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What is reading comprehension and how does it relate to college learning?

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Notions of reading comprehension have changed dramatically over the decades. Theories of learning have shifted dramatically during the 20th century. We have moved from a behavioral perspective, which dominated the field from the turn of the century to the sixties and seventies, to a holistic or interactive approach, which began in the late seventies, and continues to shape our thinking about reading comprehension today. Practitioners of the interactive model view reading as a cognitive, developmental, and socially constructed task that goes beyond understanding the words on a page. In the past, reading was considered a relatively static activity. Meaning was imbedded in the text, and the reader's job was to understand what was being transmitted via the words on the page. Current research views reading as a more dynamic process in which the reader "constructs" meaning based on information he/she gathers from the text. Reading expert Katherine Maria (1990) defines reading comprehension as:

... a holistic process of constructing meaning from written text through the interaction of

> (1) the knowledge the reader brings to the text, i.e., word recognition ability, world knowledge, and knowledge of linguistic conventions;

> (2) the reader's interpretation of the language that the writer used in constructing the text; and

> (3) the situation in which the text is read. (p. 14-15)

College-level reading is much more sophisticated than high school, and in a typical course load, students may encounter a plethora of literary genres that they are required to read, understand, and apply in a meaningful way. Comprehending these texts is crucial for academic success, yet in an average class, there will be little or no attention paid to the reading process or the strategy training that is so important to the learning tasks.

The role of metacognition in the reading process

Metacognition is vital to academic success. When applied to reading tasks, metacognition involves several elements: the ability to recognize errors or contradictions in text, the understanding of different strategies to use with different kinds of text, and the ability to distinguish important ideas from unimportant ones (Nist and Mealey, 1991). While research suggests that many college students lack

metacognitive skills (Baker, 1985), intervention studies also indicate that college students can learn to monitor their level of text comprehension by employing a variety of strategies. Studies also show that college-age students are more motivated to use strategies than younger, less experienced students. "Older students seem better able to regulate and control their understanding than do younger children... as children become older, their capacity to use metacognitive skills increases, and their reasons for not using these skills change" (Nist and Mealey, 1991). There are many reading strategies that can help students improve both comprehension and metacognition. This chapter will help faculty to better understand the complex nature of reading as a process, and also to develop comprehension strategies for students (McNeil, 1992).

Schema theory and reading comprehension

Schema theory, now widely accepted as playing a key role in reading comprehension, is based on the assumption that the reader's prior knowledge directly impacts new learning situations. While schema theory has existed in various forms since the 1930's, it has recently re-emerged and has been redefined as an important concept in reading instruction. Reading theorists view schema theory as a "framework" that organizes knowledge in memory by putting information into the correct "slots," each of which contains related parts. When new information enters memory, it not only must be compatible with one of the slots, but it must actually be entered into the proper slot before comprehension can occur (Nist & Mealey, 1991). If we accept this notion, reading shifts from a text-based activity to an interactive process in which the reader constructs meaning by interacting with the text. According to reading specialist John McNeil (1992), schemata are the reader's "concepts, beliefs, expectations, processes — virtually everything from past experiences that are used in making sense of reading. In reading, schemata are used to make sense of text; the printed word evokes the reader's experiences, as well as past and potential relationships" (p. 20).

> Reading teachers emphasize three types of schemata:
> (1) knowledge of the concepts and processes that pertain to certain subject matter, i.e., science, math, humanities;
>
> (2) general world knowledge i.e., social relationships, causes and effects;
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> (3) knowledge of rhetorical structures i.e., patterns, rules, structures for organizing text and cues to the reader. The strategies contained in this chapter are rooted in the principles of schema theory and metacognition and view reading as a dynamic process.

While this handbook is intended for college faculty and staff, the goal is for students to develop an awareness of their own reading process and apply effective reading strategies to address the wide range of reading tasks they will encounter.

Understanding the Reader's Role in the Comprehension Process

Since reading is an interactive process that is dynamic and constantly changing, each new task or assignment will alter the learning process, and challenge the

reader to be active in her approach to the text. Developing readers are often challenged with the changing nature of reading tasks. They may also lack some of the strategies that expert readers employ as they read. Because of this, students should be encouraged to take an active role in their learning process. Likewise, instructors play an important role in preparing students for the task and can help students become more aware of the reading characteristics they bring to the task.