

Combating the 'coverage' mentality

Using SIM to relieve classroom pressures

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'We both have a vested interest in this business of increasing the educational enterprise. Both teachers and students need to change to alter what happens'

The twin towers of state standards and mandatory testing dominate much of the education horizon today, heaping more pressure on teachers already burdened by too much to teach and not enough time to teach it in. Combined with the realities of academically and socially diverse classrooms, these pressures often times lead to a "coverage" mentality, in which teachers feel strongly pressured just to get through the material.

Acknowledging that the business of teaching is overwhelmingly complex and that there are no easy answers, University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning Director Don Deshler addressed these issues and the role of teachers during a recent presentation to California educators. Don's talk positioned the Strategic Instruction Model as an effective approach to handling classroom stress while moving away from the coverage mentality and toward a learning-centered approach in which mastery of important information takes precedence over memorizing minutiae.

"What I'm going to share with you questions the underlying assumption that if we get through the book, or cover the book, then kids are going to do well. I think that is an assumption we need to question," Don said. "Right now, what is happening in the coverage mentality, is kids get ex-

posed to a ton of cookies, the equivalent of facts. They don't get the cookie jars or the rubrics or the concepts within which to store and sort those cookies. When we have the big cookie jars in place, we can accommodate a lot of cookies.

"One of the big roles that we as teachers can play is to provide the structure and the shelving and so forth for kids in the way in which we organize the information and present it to them."

Two forces present in every classroom work counter to a teacher's best efforts: the Instructional Time/Content Explosion Dilemma and the Performance Gap. SIM provides ways to minimize the effect of these forces and improve the educational process for both teachers and students.

Instructional Time/Content Explosion Dilemma

As teachers are all too well aware, the amount of content they are expected to impart to students is not static. In fact, knowledge is growing at such a rate that it doubles every five years. At the same time, the amount of time available for teachers to spend with students is not appreciably different from 10, 20, or even 50 years ago. We call this the Instructional Time/Content Explosion Dilemma: Teachers are faced with shoehorning an ever-increasing mountain of content into the same limited instructional time year after year.

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The Performance Gap

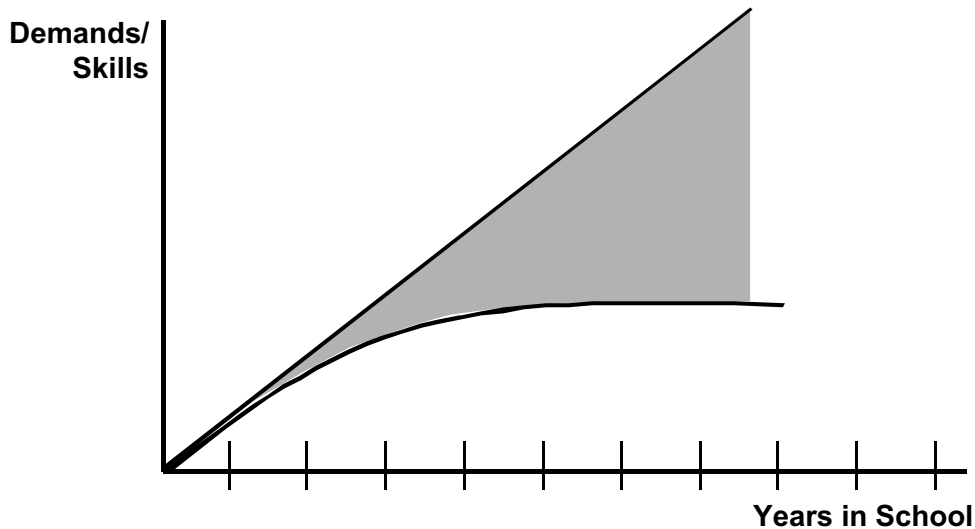


Figure 1

“The reality is we cannot, *cannot* teach it all,” Don said.

This reality forces teachers to make some tough decisions regarding what content is critical and what is of greatest worth to children.

“Are there things we can do to make this content more approachable? More understandable? More learner friendly?” Don asked. “That’s the process of teaching, isn’t it? That’s what teaching is all about.”

One way to do that is called Content Enhancement. “What we can do is identify critical content that is of greatest worth for kids to learn and let us focus our instruction on that. And then, let us present it in such a way that it’s easy to understand. Let us enhance it, make it visual, make it fun, make it ‘hands on,’ make it usable, organize it, take abstract things and make them concrete.”

“Our focus of change here is the

teacher. In other words, *we* are going to assume major responsibility for changing how we enter into the learning dynamic.”

The Performance Gap

The Performance Gap is characterized by a discrepancy between the skills students are expected to have and the skills students, especially those who are at risk, actually have. The top line in Figure 1 represents the skills students are expected to have. It increases steadily for every year of schooling. The lower line represents the skills students with learning disabilities are bringing to a learning situation.

“The older kids get, the further behind they get, the more discouraged they get. So the question becomes, ‘How can we close that gap?’” Don said. “What can we do to dramatically alter the trajectory of this line?”

In recent years, Don said, reme-

dial education has taken an almost developmental approach to skills instruction: “A one-year gain in one year’s time is sufficient.”

“It isn’t!” Don said. “If a kid’s on this path, they’ve got to double time, triple time, quadruple time, to get back. And they can.”

To help narrow the gap, students need intensive instruction to increase their skills. Learning Strategies instruction is one such option that has been proven successful in boosting students’ skills.

“Our focus here is to change how children learn,” Don said.

Research-based change

“So, you see, we both have a vested interest in this business of increasing the educational enterprise,” Don said. “Both teachers and students need to change to alter what happens.”

Three instructional conditions must be in place to support efforts to change: strong administrative support, intensive instruction, and the selection of research-based strategies (either those developed by KU-CRL or others) that are well designed, that have been tested, and that meet standards.

"I don't think all research is necessarily equal. Especially when it comes to administrators and teachers making what I consider to be life-changing decisions," Don said. "A life-changing decision is, 'I'm going to decide to adopt this curriculum or this instructional practice for my third graders.' The reason it's life-changing is this: You as a teacher may be in that third grade for 10 years. So if you go through that first year after you've adopted and you make the determination that wasn't the best decision, that's fine, you've learned, right? But what about those kids who spend one third-grade year in their life. It's life-changing for them. And so we need to make certain the things that we choose to do, at a minimum, do no harm."

Researchers at KU-CRL use several criteria to determine whether an instructional procedure is successful and effective.

"Our work has almost entirely been directed to the design of instructional procedures and instructional models that are sufficiently powerful to impact students who are struggling in school, but in as much as kids who are struggling in school don't do so in isolation, our belief is that in order to frame our research question or questions, we need to have input from those who are most centrally involved in providing direct services to students. And so, when we frame various research

questions and chart our research agenda, we have sitting around the table teachers, administrators, students, and parents, and so forth, who are grappling with the issue of trying to make it, trying to be successful," Don explained.

The results gained from this research then are evaluated in light of rigorous standards we have set for ourselves.

First, an instructional procedure must be palatable for teachers. If it isn't, teachers won't adopt it for use in their classrooms.

Second, the instructional procedure must have value and be perceived to have value by high-achieving and average-achieving students.

"We've done some research that told us that if a teacher has a desire to make some accommodations within an academically di-

verse classroom, she does it up to the point that the child who is on the way to Stanford starts rolling his or her eyeballs," Don said. "The moment teachers start to see high-achieving kids tune out, our research tells us, oftentimes, teachers will drop an instructional procedure that was designed to spread the net a little more broadly. The unspoken thing is 'I'm not going to lose the highest achievers at the expense of reaching the lowest.'"

Third, the procedure must be sufficiently powerful to have an effect on low-achieving students.

"The reality is, without disaggregating the data, you can have a subgroup of the class do well, and it can bring the whole mean up," Don said. "So when we do research on an instructional procedure, we disaggregate the data, and we look

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- Learn why the steps of the LINC Strategy have been rearranged. A description of the recent revisions to LINC is available at:
<http://www.ku-crl.org/2000con/lincs.html>
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at three subsets. We look at where the low achievers start, where the average achievers start, and where the high achievers start. After you use the magic widget, do they all go up? Do they all go up approximately commensurately?"

Our research results indicate that if we can't demonstrate improved results for all subgroups, over time we lose the subgroups we are trying to reach within an academically diverse class.

"This is a tough standard to hold an instructional procedure to," Don said. "But unless that's done in the initial research, unless that's done in the design of the instructional material and the instructional routine, I think when we place the label 'research based' on it, it really has some limitations that we should be aware of."

Two other factors are important when determining whether an instructional procedure makes a difference for students: Does the procedure result in statistically significant gains, and does it result in socially significant gains?

Statistically significant differences are those that occur because of the instructional procedure and not just by luck. Socially significant differences, Don said, pass the "school board test." He told the story of research results he saw presented several years ago in which student performance results before the intervention were 20 percent. After the intervention, results increased to 40 percent, a statistically significant gain.

"What kind of grade is the kid getting before the magic widget?" Don asked. "F. What's he getting after the magic widget? A higher F. It's not socially significant. It's not going to pass the 'so what' test. And that's critical. Are we putting kids in a position to compete? Are

Here's a tale of how one teacher used a creative version of the *Course Organizer Routine* to communicate to her students that she cared about them.

When Vicky received her class list in the spring, she started to learn something positive about each of the 130 students she expected in her fall classes. She talked to counselors, parents, and other teachers. She put what she learned to work on the very first day of the fall semester.

Day 1: A Sense of Community

On the first day of class, Vicky started by telling the students that it would be a great year for two reasons: "One," she said, "because I'm a great teacher, and two, because of what you bring to the class. You represent some fabulous perspectives and experiences. For example, let me tell you about..." Vicky proceeded to tell something unique about each student.

"It's such an affirming experience," Don Deshler, Center for Research on Learning director, said as he related this story. "To see these teenagers, juniors in high school, you could almost see them get puffed up. It was fabulous.

"It was communicating a host of things, that a high school teacher would care enough to do this, and that all these positive things were being said."

Then, Vicky turned her attention to some of the less positive things students needed to work on. But at this point, she did not talk about individuals. Instead, she said "I'll tell you about us as a group. There are some of us here who need to work on patience. There are some of us here who need to work on tolerance. There are some of us here who need to work on our memory skills. There are some of us here who need to work on our writing skills. Now, part of us being a community is we're going to help one another."

"See, she's creating a sense of community," Don said. "That's part of getting a course launched."

At the end of the day, Vicky cautioned students not to miss the remaining four days in the week. "I'm going to teach you the entire course, I mean the entire course, in the next four days," she told students.

Days 2 through 5: The Big Picture

For four days, Vicky laid out the big view of the course. She likened the course to a vacation. A vaca-

Big picture A creative

tion involves three parts: a the trip, and remembering set the stage for anticipation. The next several months w last month before summer remembering and reviewing

Vicky spent the rest of the She brought out 10 posters depicting big chunks—un board pictured four to six content. As she showed each ful human interest stories. ing the kids in. By the end finished presenting the big ished setting expectations the 10 course questions sh throughout the year.

"The expectation is that will be able to give deep, n answers to each of these 1 students.

Day 6: The

As the class proceeded, V referred back to the course lesson, or chapter. For exam of the course questions mig can Dream?" After the cla Revolution, they talk ab Dream was at that time. A Civil War, they talk about was for an African-Ameri guide their discussions th

One of the benefits of pr

Picture

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meaningful, broadly based
10 questions,” she told her

trip begins

icky and her students re-
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representing a broad overview

at the beginning of the school year and focus-
ing on a few critical questions is that the
teacher can then weave layers of deeper
understanding into learning opportunities
throughout the year. Because Vicky had told
stories about every era her class would
study, she could pause a discussion of pre-
revolutionary days and make connections to
her World War II story.

“How many history classes in the second
week of instruction are weaving content
from here to there?” Don asked. “All year
long, the tapestry gets woven across this
backdrop, using those 10 course questions.”

State Standards

To illustrate how the *Course Organizer Routine*, and
specifically course questions, can be aligned with
state standards, Don referred to a Washington state
geography standard, “The student observes and ana-
lyzes the interaction between people, the environ-
ment, and culture.” He then shared course questions
written by a Washington state geography teacher:
How do geography and people interact? How did
human interactions and the land influence the devel-
opment of different cultures and attitudes?”

These questions, which are aligned with and
worded similarly to the state standards, are posted in
the classroom and are the driving force behind the
class. The class returns to these questions continu-
ally throughout the year.

“As we do the research on this, the amount of
content that all kids in this academically diverse
class master and retain is markedly different than if
we just do the spray and pray approach,” Don said.

Aligning course questions with standards is a good
start toward meeting those standards, but it’s not
enough. Another key is creating a sense of commu-
nity, as Vicky did on the first day of class.

“We will never be successful in having kids meet
standards if we try to do it ourselves as teachers,” Don
said. “We need to create a community of learners
where kids feel safe, where they feel valued and
counted by the teacher, and where they feel a vested
interest and a responsibility for not only their learn-
ing but the learning of others in the classroom. And
the teacher has a great deal to say about creating the
environment within which those kinds of conversa-
tions and can take place.”

we putting kids in a position to
indeed be empowered to learn in-
dependently? And the standards
are high that we have to have
them meet.

“We can get kids to both a so-
cially and statistically significant
level that is meaningful, but our
work tells us it’s tough work to get
them there.”

Finally, the degree to which
students will maintain a skill or
strategy they have been taught
and generalize it for use in other
settings is important in determin-
ing whether the instructional pro-
cedure is successful and has merit.

Much of the work that has been
done in education doesn’t address
the issues of maintenance and
generalization. Often, the results
are “one-shot wonders,” Don said.
But if an instructional procedure
is to have lasting significance, it
must be powerful enough that stu-
dents continue to use it long after
the research is completed.

The Strategic Instruction Model

The result of holding ourselves to
such high standards in our re-
search is the Strategic Instruction
Model. SIM, with its complemen-
tary components of Content En-
hancement and Learning Strate-
gies, offers an integrated ap-
proach to address both the In-
structional Time/Content Explo-
sion Dilemma and the Perform-
ance Gap. It offers ways for both
teachers and students to change,
and it provides a framework for
working toward meeting state
standards and mandatory testing
requirements.

Content Enhancement

Content Enhancement is a way
of teaching an academically di-
verse group of students in which
four conditions prevail:

1. Both group and individual needs are valued and met.
2. The integrity of the content is maintained.
3. Critical features of the content are selected and transformed in a way that promotes student learning.
4. Instruction is carried out in a partnership with students.

Some Content Enhancement Routines help teachers think about and organize content, then present it in such a way that students can see the organization.

“Basically, we’re putting kids in a helicopter and we say, hey, hover above the trees. Let’s get a view of the landscape,” Don said. “And for the new learner going through content, that’s critical that you can see the beginning from the end and not get lost among all the trees and the details.”

Other routines help teach complex concepts so students gain a deep understanding and develop a shared vocabulary for talking about important information.

“Using the Concept Comparison Routine, for example, students and teachers look at individual characteristics of two or more concepts, identify characteristics that are similar or different among the concepts, develop a shared vocabulary for categorizing the characteristics, then summarize what they have learned.

Still other routines, such as the Quality Assignment Routine, help students do work in the classroom. All of the routines promote direct, explicit instruction.

“When we add a degree of explicitness, it helps kids who are struggling,” Don said. “Is it harmful for those who are doing well in class? No. As a matter of fact, it facilitates their problem solving. It facilitates their critical thinking.”

Using Content Enhancement Routines in this way takes more time than simply giving the definition of a concept before moving on. But the results in terms of actual student learning can be significant.

“If we are deliberate in care-

When we add a degree of explicitness, it helps kids who are struggling.

fully choosing that critical content, design some course questions, some unit questions around it, and then selectively choose some key teaching routines to help kids really get into it in depth, so they understand these things, then you can do all the supportive activities, the films, the group work around it. But this is at the core.”

The boxed story on pages 4 and 5 tells how one teacher used the *Course Organizer Routine* to launch a history course, add layers of depth to content that would be presented throughout the year, and grab student interest from day one. It also indicates how Content Enhancement Routines can be aligned to state standards, further increasing their effectiveness in a teacher’s repertoire.

Learning Strategies

As important as it is to use Content Enhancement Routines to help students see the structure of and construct mental shelving for organizing information, it is not enough for those who are lagging significantly behind.

“Some of these kids are hurting so significantly in terms of the basic skill level that they bring, that they need direct, explicit in-

struction to build up their skill base, their strategy base,” Don said.

SIM’s Learning Strategies fit into three main strands, or categories of skills: One strand addresses how students acquire information, the second helps students work with information once they acquire it, and the third helps students express themselves.

No single strategy is a panacea. For example, we have reading strategies that help students figure out what a word is, comprehend what they’re reading, acquire vocabulary, and understand the structure of text. All of these strategies are essential for a well-integrated, balanced reading program. Likewise, an array of strategies in other areas is necessary for student success.

“Anything that takes you down a path that just focuses on one thing is taking kids down the dumpster,” Don said. “It’s got to be well balanced.”

Conclusion

SIM’s components give teachers access to a breadth and depth of instructional procedures to address many of the challenges they face in the classroom. As a result, more students who are at risk now can realize success in school.

“We can teach kids how to learn. We can alter the life path they’re on. We can do it,” Don said. “Twenty years ago, fifteen years ago, we didn’t have an array of things to call upon. We do today. We do!”

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Vince Glaeser, former KUCRL staff member, for videotaping Don’s California presentation and providing a transcript of the session. His hard work greatly improved this article.

New manuals

Strategic Tutoring, Talking Together

The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning introduced two new manuals this summer: *Strategic Tutoring* and *Talking Together*.

Strategic Tutoring, written by Michael F. Hock, Donald D. Deshler, and Jean B. Schumaker, addresses the dilemma tutors face when forced to choose between helping students complete assignments or teaching them the skills they need to complete future assignments independently. *Strategic Tutoring* is a dramatically new vision of the tutoring process in which the tutor does both.

Strategic Tutoring involves four instructional phases: The Assessing Phase, in which the tutor assesses what academic task needs to be done and the student's usual approach to such a task; the Constructing Phase, in which the tutor works with the student to identify a strategy to complete the task; the Teaching Phase, in which the tutor models the strategy, checks the student's understanding of the strategy, and supports the student's learning and application of the strategy; and the Transferring Phase, in which the tutor and student celebrate mastery of the strategy and plan how the student will use the strategy in the future.

The *Strategic Tutoring* manual provides an overview of the process, describes how to conduct a strategic tutoring session, gives guidance for becoming a competent strategic tutor, and includes checklists, worksheets, a sample transcript of a strategic tutoring

session, role-play activities, and a description of a strategy called PREP for reading and comprehending textbooks.

The *Strategic Tutoring* manual is available without training from Edge Enterprises. The cost is \$12.

Talking Together, written by D. Sue Vernon, Donald D. Deshler, and Jean B. Schumaker, is the first manual in the new Community Building Series, which comprises methods for teaching students the concepts and strategies needed by community participants to help educators build learning communities in classrooms. The *Talking Together* instructional program is designed for introducing the concept of learning community to students and for teaching them how to participate respectfully in class discussions. Students learn how to take turns with classmates, give someone else a chance to speak and be heard, and to express respect and kindness toward others. The skills and concepts learned in this program are foundational to communication within communities and can be used by students throughout their lives.

The *Talking Together* manual introduces the instructional program and its associated skills and includes several cue cards, role-play situations, and assorted supporting materials for use with the program.

The *Talking Together* manual also is available without training from Edge Enterprises. The cost is \$12.

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