Organizing for effective instruction: The reading workshop

Reutzel and Cooter are both professors at Brigham Young University. Their interests are in the transition from basal to whole language and literature-based instruction.

Organizing for successful reading instruction is an important concern for classroom teachers, yet when entering many classrooms, the casual observer is struck by the mundane nature of traditional organizational schemes. John Goodlad (1984) mused in his book A Place Called School, "one wonders if the way classrooms are organized and run has something to do with the neutral emotional tone we observed in many of them. Whether we looked at how teachers related to students or how students related to teachers, the overwhelming impression was one of affective neutrality—a relationship neither abrasive nor joyous" (p. 111).

To offset this state of emotional neutrality in classrooms, teachers must thoughtfully reconsider how reading instruction may be reorganized to rekindle a sense of joy and ownership. Recent evidence seems to point to at least two major concerns which should be taken into account when reorganizing for effective reading instruction: 1) a lack of time spent reading, and 2) the use of worksheets to manage the classroom.

We know that children's reading fluency and consequent enjoyment of reading are related to sustained encounters with interesting texts (Smith, 1985). In the Becoming a Nation of Readers report, various research studies indicated that children in typical primary grade classrooms read independently only 7 to 8 minutes per day; and intermediate grade children typically spent only about 15 minutes per day reading independently (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Goodlad (1984) also points out that junior high school students spend only 3% of the school day reading.

A second classroom concern centers on making sure that students use their time wisely during the reading period. In an effort to ensure this, many teachers have become trapped into using worksheets as a means of managing reading classrooms (Goodman, Shannon, Freeman, & Murphy, 1988; Pearson, 1989). Becoming a Nation of Readers indicates that children spend up to 70% of allocated reading instructional time engaged in completing worksheets and workbook pages (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). In short, workbooks and practice books have become, in large measure, the major means of managing reading instruction (Jachym, Allington, & Broikou, 1989). And
yet, Osborn, Wilson, and Anderson (1985) remind us that workbook and worksheet pages provide only perfunctory levels of reading practice. Thus, organizing for successful reading instruction should provide a way to spend much less time completing worksheets while maintaining a well-managed classroom environment.

An organizational solution: The reading workshop

We suggest four criteria that should be considered in organizing for effective reading instruction. First, students should have ownership of their time (Atwell, 1987). This implies that students be given opportunities to make choices about how they will spend their reading time. By this we mean that children should make these choices within a reasonable and responsibly managed classroom structure. Teachers should devise a system of conditions that will be observed during the reading period. Atwell (1987) suggests several conditions with which we concur and recommend to teachers:

- no talking during the first 10 minutes of SSR each day,
- during the Reading Workshop (RW) students must read, respond to reading, or update their personal reading records,
- no talking is permitted during the RW except in meetings of literature response groups,
- RW time is not for completing homework or other school work,
- reading time and title logs must be updated at the end of each RW period,
- restroom or drinking breaks are not permitted during the RW time except in case of emergencies,
- students are not permitted to disturb or interrupt a scheduled individual reading conference.

Second, the classroom environment and daily routine must encourage reading as a primary activity integrated with other language modes, i.e., writing, speaking, and listening. The classroom routine should invite children to write, respond, discuss, and become thoroughly involved with books—not to complete worksheets in social isolation. Third, the teacher must communicate the importance of reading by setting an example. Teachers need to read for their own purposes and participate in reading with the children. Fourth, there must be opportunities for regular demonstrations of reading strategies, for sharing in the reading process including responding to books, and for evaluating individual reading progress.

Atwell (1987) introduced the concept of the Reading Workshop (RW) as an alternative to traditional reading instructional organizations. While Atwell’s proposal provides an organizational scheme for integrating literature into the secondary school language classroom, we have found that with several modifications it can work well with late

Students have opportunities to make choices about how they will spend their reading time.

second-grade through sixth-grade elementary school children. We do not offer this version of the reading workshop organizational scheme as a prescription, but rather as a functional and flexible approach for providing reading instruction which can meet the needs of both teachers and children.

The five main components of the RW structure are: (1) Sharing time, (2) the Mini-lesson, (3) State-of-the-class, (4) Self-selected reading and response, and (5) Sharing time. Each of these components is depicted in Figure 1.

- Sharing time (5-10 minutes)

The initial block of sharing time in the RW is a time when teachers can share new discoveries they have made in literature (e.g., folktales, short stories, nonfiction, poetry). For example, the teacher may have been looking for spooky stories for the Halloween season and discovered Jack Prelutsky’s (1976) collection of poetry called Nightmares: Poems to Trouble Your Sleep. With permission from the publisher, the teacher might make overhead transparencies of a few of the spooky pen
and ink sketches from the poems in the book and display them on the overhead screen while reading aloud these selections on vampires and ghouls. The idea is to spark interest in various literary genres for free reading. The teacher’s good judgment will dictate the selections to be used. Sometimes the sharing time activity can serve as a catalyst for introducing the mini-lesson.

- **Mini-lessons (5-10 minutes)**

  Many times reading teachers feel chained to the basal. When examining the reasons for these feelings, teachers often make an interesting discovery. School district-mandated competency tests in reading draw many of their test items from the scope and sequence charts of the basal readers the district has adopted. Thus students are tested on material they have been taught, which only makes sense.

  However, there are at least two negative aspects of this practice. First, teachers feel obliged to adhere to the basal reading series to make sure that their children “know the skills.” Second, with basal programs children are almost always placed into ability groups for reading instruction, a practice which can be detrimental to self-esteem and reading development. Mini-lessons offer a wonderful way out of this dilemma.

  Mini-lessons are short, teacher instigated whole group instructional sessions for demonstrating reading strategies and preparing students to read new books successfully and independently. Topics for mini-lessons are usually drawn from: (1) observed needs of students discovered during individual reading conferences (discussed more fully later), (2) teacher-selected skills taken from the scope and sequence charts found in the district-adopted basal reading series, and (3) literature preparation (prereading) activities to assist students with new books they choose to read in their literature response groups.

  Thus, mini-lessons allow teachers to fulfill local curriculum mandates regarding student performance objectives and escape use of
## Figure 2

### State-of-the-class chart

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### Key

- **SSR**: Self-selected reading
- **SSB**: Self-selected book
- **LRG**: Literature response group, goal pages
- **RL**: Responding to literature
- **RK**: Record keeping
- **LR**: Literature response group
- **GM**: Group meeting for response
- **NM**: New meeting
- **RM**: Determining new response
- **IRC**: Individual reading conference

### Textual Content

worksheets prescribed by the basal reader as the primary means of practice. Further, because instruction takes place in whole groups, the harmful practice of grouping children by ability for reading instruction is avoided.

Another potential use of the mini-lesson is for prereading activities. These activities are intended to assist students in drawing upon past experiences or schemata before reading in order to enhance comprehension. Having these activities prior to reading helps teachers create a stronger climate for their students' affective development (i.e., the development of interest, positive attitudes, motivation). The literature preparation activities we use include story frames (Fowler, 1982), literature webbing (Norton, 1987; Reutzel & Fawson, 1989), and schema stories (Watson & Crowley, 1988).

- **State-of-the-class (3-5 minutes)**

  State-of-the-class has the purpose of informing the teacher and individual students of their responsibilities and progress during the
workshop period. Using the state-of-the-class chart depicted in Figure 3, the teacher is able to review individual student progress at a glance. When problems are found, such as a student's spending several days on one task with no apparent progress, then students are asked to make an appointment for an individual reading conference with the teacher.

Students should take responsibility for filling in the blanks in the state-of-the-class chart. From this practice, children develop a sense that responsibility comes along with opportunity. This simple record keeping process provides teachers with a daily audit trail of student activity and requires minimal teacher effort.

- Self-selected reading and response (40 minutes)

The heart of the reading workshop is called self-selected reading and response. It involves three student activities: Self-selected reading (SSR), Literature response, and Individual reading conferences.

Self-selected reading. During SSR students may become involved in one or more activities (see Figure 1). To begin the workshop, students and teachers spend 10 minutes engaged in free reading of a book they have chosen for recreational reading or they may be reading goal pages established in their literature response group. (Goal pages are daily reading goals established by students themselves to accomplish the reading of a book within a given time frame.) The initial SSR time period lasts about 10 minutes, but may be extended as necessary.
Literature response groups. After the initial 10 minutes of SSR, one group of children per day moves into a literature response group (LRG) by appointment while the remainder of the class continues working in SSR. LRGs are made up of students who come together by choice, not assignment, to read and respond to a chosen piece of literature and develop related projects. The teacher meets with one LRG each day to participate in and facilitate response activities.

Some teachers like to act in the role of "recorder" for the group or "wait in silence." This allows them to be quiet participants in the group's activities. Other LRGs may wish to meet at this same time without the teacher present to continue work on projects.

Hartse, Short, and Burke (1988) encourage using written conversations to talk about books of interest. This format provides for regular feedback to students and establishes an audit trail for student progress. It is recommended by many authorities in the field that children avoid simply summarizing their daily readings, but rather react to what they have read (Parsons, 1990). At the conclusion of the LRG meeting, goals for continued reading in the book (goal pages) and the next group meeting date are established.

Students who continue in SSR during the LRG meeting may engage in four priority choices. First, they must complete their LRG goal pages. Next, they may complete literature response projects. Literature response logs are regular records, usually daily, that children keep as running diaries of their reading. Third, they may update their reading records. These include filling in book time and title logs, updating their activities on the state of the class chart, or signing up for an individual reading conference with the teacher. When these three activities are completed, students may select a book for recreational reading.

Individual reading conferences. During the last 10 minutes of each RW, the teacher meets with two students for individual reading conferences. Students make appointments on a sign-up board at least one day prior to the conference. (Three conferences per quarter, for each student, are suggested.) If students forget or avoid conferences, the teacher informs them of their next appointment. Students not involved in an individual reading conference (IRC) continue with the self-selected activities described above.

- Student sharing time (5-10 minutes)

As a daily closing activity in the RW, we recommend a sharing time where teachers and children come together for a few minutes to share with the group the activities, books, poetry, projects, etc., with which they were working. Student groups may share progress reports on their literature response projects, i.e., play practices, murals, or Readers' Theatre scripts. Individual students may share the books they were reading during SSR. Others may share their responses and thoughts about the book discussed in their literature response group. Teachers may comment on individual reading conferences and commend individual children or share a part of a book they themselves were reading during SSR.

The only problem associated with this second block of sharing time is stopping. Sticking to the 10-minute time limit is often very difficult because children sincerely enjoy this time for sharing their ideas, work, and discoveries.

Teachers using reading workshops: Three cases

Mr. Sheets, a fourth grade teacher, uses the RW organization with the basal and his three ability groups. He enjoys the time allocated for sharing poems, library books, and songs with his students on a regular basis. Mr. Sheets uses the mini-lesson time to teach reading skill lessons he chooses from the basal teacher's manual. He comments that the minimal time allocated to mini-lessons forces him to make decisions about skill lessons that should be taught and those that may be omitted. Mr. Sheets also notes that mini-lessons force him to be concise in his demonstrations of skills in real reading situations.

Mr. Sheets modified the state-of-the-class coding sheet to fit the needs of his basal program. He includes coding for completion of selected workbook or worksheet assignments. He uses the time allocated for meetings with literature response groups in the RW to meet with his three basal ability groups. He likes the RW schedule because it allocates time for meeting with individual children in regular reading conferences. Mr. Sheets also uses the final sharing time daily. He finds that everyone benefits when the children share their ac-
tivities, problems encountered, and strategies for better reading discovered during the day.

A second teacher, Miss Sabey, uses the RW organization in her third grade. Her implementation of the RW parallels that of Mr. Sheetts very closely, with one major exception. She is making a major transition (Reutzel & Cooter, in press) toward literature-based reading instruction while continuing to use the basal. She decided to abandon the use of ability groups and use the basal as an anthology of literature.

She selects three stories from the two basals in her classroom, and the children may choose to read one of these stories. Children attend what she calls visiting story groups which function during the 2 or 3 days when a particular story is being read and discussed. New groups are formed for each new set of stories to be read; thus, group membership is constantly changing in Miss Sabey’s room.

For the past year, a third teacher, Mrs. Hans, has used the RW as outlined with her fifth-grade class on a local Indian reservation. Mrs. Hans uses a literature-based reading program with sets of paperback tradebooks. In fact, she has completely stopped using the basal reader adopted in her district. She recently commented that early in the year when she began using the RW she nearly gave up and retreated to her traditional plan: “It is more work. You have to be better prepared. But, if you stick with it, your children will love it. I don’t have to coax them to read a book like I used to. They just pick them up and read. They have the time and the desire. And by the way, our test scores for the district tests and the CTBS were better than ever. I love the Reading Workshop!"

These examples show the flexibility of the reading workshop in organizing for effective reading instruction. The reading workshop is not a panacea, but teachers who use it are experiencing success, increased student involvement, and a sense of taking control of their own reading instruction.

References