Decoding Science Regents Questions:  
A Strategy for Decoding Regents Examination Questions

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Introduction

Teaching students how to train themselves to solve or "tackle" Science Regents questions is not an easy task. The following strategy may help students to understand the exams that they are expected to perform well upon at the end of the year. In my experience as a teacher, I have found that most students understand the concepts that the questions are asking, but have trouble figuring out what is being asked.

Step 1: Identifying the Strategy

Students will follow a thinksheet to help them gain confidence in understanding how to go about solving the exam questions. The thinksheet teaches them that problem solving is a step-by-step process. By repeated use of the thinksheet, students will ingrain a mode of thinking that will be available for recall when they are asked to perform. This strategy should give students who are stumped by a question a method or a battle plan to help them answer the question.

Step 2: Modeling the Strategy

As the teacher, I would distribute students a copy of a past Regents exam. I would call on the students to voluntarily pick any question. I would model for the students how to go through the thinksheet, demonstrating the first step in the flow chart. Deciding whether or not the question requires the student to "use a
flow chart. Deciding whether or not the question requires the student to "use a resource" or to "use your own knowledge." After leading the students through four or five questions I would have the students answer ten questions, deciding where on the thinksheet they think the questions would end up.

The eventual hope is that students would become less reliant on the thinksheet, so that in time the students would be able to decode the Regents' questions without having to refer to the it.

Step 3: Scaffolding the Strategy

While students are working on questions given to them, I would walk around the room assisting students who needed help. One of my hopes is that during this time students should realize that some questions fit into more than one category. Some students may notice that some questions require more than one step or more that one resource in order to correctly answer the question. Some questions may require a combination of the two.

Step 4: Providing Additional Practice

As in most situations the learning curve for each student is not the same. Some students will need additional help. Once I feel that the class understands the strategy as a whole, I will use regular unit tests as a guide or measuring stick to locate students that could use more help. The students with scores below 85 will be assigned the questions that they did not answer correctly. I will continue to assign corrections from tests for the remainder of the year.

Conclusion

I find that this model or flow chart does not make all students immediately geniuses. What it does do is it gives students a starting point. It is anticipated that with this model ingrained into their heads students who have test anxiety will be provided a comfort zone.

Suggestions for Adapting the Strategy in other Grades or Content Areas

This strategy is easily changed or modified to other grades or content areas. The flow chart is applicable to all science Regents exams in grades 9-12.

Thinksheet

Copy is attached.
Decoding Regents Test Questions

Step one
Read the question:

Step two
Use your own knowledge
Use memory or recall information
Use logic or apply a concept

Step three
Use a resource
Use graph or picture from the question
Use Reference Tables