).

Derry's piece provides a useful template for evaluating these various models, for thinking about the critical features of strategy instruction, and for considering the diverse ways in which strategy instruction is represented to teachers and children.

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