

Book Review

Do I Really Have To Teach Reading?

By Cris Tovani

Reviewed by Jeanmarie Hamilton Boone

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While in the throes of my simultaneous pursuit of a single subject credential in Language Arts and acquisition of practical teaching experience through the Emergency Credential for the Los Angeles Unified School District, I discerned a huge chasm between what we were required to teach and what we needed to teach. It was commonplace (and still is) to find test scores of high school students in the early primary grade range, but we were expected to teach standards set at the ninth through twelfth grade level. It just didn't make sense. Were kids no longer learning to read in the elementary school and reading to learn at the secondary level? My colleagues and I asked ourselves, Do we really have to teach reading in high school?

The latest of Cris Tovani's resourceful, easy-to-read books, *Do I Really Have to Teach Reading?*, gives teachers additional tools to grapple with the never-ending issue of secondary reading, with the hope of actually succeeding at it. Each chapter is a valuable toolkit of effective reading comprehension and thinking strategies masterfully crafted to bridge the gap between what secondary teachers are prepared to teach — content — and what they must *first* teach — reading. Tovani, who taught elementary school for ten years before becoming a high school reading specialist and English teacher, is a nationally recognized consultant who

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continues teaching high school students full-time. She knows her K-12 reading, her teacher audience, and the students.

In Chapter 3, "Parallel Experiences: Tapping the Mother Lode," Melanie, a science teacher, speaks for many secondary teachers: "If someone could teach these kids to read, I could teach them science." In response, Tovani challenges content teachers to teach reading across the curriculum by modeling for students their own successful reading and thinking strategies. She suggests it is incumbent upon the vocational teacher to demonstrate the skills required for reading blueprints; similarly, the math teacher must show students her own processes for understanding math word problems. Tovani is not alone in her belief that once students perceive the relevance of text to their lives they will come to better understand it.

An ongoing concern many teachers have is trusting students to work efficiently in collaborative group settings. In Chapter 7, "Group Work That Grows Understanding," Tovani admits she too was "tempted to give up on group work... but because of [her] continued reading of professional material explaining the benefits of small group instruction and discussion," she did not. In light of her own rich primary and secondary teaching experience, she argues convincingly why teachers should not abandon this potential well of learning.

Along with her helpful suggestions for achieving content-based learning objectives, Tovani also adds a list of impediments to avoid. A personal favorite of mine is one of the strategies in Chapter 2 that draws on her own experience with Erin, the class smart-aleck whose habitual retort after completing any class reading was, "So what?" Tovani allowed this frustrating experience to pave a new path in her post-reading instruction. Now, instead of being peeved, Tovani requires those who have finished reading to return to the text and answer, "So what?" The student work samples show just how well they respond to this challenge. What was once a challenge to her as a teacher is now a strategy for increasing reading comprehension.

Finally, in Chapter 8, "What Do I Do With All These Sticky Notes?," Tovani's demonstrates how she uses conversation calendars, learning logs, and self-assessments to monitor her use of strategies and stay connected with student learning. She includes actual copies of each of these for her readers' review and possible adaptation. I was particularly impressed by Tovani's own running self-check in which she lists a series of strategies she uses over time to increase students' thinking and reading comprehension. Leading each category is a statement such as, "On October 2nd we added more ways to make ourselves make sense of the text by..." By date she lists strategies that the class has employed:

visualizing, re-reading, slowing down the reading pace, underlining, talking to others, asking questions, making connections, setting a purpose and a host of other research-based gems, proven to increase reading comprehension.

This handbook is a must-have for any new or veteran teacher who has become disillusioned with the need to teach reading to secondary students in grades 6-12, or any teacher desirous of a refurbished bag of instructional strategies that can only inspire students to greater comprehension of content.