Abstract

Developing and using reading modules in the developmental reading classroom provides an alternative to the traditional reading text and behaviorist methodology. A reading module is a series of lessons based on a concept consisting of several learning objectives designed from a constructivist’s methodology. This constructivist methodology contains all the components for a balanced literacy program: reading, writing, responding, and interacting. While engaged in a reading module, students research, organize information, write, reflect, discuss with their peers, present material to their classmates, create authentic assessments, and use rubrics to self-assess the quality of their work. In order to appeal to varying learning styles, need, or interest, project choices are offered. Although the use of constructivist materials and methodology is more time-consuming for the teacher at the beginning of its use, students are active participants in their learning and form learning communities while participating as students. As a result, teachers are rewarded with meaningful classroom dialogue and discussion. This article provides best practices research concerning constructivist methodology, as well as step-by-step directions for creating a reading module.
**Introduction**

As a developmental reading teacher, I look forward to receiving and perusing the new developmental reading texts on the market. I am usually disappointed when I notice that nothing much changes except the reading selections, the order of the chapters, or the format of the supplemental materials. The texts still have about ten chapters with one each devoted to the “skills” developmental readers are believed to need: vocabulary development, locating the main idea, identifying details, using context clues, making inferences, distinguishing fact from opinion, using the dictionary, study skill techniques, identifying propaganda, and recognizing figurative language. These are valuable skills; however, partitioned into chapters with questions to answer at the end of the chapter relegates them to the status of discrete skills and to the behavioral theory that was so popular a generation ago. According to the behavioral theory, students learn to read by learning a series of discrete, sequenced skills (Skinner, 1974), and teachers applied this theory by drilling students on skills and having them complete worksheets. Although reading instruction has changed significantly in the past 25 years as a result of the advent of cognitive/constructivist learning theories (Tompkins, 2003), reading texts do not appear to be following suit. Some students need a different instructional format.

According to Rumelhart (1977) and Stanovich (1980), readers construct meaning using a combination of text-based information and prior knowledge. Researchers have determined that fluent readers use both their prior knowledge and features in the text simultaneously and interactively, as well as use work-identification skills and comprehension strategies simultaneously and interactively (Tompkins, 2003).
Social interaction enhances learning in two other ways: scaffolding and the zone of proximal development (Dixon-Krauss, 1996). Scaffolding is a support mechanism that teachers use to assist students. For example, when teachers provide the vocabulary or basic information before introducing a new concept, they are scaffolding. The zone of proximal development refers to the gap between students’ actual developmental level and their potential development. For instance, Vygotsky (1978) suggests that very little is learned when students perform tasks that they can already do independently. Vygotsky suggests that students can accomplish more difficult things in collaboration with someone who is more advanced. He suggests that more challenging tasks done with teacher scaffolding are more conducive to learning. As students learn, teachers gradually withdraw their support so that eventually students perform the task independently (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Cognitive/Constructivist Learning Theory and Reading Modules**

In creating reading modules, I attempted to integrate all the “pieces” of the constructivist theory. For instance, first and foremost, the methodology is student-centered. As a result, students must be assessed for learning style, interest, and benchmark skill levels; only then can instruction and assessment be effectively differentiated. The preparation and planning are very much “front loaded” because the teacher must analyze, critique, and ultimately select several options appropriate for student selection that meet course competencies long before presenting these viable options to students. The teacher also must select appropriate assessment tools such as learning and interest inventories in addition to tools to assess prior content knowledge and current reading skill levels to figure out students’ “uniqueness.”
Second, students must be actively engaged in their learning in order to construct meaning for retention and application. Rosenblatt (1991) describes two purposes for reading: reading efferently and reading aesthetically. When a person reads a text efferently, he or she is only concerned with taking away pertinent information from the text: names, dates, themes, facts. By reading aesthetically, however, the reader focuses on what occurs during the reading, paying attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that the power of words arouses. Any text can be read both ways, but some are more conducive to aesthetic reading than others. When readers read for enjoyment, they assume an aesthetic stance, and when they read to locate and remember information, they read efferently. Most of the time, especially in college, readers must read efferently to recall specific information from the text. Reader response theory suggests that when students read efferently rather than aesthetically, they do not learn to love reading and may not become lifelong readers (Rosenblatt, 1991). Reading modules provide the opportunity for students to read and learn aesthetically while they are reading efferently. For instance, students will create, produce, question, discuss, write, debate, research, and present—a myriad of action verbs that promote aesthetic learning.

Third, students need to be able to modify, change, or add to their finished work through reflection and discussion with their peers. Talking about their work will help students identify problems in their work, help them retain information, increase their presentation/communication skills, and listen for peer feedback that might allow them to consider new ideas. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) viewed reading and writing as social activities that reflected the culture and community in which people lived. According to Vygotsky (1986), language helps to organize thought, and people use language to learn as
well as to communicate and share their experiences with others. Understanding that students use language for social purposes, teachers can plan for students to discuss their reading or research and to share their writing. Working in teacher-selected pairs, groups, or teams is crucial to accomplish this goal. Although time consuming, teachers should pre-select student work configurations based on data, rather than randomness. Ideally, the teacher would design groups to include various ability levels, as well as consider racial, gender, and age diversity.

Last, I utilized formative as well as summative assessment. While students worked through their modules, individual and whole-class conferencing was important. At the end of the module, instead of using a multiple-choice, test-bank test, their projects became their authentic assessment. Students were given a rubric at the time the module began; as a result, students knew the scoring criteria before they ever started the module. The same scoring guide was utilized for evaluation at the end of the module.

**Reading Modules**

A module is a series of lessons based on a concept consisting of several objectives and is holistic in that it contains all the components for a balanced literacy program: reading, writing, responding, and interacting. Last year, I created six modules for a sixteen-week semester: the Civil War, Stage Development Theory, American Literature of the Civil War Era, Science Basics, The Bill of Rights, and Conflict Management. Based on my advising experience, most new college students register for General Psychology, an American History course, Interpersonal Communication, Basic Ideas of Biology, English Composition, and/or a math course. I chose the modules in order to
provide these students with some prior knowledge before they took their academic courses.

**Module Development**

I followed the steps below to plan the Civil War reading module for my developmental reading students.

1. Identifying 5-6 concepts for instruction. What “big” ideas needed to be addressed to provide students with the most useful prior knowledge to help them succeed in their US History classes? Are these concepts the same as the ones identified in the HIS 108 course that my students would eventually take?

2. Ordering and timing of the concepts. Is the order of the concepts important? If so, in what order will the modules be taught? How much time will I spend on each module?

3. Determining the learning objectives for the module. What do I want my students to know or be able to do at the end of the module?

4. Assessing students’ prior knowledge of the module and scaffolding accordingly. Suggestions include concept map, cloze passage, and KT charts. Graphic organizers are a particularly effective and efficient way to assess quickly the extent of students’ prior knowledge and may be used for any content or grade level. For instance, the concept map is a visual display of the new concept word placed in a box on the board or a piece of paper. Students brainstorm words or phrases they know associated with that concept word. The teacher organizes the information into logical categories and places new boxes around the concept word box. In reality, it is a pictorial outline. This method provides the teacher with a
“what’s missing” visual to assess prior knowledge. A cloze passage is a fill-in-the-blanks activity in which the student uses clues from the context to supply words that have been deleted from the text. It is a test of reading comprehension and concept understanding. The teacher creates a page of concept-summary text leaving out important vocabulary words, events, or people’s names that are commonly associated with the concept. The KT chart is simply a T-chart placed on the board with the concept placed on top of the T. The phrase “Know for Sure” is written on one side of the T while the phrase “Think I Know” is written on the other. Students then proceed to provide all the information they know about the concept, and they decide on which side of the T they wish to place that information. I used both a KT Chart and a cloze passage. I first used the Know for Sure and Think I Know chart (KT chart). I placed “Civil War” at the top of the T and then wrote “Know for Sure” in one column of the T and “Think I Know” in the other. As a class, the students completed the chart. I provided scaffolding by correcting inaccuracies and expanding their knowledge base, specifically with timeline information, important people and events, and vocabulary particular to the Civil War such as “scrip,” “secede,” “caisson,” “dissension,” “schism.” Next, I provided a cloze passage of a one-page summary of the Civil War with every seventh word deleted. This provided me an opportunity to assess syntactical knowledge, as well as content knowledge.
The Civil War

Wars happen for many reasons. As our nation grew, as states entered the Union, they entered as “slave” or “free” states. Typically, the northern lying north of the Mason-Dixon Line slavery while the southern states lying south of the Mason-Dixon Line, advocated slavery an agrarian economy depended on manual labor. Cotton was a labor-intensive crop, requiring workers to harvest it from the pod holding the cotton boll. When Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850 to accommodate both sides of the issue, South Carolina seceded from the on December 20, 1860, followed within two months the states of Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, Texas. These states decided to secede the existing Union to form their own “country.” When the Confederacy Fort Sumter South Carolina in 1861, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee joined the. Abraham Lincoln was president of the and Jefferson Davis was president of Confederacy. The Union’s capital was Washington Richmond was the capital of the. The two capitals lay only 100 apart. Both the Confederacy and the believed that the war would last a few months. In fact, Northern were called up for 90 days service because both sides were optimistic quick victory.

Four years later and 600,000 later, the Confederacy fell to the when Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Court House in Virginia on April 9, 1865. April 14, 1865, at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth, an who swore allegiance to the Southern cause.
5. Sharing learning objectives with students and deciding how the objectives could best be met. I used LaDelle Smith’s Trackstar, a track of excellent Civil War resources/web sites that provided the necessary information to accomplish my learning objectives. (Go to www.trackstar4teachers.org and type in Track #21277 by LaDelle Smith). In addition, I divided up the objectives, thereby placing the responsibility of one or two objectives on each student. This area is the most time consuming part of the module creation, as well as the most important in a developmental reading class. The teacher must plan the reading content so that the material is within the students’ zone of proximal development, is engaging and interesting, and contains accurate information. For instance, the following activities were assigned to accomplish the learning objectives:

   a. Prepare a time line of the major battles of the Civil War. Include the state in which they were fought, the major generals from each side, and the number of lives lost.

   b. Using the same track or one of your choosing on the Civil War (simply type in Civil War as the keyword), prepare a concept map for the Union and one for the Confederacy to indicate causes of the war from each perspective.

   c. List and describe five women who contributed to the Civil War.

   d. Determine the role that Northern African Americans played in the Civil War.

   e. Discover the significance of naval warfare during the Civil War.
f. Choose one of the war generals. Research as much personal information as you can find.

Although Smith’s Track of websites provided the desired factual information, I added a website of a preacher’s diary relating the Battle of Gettysburg. This track provided a personal, emotional connection to the Civil War. Although the track provides many diary entries, I have included only one for example’s sake. (http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/personal/essick.html). Reverend Essick lived in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, during the Civil War, and the diary entries from this website provide a first-hand personal account of the concepts introduced in the factual cloze passage. The purpose of this activity is two-fold. Students first need exposure to basic factual information. Once they have a body of information, they can manipulate that information, test that information against other reading material, and finally integrate it into their cultural and intellectual understanding. The narrative, containing a focus on more of the emotional, rather than intellectual response, serves to reinforce the factual knowledge by providing an emotional attachment to the information, thereby helping students to remember it longer. Second, the purpose is to build vocabulary. Words to be discussed in context and then to be researched may include secede, dissension, caisson, scrip, cessation, deplorable, and schisms. An extension activity might include substituting synonyms, thereby increasing the student’s exposure to additional vocabulary.

**June 26, 1863**

This was a memorable day in Gettysburg. Pennsylvania is invaded by the army of the Confederate States. They had made their appearance at Greencastle and
Chambersburg some ten days ago, and we had many rumors of their advance in this direction. Our merchants sent away most of their goods and the horse had been removed from the town and surrounding country several times under false alarms. But today they came numbering, according to the best estimates, about three thousand, consisting of cavalry and infantry supported by four or five [caissons]. The place was not defended and of course they met with no resistance. A regiment of militia had arrived from Harrisburg the evening before, but these made no stand. About two hundred of them were captured and paroled. A small troop of horsemen (about 25) from Philadelphia and another collected in the country made their escape from the east end of town as the enemy entered at the west. I witnessed the charge down York Street, and it was truly terrific to one unaccustomed to such things. They rode at the top of their speed and yelled like demons, their face [?] and their hair streaming in the winds. They overtook a number of citizens endeavoring to make their escape with their horses, and captured a car of government stores. They gathered up all the horses they could find. They demanded of the town, among other things, ten barrels of whiskey, sixty barrels of flour, one hundred beef cattle and five thousand dollars. The town council refused to give them anything. They then proceeded to help themselves to such things as they wanted. They took a great many things from the stores, for which they paid confederate scrip or left a receipt and order upon their government. Their stay was very brief lasting only from about three o’clock PM to the following morning. They burned some eight or ten cars and the railroad bridge over [Rock] Creek. With few exceptions they molested no families. They
pushed forward from this to Hanover and York, destroying railroad bridges and
warehouses and capturing horses. (Essick, 1863).

6. Identifying the type of assessment to determine mastery of learning objectives. I
provided a choice of projects students could create and then share with the others.
Choice provides attention to students’ preferred learning styles. In addition,
choice piques interest and motivation. Examples follow:

a. In a two-page letter to a fifth-grader, explain the Civil War by writing
what you learned during the Civil War reading module.

b. In a two-page persuasive essay, pretend you are a resident of Atlanta
asking Sherman to spare the city.

c. In a two-page narrative, pretend that the Confederacy won the Civil War.

d. In a two-page persuasive essay, pretend you are a soldier trying to
convince his mother of why he should join the militia (either side, your
choice).

e. Create a historically accurate, both in content and time, scrapbook of
collected photos/newspaper clippings from the Civil War

f. Create a CD containing eight popular songs during the Civil War,
including annotations for each song.

g. Perform a skit or monologue, taking the persona of either general on the
eve of the Battle of Gettysburg.

7. Creating a rubric for teacher evaluation and for student self-assessment (Go to
Rubistar.4teachers.org/index/shtml for a rubric template). Provide the students
with a copy of the rubric before they ever start the project so they understand the grading criteria and so they can self-assess the quality of their own work.

8. Determining how students should collect their data and scaffold accordingly. Will they maintain learning logs, take traditional note card notes, use a note taking method such as the Cornell method? Will they work in groups? How will groups be assigned? How can I ensure individual accountability? How will I monitor progress?

9. Determining how students will share their data. Will they present individually or in groups? Will they debate? Will they create a poster? Will they create a display?

10. Determining how students will reflect on the process and the product. Will they keep a learning log or journal? Will there be classroom discussion? Will there be a formal, written reflection?

Results

I have used reading modules over the course of three semesters with three different classes. In the first class, I began the semester with ten students; I ended the class with five. In the second class, I began the semester with thirteen students; I ended the class with seven. In the third class, I began the semester with eleven students; I ended with nine for a total of twenty-one. Because the Nelson-Denny Reading Test was readily available in the Learning Center, I used Forms G and H for pre-test and post-tests, respectively. The average grade-level gain was three grade levels with students reading on the 13.3 grade level by the end of the semester. Although only a small sample of
students was affected by reading modules, the positive posttest results provided the motivation for me to continue this methodology.

Probably more important than the posttest results, however, were student engagement and empowerment in the reading class. For example, students with an average reading level of 10.3 grade level and generally lacking self-confidence in their ability to “do” school at the beginning of the semester learned PowerPoint and made PowerPoint presentations on a regular basis; one made clay models of a plant cell and an animal cell and explained the function of each part of the cells; one demonstrated Bernoulli’s Principle with soap bubbles; one demonstrated the cause of lightning with a chalk drawing presentation; one made a children’s book telling an historically accurate account of the Civil War; one brought in flowers and dissected them for a class presentation to explain the parts of a flower and the process of pollination; and one made a Jeopardy game to demonstrate the importance of root words, prefixes, and suffixes for expanding science vocabulary. In order to create and present their projects, these students researched, read, used critical thinking skills to analyze data, discussed their findings with me and other students, self-assessed the quality of their projects with a rubric, presented their projects to the class, and wrote a reflection on their experience with the process and the product—a balanced developmental reading curriculum based on current literacy theories in an active, learning community environment.

**Implications**

After using the modules model for developmental reading, I will never use any other methodology. I feel that it is an appropriate method of instruction for any course, but the benefits for the developmental reading students are innumerable:
1. Modules provide “cultural literacy” in several academic areas. Students then have the prior knowledge necessary to be more successful when they take the actual courses. Reading specialist Jeanne Chall (1983) believes that world knowledge is essential to the development of reading and writing skill. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1987) calls this kind of network of information that all competent readers possess “cultural literacy.” According to Hirsch, cultural literacy is the “background information stored in readers’ minds that enables them to pick up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated content” (p. 2).

2. Modules provide a purpose for reading. With established learning objectives, students are reading for specific information that they will use in a project.

3. Modules provide an authentic assessment as an alternative to an objective test.

4. Modules provide the opportunity for students to share their learning with others.

5. Modules provide the opportunity for students to assess objectively the quality of their own work through the use of a rubric.

6. Modules provide the opportunity for students to become academically and socially engaged in the classroom. According to Vincent Tinto (1987), students are less likely to drop out of college if they are engaged.

7. Modules provide choice since students are provided different projects to create and present. Researchers Arends, Winitzky, and Tannenbaum (2001) feel that providing choices respects students’ diversity and helps keep students involved.

Certainly a more comprehensive study is necessary if any meaningful conclusions are to be drawn; however, using reading modules for developmental reading may assist
reading teachers who wish to move toward a cognitive/constructivist model of instruction.
References


