

A White Paper on the Impact of Project Semiotics: Implementing AceReader Software and E-books to Raise Standardized Reading Scores

by Craig Luchsinger

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Abstract

This article documents significant historical events and trends that have helped shape the policies and practices of education at 20 public schools in Chicago, IL that serve minority populations of which at least 90% qualify for Title I federal assistance. The following information is provided: (1) a fact-based overview of a consulting project for impacting standardized test results on reading skills (2) a qualitative analysis on the best practice of implementing AceReader software in conjunction with public domain e-books.

Information on Author

Craig Luchsinger is President of MindCorral Educational Ventures, Ltd, an education consulting firm, and a literacy teacher at George Morgan Sr. High School, Upper Kalskag, Alaska. Since 1989 he has worked collaboratively with educators in research/teaching efforts designed to prepare and impact teachers/students in multicultural schools in Chicago, Japan, and Western Alaska. He has a doctorate from the Department of Comparative Literature, the University of Chicago, with a major in Japanese Literature and a minor in Anthropological Linguistics.

OVERVIEW OF IMPLEMENTING PROJECT SEMIOTICS

The Chicago Public School system has achieved national recognition for school reform efforts. Despite realized achievements, much work remains to be done, as is indicated by the fact that two-thirds of the elementary schools have been recently identified as in need of ‘emergency measures.’¹ Since participating in the implementation of a gifted-talented program for urban minorities in 1989 at Crane H.S. on the West Side of Chicago, my educational focus has been literacy for impoverished minorities. The following reports facts about the implementation of Project Semiotics at 20 Chicago Public Schools during the 2000-01 school year.

During the spring of 2000, the Chicago Public Schools requested that I create a consulting initiative, called Project Semiotics, integrating AceReader software with public domain e-books. The objective was to show teachers/students the basic principles of mathematically coordinating reading rate (in terms of words per minute) with reading comprehension (in terms of a percentage of correct recall). The goal was to impact student achievement on standardized tests, in this case, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (hereafter, ‘I.T.B.S’).

This entailed designing an in-service for teachers, another for students, and a plan for integrating this training with on-site implementation of the software and content.² Project Semiotics was presented to the President of the Board of Education, and implemented at 20 schools during the 2000-01 school year.

The project was based on a simple premise: should students demonstrate mastery over more verbal signs within a given year, this will impact their performance on standardized literacy assessments. In general, students were permitted to select e-books,

¹ “Nearly Two-thirds of C.P.S. Labeled by State as In-Crisis” Chicago Tribune, 11/12/01

² 40 classic e-books were selected, from Peter Pan to “Essays by Frederick Douglas” from the database of Project Gutenberg (www.promo.net), currently the most important source of public domain e-books.

for practice, that were considered appropriate for their level. They were subsequently able to discern their comprehension through the grade level tests imbedded in the software. This opportunity was a significantly ‘teachable moment’ insofar as students were able to assess, through autonomous learning, their ability levels in terms of frustration/ instructional/ independent at the correct grade level of content.

Once familiar with the software, and how to load an e-book, students were given free reign to read as much as they wanted. Certain schools were able to provide more time for practice, than others. Those that did, as witnessed through on-site monitoring, realized double-digit growth in their reading scores. This ‘teachable moment’ represented the nexus of achievement that consequently doubled the standardized reading scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (3.0%) at these schools compared to the city-wide average of the C.P.S (1.6%).

ANALYSIS OF BEST PRACTICES

Simply put, in my view, significant growth in literacy skills occurs when students are given the freedom to explore content at their own rate and on their own terms. Project Semiotics was based on the premise that children live in a world of signs, yet adults live in a world of signs and power. During the course of implementation, a number of children understood this point. From a qualitative perspective, this is why the reading scores rose.

From a quantitative perspective, it is a simple fact that should a student in the primary grades double her reading rate, her exposure to verbal signs shall increase two-

fold. The average American reads at a sixth grade level, at 225 words per minute, with, at the most, 30 percent recall. AceReader software can assist in significantly impacting this measure.

What is most interesting about the potential of this software in conjunction with public domain e-books is the extent that it creates a space for autonomous learning and the development of multiple intelligences. Keeping in mind Gardner's work on the, at least, nine intelligences, it is clear that this software directly cultivates those that are linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, kinesthetic, and even musical, not to speak of the secondary influence on the interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and existential intelligences.³ Without out a doubt, the most exciting sources of content, the Internet and Project Gutenberg, can be integrated into the best practices of using AceReader software

There is a limitless potential in the appropriate application of proficiency reading software, e.g. AceReader Pro, in conjunction with leveled e-books. In one sense, teachers and students are currently overwhelmed from the endless opportunities offered by cyberspace for great content to study. The best practice of implementing AceReader with excellent results in significant gains in the areas of autonomous learning and performance on standardized tests. In this view, the former issue is far more important than the latter. Accomplished members of global society are capable of processing verbal signs at a rate that far exceeds 225 word-per-minute at the sixth grade reading level. Project Semiotics, in conjunction with AceReader software and appropriate e-books was able to attempt such a goal—and succeeded with terrific results.

³ Armstrong, Thomas (2000). Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

I am currently implementing Project Semiotics in classrooms at George Morgan Sr. High School, to test the application of these principles within the context of serving Native Alaskan (Yup'ik) students whose background is rural and impoverished. Should you have any questions regarding the information provided in this white paper, or desire the services of a consultant from MindCorral Educational Ventures, Ltd., please feel free to contact me at either cluchsinger@ani.kuspuk.org or 907.675.4371.

