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# Using “TRIMS” to Promote Pre-Service Teachers’ Active Engagement with Assigned Readings

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## The Effect of a Reader Response Format, *TRIMS*, Upon Pre-Service Teachers’ Comprehension of Their Course Texts

It’s a Thursday morning at 8:30 AM and the junior level pre-service teachers are slowly meandering into the classroom for their literacy methods course. Within minutes they are all actively involved in the class that is conducted in a workshop format. Students are working together in partners or small groups, participating in discussion of the Power Point presentation, watching media presentations, using the Smartboard in their demonstration lessons, practicing interactive read alouds, and writing about what they learned. The classroom is abuzz with discussion and learning. Then it’s time to discuss the text or journal article readings assigned prior to the class session, and...silence ensues. It is a problem long confronted by professors in all disciplines. In fact, “Much recent research indicates that college students are not reading their textbooks” (Ryan, 2006, p. 135). How do we motivate students to read what has been assigned so that they are better prepared?

Much time and effort goes into selecting texts that will supplement the class discussions, PowerPoint presentations and collaborative activities. The texts are chosen to be a balance of research-based practices that will be useful to these students in their teaching, with the discussion of the theories and research that support those practices. Texts such as Debbie Miller’s, *Reading with Meaning*, Gail Tompkins’s, *Literacy for the Twenty-First Century*, and Patricia Cunningham’s, *Phonics They Use*, all offer valuable strategies and background that every beginning teacher of reading should know. The students in the class often remark that the texts they have for our class are some of the same ones their Supervising Practitioners in the field are referring to when planning.

We discuss the value of reading the texts and the fact that there is not enough class time in the semester to cover everything there is to know. Completing the assigned readings prior to class gives students the background knowledge they need to participate in class discussions, a chance to form questions, and time to think critically about the content. In addition, reading the texts is like “filling in the blanks” from the material that we do not get to complete in class. Also, these pre-service teachers take a licensure exam in our state of Massachusetts called Foundations of Reading, and the information from class, supplemented by the text readings, is invaluable to passing that exam.

Despite knowing and understanding this rationale, some students still do not complete the readings. Research has shown that college students often do not read the textbooks for various reasons (Lei, Bartlett, Gorney, & Herschbach,

2010; Berry, Cook, Hill, & Stevens, 2011). One reason, the same one cited by my students, was the lack of time, given all the other assignments and requirements placed upon them by a full load of classes. As one of my students put it, “Given all of the assignments in our methods courses, if something has to be eliminated, it’s usually the readings.” Another student remarked, “I really like the texts for this class because they are practical and have creative ideas to try, but I usually only skim the pages, because of time.” For other students, it was underestimating the importance of the texts and relying solely on the information covered by the professor in class.

In thinking about how to best solve this dilemma, I conducted a literature review on the topic of engaging students in higher education to read their texts, and spoke with senior, experienced professors. Through these methods, I found that several approaches to motivating students to read the texts were consistently suggested. One approach is the use of random or weekly quizzes that relate to the assigned readings (Gurung & Martin, 2011; Fernald, 2004). While I recognized that this extrinsic motivation (grades) might work, administering weekly quizzes was not a match for my teaching style. I wondered if the information would be learned only for short term purposes and not assimilated into their teaching. A second approach was the use of reader response journals. I really like this idea as it is also something I teach them to use with their own students. It highlights the reading and writing connection and allows some choice in their responses. I implemented this approach for two semesters. I told the students that I would randomly decide when I wanted to collect and read the journals and that they would get feedback from me in the form of comments on their journal responses.

Much to my disappointment, some students, both semesters, simply chose not to keep up with the journal (probably because they were not reading). Others had entries that were weak and really did not show a deep or critical processing of the material. Many times a quotation was extracted with a page number listed by it, with no reflection of the value or application of the quotation to their experiences. It was hard to decipher if students were really reading the material, or simply skimming and writing superficial journal responses. In other words, this approach wasn’t working either.

Reflecting on what it was I wanted my students to do, it occurred to me that it wasn’t simply reading, but **engaging** with the texts. I wanted them to learn the content and concepts in the texts, but also to use those strategies we know are critical in our literacy work with children. I needed them to relate the readings to our class discussion, find main ideas, learn new terminology and make connections to the text. I was asking them to do what we know research says is effective practice while reading. After all, this wasn’t simply information

they needed to learn to pass a test; it was material they needed to know in order to be effective literacy teachers. My desire was for them to be intrinsically motivated and value reading the texts as contributing to their learning and skills-base for their teaching profession.

This article describes one solution I discovered as a reader response strategy and used with pre-service teachers. The results of an action research project using this model will also be shared.

### **The Dynamic Act of Reading**

In Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory, comprehending is seen as a dynamic act. It is an interaction between the reader and the text that creates what she called, "the poem." It was exactly this theory that I wanted to uphold in choosing a reader response strategy to use in my course. Along the same lines of the Transactional Theory, Dorn and Soffos (2005) discuss four types of knowledge that good readers use to expand their comprehension: generic, text, strategic, and reflective. Dorn and Soffos (2005) state, "Deep comprehension depends on the dynamic interplay between the four sources of knowledge" (p. 15). Generic knowledge consists of the reader factors such as background knowledge, cultural influences, experiences and beliefs. Text knowledge consists of text factors such as the text structure, content, and vocabulary. Strategic knowledge is problem solving strategies, "...including cognitive strategies for sustaining and expanding the meanings of a text" (p. 16). The final component is reflective knowledge. For pre-service teachers this is one of the most critical knowledge types. "Self-reflection requires both a deep understanding of the content itself and the motivation to relate this information to personal goals" (Dorn and Soffos, 2005, p. 16).

Given this theory, I implemented a reader response strategy titled, TRIMS. It required that my pre-service teachers use all four knowledge types, as described above, for deep processing of the text material.

### **The Survey Routine-TRIMS**

The Survey Routine instructional strategy was originally intended for high school students and was developed by researchers at the University of Kansas, Center for Research on Learning. "The purpose of the routine is to make students aware of the main ideas associated with the reading passage and to help students focus on the most important information in the passage as they eventually read it" (Deschler, Schumaker, & McKnight, 1997, p. 2). When engaged in this strategy, students preview the text, make predictions about the content, form relationships to previously read material and prior knowledge, identify the text structure, name the main parts, summarize, and generate questions. The Survey Routine is based on three critical components, but for my own purposes with the pre-service teachers, I used only one component, the Trims Learning Sheet (TRIMS). The Trims Learning Sheet is a visual organizer that allows students to record important information from the text. It uses the acronym TRIMS to remind students to trim the reading passage. As Deschler and colleagues note, "When we trim something, we reduce it--for example, we trim the fat off a piece of meat so we are left with the best part" (Deschler, et al., 1997, p.

29). The components have been slightly adapted for use in the literacy methods course (see Appendix A). The adapted components of TRIMS for this research include: activating prior knowledge, learning new vocabulary, determining main ideas, summarizing, and making connections. In order to validate the inclusion of each of these components in the TRIMS learning sheet, a brief overview focusing on these individual areas will be discussed.

### **T-Title; R- Relationships**

The first components of the TRIMS Learning Sheet are designed to activate students' prior knowledge. Researchers have long validated the importance of building or activating prior knowledge (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007; Miller, 2012; Cooper & Kiger, 2009). There is a relationship between prior knowledge and comprehension that is not to be underestimated. Cooper and Kiger (2009) state, "Prior knowledge affects construction of meaning for everyone--emergent reader as well as competent reader" (p. 77). The pre-service teachers are no different from the elementary students they will teach, in that using their prior knowledge as they read helps "link" new information to existing information so that it is better understood, remembered, and assimilated.

In the *T* step of TRIMS, students record the title of the chapter(s). In the *R* component (Relationships) students consider the following questions: What do I already know about this topic? How does this reading relate to our class discussions on this topic? What new information was added to my prior knowledge after reading this content? How does the information presented in this reading relate to previous readings and upcoming topics on the syllabus? For example, in reading about phonics instruction students often state the relationship between phonemic awareness, that they read about previously, and its relationship as a precursor to phonics.

Another piece of the Relationships component is thinking about how the material applies to state and national standards. Depending on the reading's topic, students may relate the readings to content standards from the Common Core State Standards (2009), or if the reading addresses more pedagogy or even professional dispositions, students often make the relationship to the Massachusetts Professional Teaching Standards (2012) or professional organization standards such as those from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) and the International Reading Association (IRA, 2010). This helps the pre-service teachers become more familiar with the standards and also conveys the importance of how the content they are learning applies to their role as teachers.

### **I-Important Terms**

After the Title and Relationships, students then complete the *I* portion of the TRIMS learning sheet. The *I* stands for Important Terms from the readings. In completing this section, students are asked to list and define vocabulary from the readings that they were previously unfamiliar with and deem important to understanding the content. Depending on their individual background knowledge, some students have many words selected and others only a few from the same readings. Morrow and Gambrell (2011) write, "Studies that focus on self-

selection of vocabulary suggest that when students choose words that they need to learn, they learn the word meanings more successfully and retain the meanings longer than when a teacher chooses the words" (p. 230).

Graves (2009) suggests that the vocabulary a person uses influences others' judgments of their competence. In Education, like any other profession or discipline, we have terminology or jargon that is specific to what we do. Knowing these terms is vital to pre-service teachers being able to speak knowledgeably on a topic, prepare for job interviews, collaborate with colleagues, pass licensure exams, and succeed in furthering their Education degrees. When reading on the topic of word study, students define terms such as phonics, high frequency words, morphology, affixes, suffixes, digraphs, word roots, etc. In our discussion of vocabulary instruction for the classroom, it is emphasized that children must be actively involved in learning new vocabulary and that the definitions need to be in their own words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). The pre-service teachers are asked to do the same. It's expected they will write the definitions in their own words or with examples provided, not simply copy them from the text. This contextualized vocabulary learning is important to the understanding of the content. After all, "Words are the currency of education" (Morrow & Gambrell, 2011, p. 225).

### **M-Main Ideas**

As Cooper and Kiger (2009) note, "Strategic readers identify the important information in what they read" (p. 145). The M component of the TRIMS learning sheet is designed to get students reading strategically and thinking about the main ideas. Just as we discuss the comprehension strategy of determining importance and how to help our young readers achieve this goal, we connect it to the importance of the pre-service teachers' readings as well. The material for the course readings is content-laden and as such the students are, "...called upon to extract factual information from the text and to do so in the most efficient way possible" (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007, p. 218).

Students often use bullet points to list the main ideas of the readings. They are told not to write everything they read about, but to address those main ideas that are new to them. In this way they are constantly relating what they read to their prior knowledge, and if it is new information that is deemed to be important to the content, they list it as part of their Main Ideas section.

### **S-Student Connections**

One of the most important components of the TRIMS sheets is this last piece, where students are asked to think beyond the text. Dorn and Soffos (2005) write about two levels of comprehension: surface and deep. At the surface level students recall information from the text. "The deep level of comprehension is a conceptual level of understanding that results from the reader's ability to think beyond the text, thus integrating the author's intentions with the reader's point of view" (Dorn & Soffos, 2005, p. 14). The student connections section helps move the pre-service teachers toward deeper comprehension. In explaining this section of the TRIMS we discuss how strategic readers are always analyzing and synthesizing the text as they read, while integrating it with

their background knowledge. In the student connections section they can write freely about their personal connections to the material, share anecdotes from the field experiences, or contribute opinions on the topic. Often students generate questions in this component that come up as they read, or use their critical literacy skills to reflect on the content.

In our discussion of comprehension strategy instruction with elementary students, we discuss the three types of connections: Text- to-Self, Text-to-Text and Text-To-World (Miller, 2012). As they learn about these connections, the pre-service teachers note that they often use these same types of connections in completing their TRIMS sheets. This is invaluable to their understanding of how to best think aloud and model this strategy for their own students someday. It is truly applying what they are learning.

This S (Student Connection) component is also important to me as the instructor. It is in reading their perspectives on the content and their experiences that I learn more about my students. I learn what they value, what their own school literacy experiences were like, how their home situations contributed to their own literacy development and often students will write about literacy instruction they are seeing in their field placements and how it relates to the content of the readings. It is there that they might write, "I saw an example of shared reading in my field placement last week" and go on to share how helpful it was to now put a label with the type of instruction they witnessed. It is also here that they question what they are seeing in their field placement if it doesn't match what they are reading. This provides me the opportunity to bring up some of these issues in class and the students contribute to the conversation, because it focuses on issues they divulged in their TRIMS.

### **Action Research**

#### **Question**

After using the TRIMS for a few semesters, I felt compelled to complete an action research study that would help determine if my students were more successful using this strategy rather than other reader response strategies. I posed the question: Will students who use the TRIMS as a reader response strategy score higher on a textbook content quiz than those who use a different reader response strategy? In addition, I wanted to know how students perceived completing reader responses in general and then specifically examine their thoughts on using the TRIMS strategy.

#### **Participants**

The semester I conducted this action research study, I had 18 students enrolled in a literacy methods course at a state university. Seventeen of the students were traditional undergraduate Early Childhood coordinate majors in their second semester junior year or first semester senior year. They followed as a cohort through the Education course sequence and had all had the same prior education courses. One student was a non-traditional student earning her post-baccalaureate teaching license in early childhood education. It should be noted that the literacy methods course at our institution is six credits, covered in two courses. All of these student participants in the research project had previously

taken the first course with me and were required to use the TRIMS format in that course. For the purposes of this study, the students were in the second literacy methods course, with me again as their instructor.

**Methodology**

The 18 students were randomly assigned to either of two groups: the TRIMS group or the Choice group. The first group was required to respond to the readings using the TRIMS format and the second group was also required to respond in writing to the same readings but had choice as to the format of their responses. All of the students had taken the prerequisite literacy course with the same professor. All students passed the first Massachusetts Test of Educator Licensure (MTEL) called Communication and Literacy Skills and all had a minimum grade point average of 2.8. The students were asked to read and respond to the textbook chapters or journal articles assigned on the syllabus each week. The responses were collected twice during the semester and two tests were given that contained questions taken directly from the textbook test bank.

**Results**

In reviewing the average scores on the two content textbook tests, a comparison of the two groups shows those students who were assigned the TRIMS reader response format scored slightly higher than the Choice reader response group (see Table 1). It should also be noted that only 14 students out of the 18 are represented in this comparison data, because 4 students did not complete the reader response assignments. Of these four students, two had originally been assigned to the TRIMS group and two had been assigned to the Choice group. These four students still took the tests and their average scores are compared to the other two groups in Table 2. These particular students scored significantly lower than the other two groups on both tests. This is most likely a result of not completing the assigned readings.

**Table 1**

*Mean Test Score Comparison for TRIMS and Choice Groups*

Group	Mean Score (%) Test #1	Mean Score (%) Test #2
TRIMS Group	86	80
Choice Group	82	77

**Table 2**

*Mean Test Score Comparison Including Group Who Chose No Reader Response*

Group	Mean Score (%) Test #1	Mean Score (%) Test #2
TRIMS Group	86	80
Choice Group	82	77
No Reader Response Group	79	53

Although the average results between the TRIMS group and the Choice group differ only by 4 and 3 points respectively, it is important to point out the reader response options that were used by the Choice group. This group could choose to respond in writing using any format preferred. Three of the seven chose to use a format very similar to TRIMS, in that they recorded terminology, main ideas and connections. These students had used TRIMS in their prior methods class with this professor and felt as though it worked best for them. These particular students outperformed their peers in the same Choice group (see Table 3). Other options utilized by the Choice group were basic outlines and narrative summaries.

**Table 3**

*Choice Group: Individual Scores Comparison*

Students	Test #1 Score (%)	Test#2 Score (%)
1*	92	76
2	76	74
3*	90	76
4*	90	80
5	70	70
6	80	82
7	76	78

Note: A \* indicates student who chose the TRIMS format as the reader response option

The students in both groups were also asked to write a brief comment (anonymously, identified only as TRIMS group or Choice group) on an index card, about the reader response options. Several of their responses are mentioned here. One student from the TRIMS group commented, "They (TRIMS) allowed me to force myself to read all of the reading assignments for the class and take away the most important topics and vocabulary I needed to learn." Another student from the TRIMS group wrote, "I used TRIMS! I felt like they (TRIMS) were more structured and gave me a better understanding of what to look for when I was reading. I really loved the reader response assignment because it gave me use of the course books, which other classes did not do." Of the Choice group, one student wrote, "I chose to do TRIMS this semester. I did this because I found myself looking much deeper into the text and connecting information back to myself while writing the TRIMS. They (TRIMS) were helpful and informative and I have been using them as we go along to study for the MTEL (MA Test of Educator Licensure)." Another student from the Choice group noted that she used her own version of the TRIMS in that she recorded only main ideas. Another student in the Choice group wrote, "I did not use TRIMS and found it easier. When I would do the TRIMS last semester I would have to cut down the amount of information from the text. I noticed that I learn better and comprehend easier when I type out exactly what I highlighted while reading." Two students wrote that completing reader responses is simply, "busy work" and this instructor assumes these would be two of the four students who did not complete the assignments. These two responses were the only ones not favorable toward reader response, regardless of method used to respond.

## Discussion and Implications

The results of this action research study reinforced my belief that reader response is important to include in the course and is effective at assisting students to comprehend material that is covered in the texts. It also creates improved class discussion when students have read the material and can offer their own thoughts and connections. Although not intended, the fact that four students chose not to do any reader response actually added valuable data to the study, because these students' scores were significantly lower than the other two groups. This verified that writing in response to the reading, regardless of the format used, is better than no written reader response at all.

In this study, the TRIMS group did outperform the Choice group, but only slightly. However, because some of the Choice group students voluntarily chose to use TRIMS, the difference may have actually been greater than what was shown if they had used alternative response options. The qualitative feedback from students, via their written comments, verified that the majority of the students saw value in using the TRIMS, or a similar reader response option, in learning the course material.

Going forward, I will continue to introduce the TRIMS format and require it during the first course, but will probably allow students choice in whether to use it as is, or adapt it to better match their needs during the second course. Either way, the emphasis will continue to be on having the pre-service teachers engage with the text and journal readings, while going beyond surface comprehension, into deeper connections.

### Summary

It is apparent from this action research that reading the texts and journal articles, and writing in response to the readings, contribute to the successful preparation of pre-service teachers in a literacy methods course. The key was using a structure, the TRIMS, which allowed the pre-service teachers to engage with the text and use multiple reading strategies. Now, when the discussion of the readings begins in class, it's often difficult to get them to stop. But this professor considers that a good problem to have!

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## Appendix A

(Adapted TRIMS Format)

### Title of Article or Chapter

#### **Relationships:**

In this section you will write a brief paragraph about how this particular reading relates to one or more of the following: the course content, the MA Professional Teaching Standards, the MA Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy, learning theories, or class discussions.

#### **Important Terms:**

List and define any important or new terms discussed in this text. Remember that this will be a study tool for you in the future, so include terminology you will need to review.

#### **Main Ideas:**

Using a bulleted list, highlight the main ideas covered in this reading.

#### **Student Connections:**

In this section, write briefly about any personal connections, text-to-text, or text-to-world connections you made while reading. This is where you can also apply what you have read, to what you are witnessing or doing in the field experiences.

Form created by M. Correia and adapted from Deschler, D., Schumaker, J., & McKnight, P. (1997). *The survey routine*. The University of Kansas.

## Appendix B

(Student TRIMS Sample)

#### **Titles:**

Chapter 1 in Miller: Guiding Principles; Chapter 7 in Tompkins: Expanding Students' Knowledge of Words

#### **Relationship:**

The vocabulary section of this reading most closely relates to the MA Professional Standard 2a: plans curriculum and instruction. Vocabulary lessons are most effective when taught explicitly. Since reading comprehension is directly related to vocabulary, it would be important to teach vocabulary regularly and explicitly. We have also been discussing fluency, and expanding a student's vocabulary will help him to become a more fluent reader.

#### **Important Terms:**

*Gradual release of responsibility:* scaffolding from teacher directed to assisted to student independence

*Guided practice:* gradually giving children more responsibility for using different strategies in a variety of authentic situations

*Independent practice:* when children begin to apply strategies in their own reading

*Word sorts:* a vocabulary activity that uses lists of words for students to sort by a specific principle

*Word wall:* an alphabetized chart posted in the classroom listing words the students are learning

*Think-aloud:* when teachers stop while reading and think out loud to model for students how to use context clues or another strategy to determine the meaning of something unknown

*Quick write:* an activity done by students to explore a topic through writing

#### **Main Ideas:**

Structure a reading mini-lesson to occur during a large block of time so that you can model thinking aloud and demonstrate different strategies for reading the text.

- Interacting with the text, drawing inferences and determining the important parts of a text are all signs of being a proficient reader.
- 4 stages guide children to independent reading:
  - Teacher modeling and explanation of a strategy
  - Guided practice and scaffolding
  - Independent practice along with feedback
  - Application of the strategy in real reading situations
- Genuine relationships with your students that are built upon trust help build a good, working literate environment.
- Showing children is always more effective than just telling children something.
- There are 4 levels of word recognition:
  - Unknown word: children don't recognize the word
  - Initial recognition: students have seen or heard the word before or can pronounce it, but do not know its meaning
  - Partial word knowledge: students know one meaning of a word and can use it in a sentence
  - Full word recognition: students know more than one meaning of a word and can use it in several ways
- Students learn words incidentally all the time (through independent reading and sustained silent reading, SSR).
- Students with larger vocabularies are more capable readers, and they know more strategies for figuring out unknown words than less capable readers do.

- Word studies, word walls and word sorts are all fun and interactive ways to work with new or troublesome vocabulary words/lists.

**Student Connection:**

I remember in first grade that we had a lot of posters on our classroom walls that were centered on words. We had posters of trees and they were full of words with the same rime. They were our word family trees. As I moved up in elementary school our word posters became more complex, however, they were always on the wall for a reference. Having them always around was helpful and soon I was familiar enough with the posters that I could visualize the poster and not need to find the actual poster when I struggled with a word.

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