Reading for Information: The Trash-N-Treasure Method of Teaching Note-Taking (Grades 3 - 12)

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"And remember, don"t copy out of the encyclopedia. Write it in your own words!" How many times have students heard this warning as they begin searching for information in the library media center? Students will copy out of the encyclopedia or other source unless taught effective note-taking strategies and given an authentic task that requires higher level manipulation of the located information. (For more information on authentic task development, please see "Authentic Products: The Motivating Factor in Library Research Projects," SLMAM December 1995) Reading for specific information and taking notes may be the most challenging step in the information problem-solving process. Students in grades 3-8 need many developmentally appropriate opportunities to locate and use information before mastering the techniques. By providing these opportunities in an information problem-solving process model, such as the Eisenberg and Berkowitz Big Six Skills Model (Eisenberg and Berkowitz, 1990) or Stripling and Pitts Research Process (Stripling and Pitts, 1988), students will work with a well-defined and focused task including researchable questions. "The real skill of note-taking lies not in the manual techniques for arranging material on a page, but in the cognitive techniques for looking for and asking relevant questions. Knowing what is important means knowing what it is important for having a sense of purpose" (Irving, 1985).

More than just extracting needed information, note-taking consists of three steps: Identification of keyword and related words in the researchable questions, skimming and scanning and extracting needed information. These steps begin after students have defined and narrowed the task, constructed researchable questions, and located appropriate sources.

Identification of Keyword and Related Words in the Researchable Questions

Once students have constructed researchable questions based on the information needed to complete the task or solve the information problem, they can transfer the questions to a data chart (McKenzie, 1979), other graphic organizer, or note cards. (See data chart on Example 1). The students should then underline the keywords and generate a list of related words. Demonstrate, using the overhead projector, how students will identify keywords and related words. Then allow students to underline keywords and generate a short list of related words for the questions on their data charts as the library media specialist and the content-area teacher monitor (See example 1).

Skimming and Scanning for Specific Information

Having organized the researchable questions on data charts or other organizer and identifying keywords and related words, students are ready to begin reading for information. This may be the most difficult task a student researcher faces. Teaching students to skim and scan a nonfiction or reference book will facilitate their search. Skimming and scanning "is to utilize text in as pragmatic a way as possible with a minimum of time and effort" (Cheek and Collins, 1985). Skimming requires the reader to read quickly and look for main ideas or supporting details in a paragraph (Phipps, 1983, 4-5). Skimming requires the reader to take in large chunks of text at one time. The reader is concerned with getting an idea of the whole passage. Comprehension does not depend on reading every word. Teach students to read the first and last paragraph of sections for summaries of the content and the first and last sentences of paragraphs to gain an impression of the topic (Cheek and Collins, 1985).

Scanning requires the student to "move his or her eyes quickly over a piece of reading material looking for

one specific point, the words they are looking for jump off the page at them. It is employed for pinpointing needed facts or ideas from the text or the index. It involves skipping words, but the emphasis is on recognition the reader knows what to look for and rapidly scans until words are found and closer reading can occur (Phipps, 1983. 4-5). Here is where students will look for keywords and related words.

Extracting Needed Information

Note-taking consists of four types: citation, summary, paraphrase, and quotation. The citation technique involves exact copying of specific facts (Stripling & Pitts, 1988, 116). Students should learn to take notes by omitting all words or phrases not essential to the meaning. The most important considerations in note-taking are accuracy and honesty. The student must not distort the author"s words or views, and give full credit if copying or quoting the author"s ideas (Irving, 1985.) The trash-n-treasure method supports the citation technique and teaches students how to eliminate unnecessary words and phrases.

The Trash-N-Treasure Note-taking Technique

After identifying appropriate sections in the source by scanning to locate keywords and related words in the table of contents, index, headings, subheadings, and captions, students are ready to begin extracting needed information. Direct instruction is necessary the first few times students are required to take notes for an assignment. Frequent review will help students become independent users of the process. Relate note-taking to a pirate"s treasure map (show one if necessary). The map itself is like the article or chapter of a book containing information about the topic. The X on the map, which marks the exact location of the buried treasure, is the section of the text containing needed information, or an "answer" for specific questions defined in the task. A pirate must dig for the treasure chest, tossing aside dirt, weeds, and rocks (trash). A researcher must dig to find words that help answer the questions (treasure words). He or she must "toss aside" unnecessary sentences, phrases, and words (trash words). Of course, these words are not trash to the original source, only to the researcher because they do not answer the questions defined in the task. Demonstrate this concept using an overhead projector and transparency of an encyclopedia article or section. The students should each have a copy of the article so they can follow along and practice the technique.

1. Show a prepared question, including the underlined keywords and list of related words. (See example)
2. Scan the article until the appropriate heading is located.
3. Place a slash at the end of the first sentence and read it. Ask "Does this sentence answer the question?"
4. If the answer is no, tell the students that that sentence is "trash" to them. Go on to the next sentence, placing a slash at the end.
5. If the answer is yes, underline the first phrase and ask if that phrase answers the question. If the answer is no, underline the next phrase and repeat the question.
6. If the answer is yes, read that phrase word by-word, asking which words are needed to answer the question these are treasure words. Circle those words, then write them in the appropriate place on the overhead data chart (see sample) or whichever organizer the students are using. Those that do not answer the question are trash words. Continue phrase by phrase and word by word until coming to the end of the sentence. Count the words in the sentence and then count the treasure words. Students are very impressed when you say, "The sentence has 17 words and I only needed to write four of them. I don"t know about you, but I would rather write four than 17!"
7. Demonstrate the process again, allowing the students to practice, using copies of the article. Allow students to independently practice a few times before they begin their own research. The library media specialist and teacher should monitor each student"s work, reteaching as necessary.

Once students understand the concept of "trash-n-treasure" words, they begin to write fewer and fewer unnecessary words. Third, fourth, and fifth graders can begin to understand the concept of not copying every word, but mastery should not be required.

When students have located and extracted adequate information for the stated task, encourage them to summarize as necessary and add written comments and reactions concerning the use of the notes in the final product or performance. To avoid plagiarism, the notes should be turned in with the final project, whether or not it is written. And, of course, the more creativity that the final project requires (Stripling and Pitts, 1988, 117), students have no reason to "copy from the encyclopedia."

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