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Toward Inclusiveness In Classrooms

This website is dedicated to promoting inclusive schooling and exploring positive ways of supporting students with autism and other disabilities. Most of my work involves collaborating with schools to create environments, lessons, and experiences that are inclusive, respectful, and accessible for all learners.

Readings



Rewriting History, and Nine Other Ways to Adapt Textbooks

In almost every subject area, in nearly every grade level, students are expected to use a textbook as a resource. Many, however, are unable to access the content in their textbook due to struggles with reading and related skills such as information processing. Therefore, teachers in inclusive classrooms must adapt textbooks so that students with different reading and comprehension levels can learn classroom content. Adapting textbooks may involve making changes to the text itself, supplementing the text, or giving students strategies to learn the material in some other way.

The ability to adapt common classroom materials such as commercial textbooks is an essential for teaching in a diverse, inclusive classroom. For some students, these adaptations are the difference between mere inclusion in a learning experience and true and meaningful participation in a learning experience. In addition, the adaptations created for some often cause deeper and more meaningful learning for many. That is, when adjustments in lesson materials, content, and delivery are made, students with a range of different learning strengths and needs profit.

Adapting Textbooks for Students in the Inclusive Classroom: 10 Ideas

There are undoubtedly dozens of ways to adapt textbooks for the students in a diverse classroom. Ten quick and easy strategies are offered here:

1) Rewrite History: Adapt Content

Adapting textbooks does not actually involve rewriting history in the way we traditionally think about it, but it can involve rewriting the history book. One of the most common adaptations teachers make to the book is to change the actual content in some way. Content may need to be changed to better fit the learners' age, experiences, abilities, or reading level. Whole pages or chapters may be omitted or shortened for some of these learners. Other pieces of the text may simply be adapted. Teachers can adapt text in a number of ways:

- rewriting passages, sections, or chapters (simplify the language or make it more complex)
- cutting out or crossing out certain passages, sections, or chapters
- highlight or emphasize certain sentences or paragraphs
- supplementing the text with easier or more challenging books or articles on the same topic
- summarizing content into bulleted points

In some cases, students can help the teacher with these adaptations. For example, students with a lot of knowledge and expertise on a subject may want to create a set of summary notes that can be used by students needing material that is less complex than that provided in the textbook (see www.sparknotes.com for help in the construction of summaries).

After the text has been modified, adaptations can also be made during classroom lessons related to the textbook. Some students may only be responsible for learning a handful of concepts and for "reading" a few sentences from each chapter, while others may need a more challenging unit and may want to do research to add content to the chapter.

2) Review, Rewrite

One teacher, concerned that her students needed support to understand the dense and complex language of the social studies textbook, found a way to review and simplify the content for all. After an initial reading of the chapter, the students met in small groups and created their own version of the text complete with illustrations. The learners were directed to include the chapter's main ideas and to provide any details, drawings, or concepts that would help them retain the information outlined in the chapter.

Similarly, in a second-grade classroom, students had an opportunity to rewrite and "publish" (by binding and placing in the school library) stories from their basal readers. Teachers used this as a tool for assessing student comprehension and students used it as a way to practice their storytelling skills.

3) Show Instead of Tell

The reading task is often less complex when pictures, diagrams, and other graphic representations accompany or replace parts of the text. Therefore, many students find text easier to comprehend when it is supplemented with a lot of visual information. Images to support concepts can be found in magazines, newspapers, or on the web (e.g., Google Images). As an alternative, teachers may have students create additional visual supports for each chapter. Artistic students may be especially interested in taking on this task.

For example, a high school biology teacher found that some of his students who used English as a second language were struggling with new vocabulary words. He began asking different students to choose a "vocabulary word of the day" from the textbook. Students then took turns trying to illustrate the word on chart paper. This artistic and collaborative exercise often drew laughter from the class as students attempted to draw terms such as "photosynthesis" and "meiosis". This exercise, while designed primarily to support students learning English, enhanced the vocabulary of all learners and was, therefore, eventually used in all of the teacher's science classes.

4) Let Them Listen

When time and resources permit, the teacher may read parts of the textbook to the classroom or to certain learners. Audio books are also an option. Some textbook companies provide audio or web-based supplements of their books as part of the textbook package to the school. In other cases, the teacher may need to create his or her own audio. Some students may want to assist in creating these resources. In one school, the theater club created a set of audio recordings for a high school English teacher as a way to practice reading dramatically.

5) Highlight Key Concepts

Another way to adapt textbooks is to help students focus on the most important concepts presented in the chapter. The teacher, along with the students, can decide which concepts, terms, and ideas are the most important for all students or for individual students to know.

Several different tools might be used to help students learn these concepts. Advance organizers might be introduced, for instance. Teachers can demonstrate how to use this tool and then have students teach each other and review together using their organizers. The teacher might also use the following techniques to showcase key concepts:

- provide a graphic organizer of the content;
- give a list or set of flashcards of important vocabulary words (or set up electronic flashcards on a classroom computer or on a student's phone);
- ask students to highlight the main ideas on each page (or have them electronically mark words or passages on an e-book version of the text);
- encourage students to place sticky notes on passages they don't understand or on those they view as important to remember; or
- share the key concepts with learners and ask them to find them in the text.

6) Move Beyond the Book

To supplement text reading, the teacher should provide additional materials that will boost learning. Books, magazines, newspapers, videotapes, DVDs, visuals, models, interactive CDs, and web pages are all examples of materials that will help students understand course content in a deeper way. Consider these examples:

- When students in a science classroom studied the systems of the human body, the teacher also brought in a physical model of the body to help students see how the systems interact. He also showed individual models of the heart, the brain, and of a cell.
- One high school history teacher supplemented his textbooks with other textbooks from competing companies so students could compare and contrast the ways in which events and people were represented in the books. This helped the students understand point of view and critically analyze the use of secondary sources.
- Students in a fourth-grade math class solved the fractions problems in their textbooks by “dissecting” and enjoying pizzas, slices of oranges, and bags of candies. Students also drew graphs and charts on mini-chalkboards and hunted for real-life fractions problems in newspapers.
- Students reviewed their chapter on regions of the United States and then got to play related review games on iPads in small groups.

7) Fracture the Chapter

To use this strategy, the teacher divides the class into small groups and assigns one section of the chapter to each group. Each small group is then responsible for reading their section, mining important points from that section, and creating a poster or Power Point presentation to illustrate these concepts/points. Each group takes a few moments to share the critical elements from their section of the text and to explain their visual. Then the presentations are displayed around the room and students can be given time to walk around and study the work displayed. The visuals then serve as a learning tool throughout the unit.

8) Peer Support

Students can also work with a partner to learn from the textbook. Students may take turns reading passages or one student may read while the other takes visual/graphic notes, copies down main ideas, or jots down questions that emerge from the reading. Another version of this peer support strategy is the cross-age support strategy. In this version, older students interested in tutoring or helping younger students can visit the younger child’s classroom and act as the reader while the younger child functions as the critical listener. Again, the role of this individual can be to take notes or respond to the reading in some way (e.g., answering questions, drawing pictures).

9) Learning in Color

Teachers may find that some students learn best when information is coded for them in some way. To reduce the amount of material that must be studied and to help the learner focus on the content that is most important, the teacher may develop some type of color system for the text. For example, one teacher used the following code to highlight the books and related notes of all students with learning disabilities in her classroom:

- blue-key vocabulary words
- yellow-main ideas; content that is likely to be on the test
- pink-interesting details

Codes may change for different learners and may be used for different purposes. In one classroom, the teacher used a green highlighter pen to mark concepts that one of her students with autism would be responsible for learning. Since his goal was to master only a few concepts in each language arts unit, the teacher carefully chose and coded those concepts she thought would be most meaningful and useful for him.

10) Classroom-Created Textbook

In one fifth-grade classroom students worked and learned from two different texts: the commercial textbook and the classroom-created version they compiled throughout the year. The classroom version was divided into chapters just like the commercial book and the classroom book contained the exact same concepts as the “official” text. The difference was that the students wrote, illustrated, and otherwise constructed the classroom book. In the chapter on measurement, the students included a list of everything they had measured in the classroom during a math lesson. They also included digital photos of all of the measurement tools they found in their school. In the section on statistics, they included several student-created surveys and data-collection instruments. Several students also added a colorful spinner they created to teach and learn about probability. Students referenced and studied from both texts throughout the year.

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