Peer Reading

Overview

Because textbooks are so densely packed with information, many students feel overwhelmed, lost in a sea of words and disconnected ideas. *Peer Reading* is a partnering technique that teaches students how to break down a reading into manageable chunks, use questions to focus on essential information, and distill a reading into a concise summary.

Steps in Implementation

1. Select a reading and break it down into three or four smaller sections. Create questions for each section that focus student reading toward important information and record them on the Peer Reading Coaching Sheet (a sample Peer Reading Coaching Sheet is shown in the upcoming classroom example).

2. Pair students up, and assign each member of each pair a letter, A or B. Explain that both students will read each section and then will alternate roles as coach and oral summarizer (Reader A will use his or her notes to coach Reader B to a complete summary of the section and vice versa).

3. Have students continue to reverse roles as coach and summarizer until all questions on the Peer Reading Coaching Sheet are answered.

4. Ask students to work in their pairs to summarize the entire reading using their notes and marked texts.

5. As students become comfortable with Peer Reading, encourage them to chunk and question on their own, as a way of managing textual overload.

How the Strategy Works in the Classroom

In Jerry Kendal's tenth-grade psychology class, students have been studying human development. His students are about to read a section in their textbooks about Piaget's theories of childhood development. Based on the last writing assignment, Jerry realizes that his students are having trouble extracting essential information from their textbooks. In response, he has decided to use Peer Reading to slow down the reading process of his students so they can gain greater control over the information. He splits a four-page passage on Piaget into four readings of relatively equal length. He asks his students to pair up and assigns each member of each pair either a letter A or B. Jerry then introduces the class to the coaching sheet they will use to complete the reading (see Figure 1.3).

Student pair Paul and Jenny begin by reading the first passage independently. As they read, both students use the summarizing questions on their coaching sheets to take notes and record what they believe to be central ideas and important facts or details. They also note any new vocabulary they may encounter. When both students have finished the passage, Paul (Reader A) takes

Figure 1.3. Peer Reading Coaching Sheet

Peer Reading Coaching Sheet

Section 1 questions (Reader A)

1. According to Piaget, where do the roots of knowledge lie?

2. What are the first two stages of childhood development?

Section 2 questions (Reader B)

1. What are the last two stages of development?

2. Why is it important that children "transcend egocentrism"?

Section 3 questions (Reader A)

1. What can adolescents in the last stage of development do that younger children cannot?

2. How are assimilation and accommodation related?

Section 4 questions (Reader B)

1. What are the major criticisms of Piaget's theory?

2. What do experts consider to be Piaget's greatest contribution to developmental psychology?

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a moment to look over his marked passage and then turns the copy over, while Jenny (Reader B) uses her marked passage to coach Paul to complete answers to the questions under "Section 1" on the Peer Reading Coaching Sheet:

Jenny: OK. Ready?

Paul: Ready.

Jenny: Question one: According to Piaget, where do the roots of knowledge lie?

Paul: OK, well, Piaget was interested in how a child's experiences shape his development, so the roots of knowledge lie in a child's interaction with the world around him.

Jenny: Good, but there's a simple answer.

Paul: OK, wait . . . uh, was this near the beginning of the passage?

Jenny: Yup.

Paul: Well, they focused quite a bit on action initially . . . that's it, action! The roots of knowledge, according to Piaget, lie in action!

Jenny: Good job! Question two . . .

Once Paul has finished answering the questions under "Section 1," he and Jenny continue on to the second reading. This time, their roles are reversed. Paul (Reader A) becomes the coach, while Jenny (Reader B) turns over her text to answer the questions for Section 2. The partners continue this process for Sections 3 and 4, each time switching roles, until all the questions on the Peer Reading Coaching Sheet have been answered.

Once all the questions have been answered, Paul and Jenny look over their answers to the questions on the coaching sheet and work together to create a summary of Piaget's four stages of cognitive development. Throughout this process, Jerry walks around the room observing his students. He pays special attention to any problems students encounter in trying to answer questions or in creating a summary. Over the next month, as students learn about social development in children, Jerry will teach students how to use this process on their own by chunking the text and asking themselves summarizing questions to determine what is essential information in their reading.

Why the Strategy Works (What the Research Says)

Summarizing is such an old practice that the teaching of the method has yet to catch up with modern educational theory. Traditionally, when a teacher engages a student in a summarizing activity, the expectation is that the student will be able to ignore unnecessary ideas and details, form a more generalized concept, and pick out main ideas or topic sentences from a reading.

The problems with this method of teaching become apparent when we examine the assumed skills these tasks take for granted. Peter Afflerbach and Peter H. Johnston (1986) keenly note that when teachers ask a student to delete unimportant information, they are assuming the student already knows how to extract only the essential information.

Following the findings of research showing how questions help readers focus on essential information and manage longer readings (Just & Carpenter, 1987; Wood, 1986), Silver, Hanson, Strong, and Schwartz (1996) developed the Peer

Reading strategy. This method of reading and summarizing brings the following advantages to the students' learning experience:

- Through oral summary and the support of a coach, students are involved in deep processing of the content.

- The task of summarizing is structured by the use of coaching questions that point students toward essential information.

- Information is extracted from the text in a number of ways, including coaching, taking notes, answering questions, and writing a collaborative summary.

- Students work toward creating their own coaching questions and developing autonomy with the process so they can use the strategy as an independent research tool.

Resource 1.7 shows a sample blank, reproducible Peer Reading coaching sheet.

Collaborative Summarizing: Helping Students Build More Powerful Summaries

Some students may have trouble creating effective summaries, even after they have practiced using Peer Reading. Collaborative Summarizing (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2001) is a strategy that will help them build confidence and independence with this vital skill. To use Collaborative Summarizing in your classroom, distribute summary sheets (see Resource 1.8) and proceed through the following six steps.

1. Ask students to list three to five ideas that they feel are the most important in the reading.

2. Have students pair up and review the rules for peer negotiation:
   a. You must use textual evidence to show why an idea is important.
   b. Do not jump to simple solutions.
   c. This is not a contest of wills, so avoid win-lose situations.

   Ask students to come to an agreement on the three to five most important ideas, using the foregoing rules.

3. Allow each student pair to meet with another pair to renegotiate their list of ideas. Explain that this final list will be the basis for their summary, so they should arrange it in a way that will make sense when written out. For example, one student group created this list for a reading on the role of geometry in Renaissance art:

Resource 1.7. Sample Peer Reading Coaching Sheet

Peer Reading Coaching Sheet
Section 1 questions (Reader A)
Section 2 questions (Reader B)
Section 3 questions (Reader A)
Section 4 questions (Reader B)

    a. Unlike Medieval artists, Renaissance artists wanted to paint objects realistically and accurately.

    b. Many Renaissance artists turned to geometry to help them paint more realistically.

    c. They discovered that parallel lines running directly away from the viewer come together at a *vanishing point* on the horizon.

    d. They used this knowledge to create a three-dimensional effect called *perspective*.

    e. Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, and Albrecht Dürer all relied on perspective to create their most famous paintings.

4. Ask students to use their final lists to write their summaries individually.

5. Have each original team of four meet with another team of four. Students read and discuss their summaries, then develop a set of criteria for creating powerful summaries. Students share and refine these criteria through whole-class discussion.

6. Over the course of the year, students refer to these criteria to help them create effective summaries of different texts.

A sample reproducible Collaborative Summarizing worksheet is shown in Resource 1.8.

Questioning the Author

Overview

It is not uncommon for students to view textbooks as infallible sources of information. This view, however, fosters a passive approach to reading, where learning is not constructed by the reader and where information is rarely questioned. The strategy called Questioning the Author seeks to make students active participants in constructing meaning and critiquing the way information is presented in textbooks.

Steps in Implementation

1. Explain to students that an author's meaning in a text is not always easy to understand and that authors can sometimes be unclear or write poorly.

2. Have students read a selected text. At critical points during the reading, stop to pose initiating queries that will spark group discussion, such as, "What is the author trying to say here?" or "What does the author want us to understand in this section?"

3. Guide discussion by delving more deeply into the text's meaning or pointing out missing information by posing follow-up queries, such as, "Does the author fully support this statement?" "How does this compare with