

CASE STUDY:

Summary Street Helps Students Gain Deeper Understanding in Science and Social Studies



Situation

For years, education experts have focused on literacy in the younger grades, but there's a new national awareness of the difficulties students face when they are still struggling with reading by the time they get to middle school. Although they might be able to read words on paper, these students can't explain or analyze what the words mean, making it all the more difficult to get through demanding subjects such as math, science and social studies.¹ Adding to that challenge is that in most school systems, there is little formal reading instruction after the primary grades², and teachers rarely have the time or the resources to provide additional literacy instruction along with the content curricula they are required to cover. However, at two New Jersey middle schools, teachers and students found an online technology solution that helped students develop reading skills and, subsequently, understand instructional content on a much deeper level.

Improving Literacy Through Science and Social Studies

Summary Street[®], a Web-based product from Pearson Knowledge Technologies (PKT), has been used and tested in schools around the country as a literacy improvement tool, most often in language arts classes. With Summary Street, students receive guided practice in writing summaries, a proven method of increasing comprehension. Previous research shows that the Web-based format and instant feedback helped students understand what they were reading on a more meaningful level. But could Summary Street work the same way if the classroom focus wasn't on reading or writing, but on another academic subject?

"They even surprised themselves at how well they did. They loved the instant feedback and making their own corrections to see if they could do better."

To test this, PKT researchers partnered with their colleagues at Pearson Prentice Hall to combine the use of Summary Street with science and social studies texts at two New Jersey middle schools.

Michelle Rhodes, a science teacher at Frelinghuysen Middle School, integrated Summary Street into her classroom while teaching with Prentice Hall's "Science Explorer: Earth's Changing Surface." With the text available in Summary Street, students read about the formation of the earth, fossils, geological history and why scientists study the earth's surface. After reading the text, they typed a summary of what they just read and received immediate feedback about how well they covered the content and whether they copied the text or put it into their own words. At Hackensack Middle School, students used Summary Street to learn about the colonies and the Civil War with Prentice Hall's social studies textbook, "The American Nation."

¹ Vaishnav, Anand. "Middle Ground: Shattuck Professor Catherine Snow's Project on Adolescent Literacy," Harvard Graduate School of Education, September 2005.

² Aratani, Lori. "Upper Grades, Lower Reading Skills: Middle, High Schools Find They Must Expand Programs for Older Students," *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2006.

Results

Rhodes immediately saw that Summary Street made a difference, especially with lower level students. "Students tend to skim through things, but Summary Street made it fun to understand the text," she said. "They were reading to understand it instead of just trying to read to get through it. They were doing less copying from the book, and actually learning the material."

At Hackensack Middle School, teachers observed that Summary Street really motivated their students to write, even the ones who normally hated writing. Teachers also liked that it "removed [them] from the equation" – writing the summaries was a task students could complete on their own by seeking out their own answers in the text rather than going straight to the teachers, gaining self-sufficiency and enjoying the process.

The teachers also used Summary Street in other ways that supported instruction. Since teachers can view feedback screens on one student or a whole classroom, teachers at Frelinghuysen would use these assessments to look for weak spots so they could go over certain points again in class. And the social studies teachers at Hackensack said they would love to use the report function of Summary Street for parent-teacher conferences to give parents a snapshot of how their children are progressing.

Overall, teachers and students both felt that Summary Street was user-friendly. Most of all, the teachers were thrilled to see that Summary Street gave their students a renewed sense of accomplishment and enjoyment of learning. "They even surprised themselves at how well they did," said Rhodes. "They loved the instant feedback and making their own corrections to see if they could do better."

For more information on Pearson Knowledge Technologies, call (303) 545-9092 or visit www.PearsonKT.com

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Frelinghuysen Middle School, in Morristown, N.J., is a suburban school comprising 991 students in grades 6-8.

Hackensack Middle School is located in an urban area and has an enrollment of 720 students in 7th and 8th grades.

Benefits

- Content available in textbooks and online so students can read anywhere
- Provides valuable teacher assessment tool on both the classroom and individual level
- Students improve comprehension skills on their own, giving them a strong sense of accomplishment
- Helps students truly understand a subject instead of reading just to "get through it."