
Meyer, C. K., Stewart, T. T., Moorman, G. B., & Brozo, W. (2012). Discipline literacy: Looking back to move forward. *American Reading Forum Annual Yearbook* [Online], Vol. 32.

Discipline Literacy: Looking Back to Move Forward

Carla K. Meyer
Trevor Thomas Stewart
Gary B. Moorman
Appalachian State University

William Brozo
George Mason University

Introduction

A few semesters ago, a secondary History teacher candidate approached a professor after the final class of their discipline literacy course. The student shared with her that he found the course to be very valuable. He told her how the course helped him recognize the role of literacy in the history classroom and how he hoped to incorporate the things learned in his classroom someday. She was thrilled the student found the course beneficial and reminded him to include what he learned in the unit for his internship. However, the student informed her that his History methods professor instructed the class not to include anything taught in the literacy course in the unit. She was crestfallen and spent a great deal of time pondering why the History professor would say this.

The above anecdote highlights the conflict between literacy specialists and content-area teachers and professors that inhibits efforts to help students reach their potential. Draper, Broomhead, Jensen, Nokes, and Siebert (2010) have argued that the perception that instruction should be either literacy-driven or content-driven has created a *literacy-content dualism*, which divides teachers instead of uniting them in their efforts to facilitate learning. It seems to us that the conflict is a result of breakdown in communication. Our example with the literacy professor, History professor and student exemplifies this breakdown. When communication between the content expert and the literacy expert breakdown, misunderstandings and misgivings flourish. By collaborating, the literacy professor and the History professor could have modeled an environment in which their teacher candidates observed instruction fostered by collaboration and designed to meet the needs of the student. Literacy specialists must remember that the content

teacher is the expert in the discipline, and therefore is literate in the discipline. It is crucial that literacy specialists do not appear arrogant about how instruction should take place in content-area classrooms. Meanwhile, content-area teachers must recognize that their facility with the content, processes, and principles of their disciplines can often cause them to overlook the reality that their students will often require scaffolding to successfully “read” content-specific texts. For example, a Trigonometry teacher’s ability to interpret a graph without consciously thinking about the processes he or she used to interpret the graph need to be overt to the neophyte student. Opening the door to communication and collaboration makes it possible for literacy specialists to share their knowledge about literacy and offer insight into the instruction necessary for students to become literate in the disciplines. It is crucial that content-area teachers realize that Middle and High School students (and college students as well) are generally in need of assistance in coping with content-area literacy tasks.

Conceptual Framework

We approach our work from a perspective that recognizes that each discipline brings unique literacy demands to the learner. We believe that instructional strategies can be adapted to specific disciplines. In our view, content-specialists and literacy specialists would benefit from clarification of a number of key conceptual elements related to content-area literacy. Moreover, we find it helpful to remember that each discipline has a unique Discourse (Gee, 2008) that must be demystified when someone seeks to become literate in that discipline. These “Discourses are ways of being” that are central to the culture of a discipline or social group (p. 3). These ways of being include the content-specific vocabulary, processes, and procedures that experts in a discipline have mastered through years of immersion and study. The key, in our view, is to foster collaboration between content-specialists and literacy specialists that can enhance instruction in ways that make these Discourses available to students.

To facilitate this collaboration, we have found it useful to distinguish between “acquisition” and “learning”. This distinction is common in the literature on second language acquisition (Krashen, 1988). In fact, we see many parallels between learning a second language and learning how to read. For example, both rely on the metalinguistic knowledge of the native language. Acquisition is the primary way children master their native language. It is informal, implicit, based on experience, concrete, practical and context dependent. In contrast, learning is formal, explicit, based on instruction, abstract, flexible, and generalizable. For older children and adults, complex knowledge and skills are usually both learned and acquired, with some emphasis on one or the other. In order to foster collaboration and assuage the concerns of content-area teachers who, quite often, feel overwhelmed by unclear mandates that they teach literacy skills, it is important to clarify two key concepts related to notions of reading and literacy

The key point is that reading—the ability to decode text and arrive at a basic level of comprehension—is primarily learned. Acquiring this skill requires instruction by a teacher (or parent, or sibling, etc.) and attention and effort on the part of the learner. We see literacy as the ability to purposefully use reading and writing, as well as other communicative skills. Literacy is primarily acquired, requiring participation in activity that is personally and socially relevant. It is important conceptually to recognize it is not the role of content-area teachers to help their students *learn* how to read. They are not professionally prepared and it is not part of any set of

reasonable content goals. However, it is their role, and within their professional expertise, to help students *acquire* literacy within their discipline.

A second important conceptual distinction is the difference between content literacy strategies and discipline-specific strategies. Content literacy strategies tend to be thought of as generic approaches to reading in content areas because the strategies were design to work across the disciplines. According to Brozo, Meyer, Steward, & Moorman (2011), the generic approach may be thought of as “outside-in” because the strategies are pushed into the process of reading and learning (see Figure 1). On the other hand, a discipline-specific literacy approach tends to require highly developed specialized understanding of text. This approach requires teachers to become aware of the nuances of the Discourse of their disciplines. As such, also according to Brozo et al, the discipline-specific approach may be thought of as “inside-out” because the text itself and the goals for reading the text dictate the reading processes (see Figure 2).

Figure 1.
Outside-In Skills

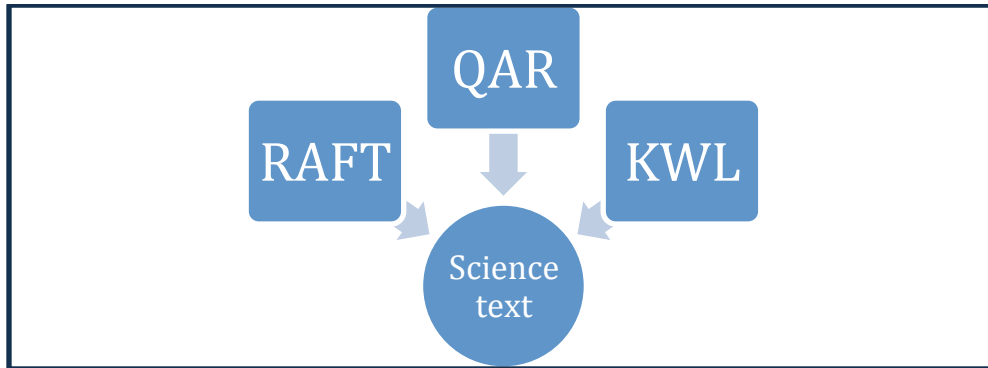
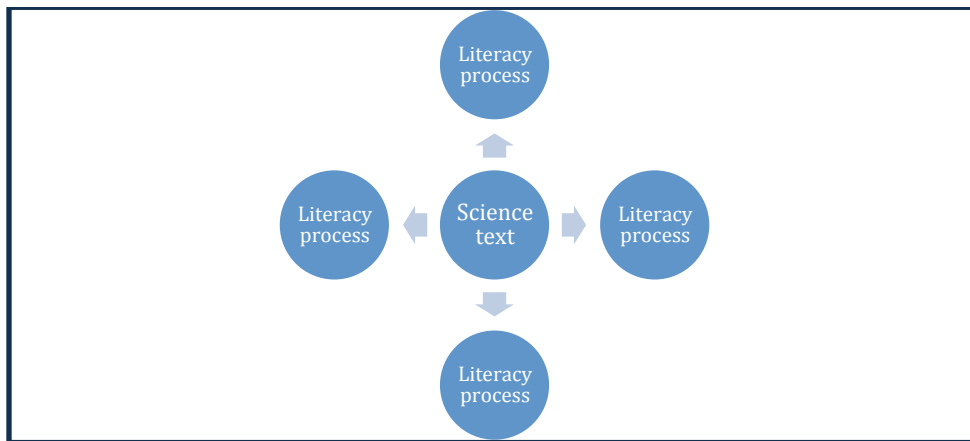


Figure 2
Inside-Out Skills



Finally, a third conceptual consideration we feel needs attention is the theoretical lens needed to foster communication and collaboration. We feel any conversation about discipline-specific literacy must be situated in classrooms and educational contexts (middle, high school and university). As such our viewpoint is framed using a pragmatic lens (Dillon, O'Brien, & Heilman, 2000) that attends to socially-situated problems whose solutions contribute broadly to a more democratic way of life. A pragmatic lens merges the contributions from the research literature and school-based practices in the search for solutions to existing challenges. Pragmatism allows us to explore discipline literacy without the constraints of a single theoretical lens in search of a practical solution.

Historical Background

At first glance, tensions between content-area teachers and literacy specialists seem to date back to the beginning of the content-area reading movement in the early 1970s. However, a stroll down memory lane indicates this is an old and recurring debate. In the early 20th century, scholars debated how students best learned to read. Gray (1919) contended that reading could and should be transferred to specific subject areas. Thorndike (1917) and Yoakum (1928) both argued that reading in the content class would help students address the differing demands of the discipline.

The 1920s saw the emergence of content reading as topic of research. In 1925 Gray conducted content reading research and in the same year, the *Yearbook for the 24th National Society for the Study of Education* focused on reading across the content fields (Whipple). Interests in content-area reading continued through the 1930s and 1940s. McCallister (1936) published the first book on differentiated reading needs in content areas. McCallister argued that every teacher should provide guidance in reading, and Bond & Bond (1941) published *Developmental Reading in High School*. In the 1950s, with the onset of the Cold War, education began to focus on keeping pace with the Soviet Union. During this era Flesch (1955) authored *Why Johnny Can't Read*, which ushered in an era that narrowly focused reading instruction on phonics. Comprehension generally and content-area reading specifically became secondary issues.

The 1970s saw a reemergence of interest in content literacy. In 1970, the late Hal Herber authored *Teaching Reading in the Content Areas*. During the same decade Herber at Syracuse University established the Reading Research Center, and within the literacy community scholars emphasized the application of generic strategies to various disciplinary texts. During the 1980s, cognitive psychology played a large role in the evolution of learning strategies across the content areas. In this movement, strategic processes for reading and thinking about text (e.g. QAR, micro- macro-text structures, summarizing) encouraged students to approach content reading in a deliberate and systematic manner. At the same time, the field was beginning to recognize the importance of domain-specific knowledge.

Recent Developments

Serious criticism of content-area reading and support for a disciplinary literacy alternative have begun to emerge. Moje (2007) asserted that the only way to create a socially just disciplinary curriculum is through practices that imbue youth with expertise and critical dispositions to challenge the authority and hegemony of disciplinary knowledge. She argued that generic literacy strategies are inadequate for this goal. In addition, Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) raised several concerns about generic content literacy strategies. First, they questioned whether generic strategies are efficacious for secondary disciplinary teachers. Shanahan and Shanahan also asserted that generic literacy strategies are behind the resistance from secondary teachers to embrace literacy in the content areas and argued that secondary pre-service teachers need to know the unique literacy demands of each discipline. Draper (2008) asserted that high-quality secondary content teachers utilize inside-out literacy practices that are organic to their disciplinary topics and cannot be improved upon with generic literacy strategies. However, at this point in time, research to support the claims of these critics of generic literacy strategies is anemic.

We agree with the critics that the over-generalization of content literacy strategies is problematic. However, we argue that using both the discipline-specific approach and generic strategy approach can be effective in assisting students to become discipline literate. The discipline-specific approach offers several advantages. First, literacy instruction integrated with a specific discipline avoids forced application of strategies that may be inappropriate for the text. Instead, reading strategies are informed by the text, which encourages cognitive flexibility. In addition, the discipline-specific approach offers opportunities to emphasize critical reading of text to challenge how knowledge is constructed, and to increase engagement by privileging student identities and experience.

Nevertheless, the discipline-specific approach may create challenges that prevent adoption in the secondary classroom. The discipline-specific approach requires teachers to understand and be able to teach processes used by experts in the discipline. These processes are generally acquired as experts engage in discipline-specific activity. Therefore, experts may not be consciously aware of these processes. As a result, it may be difficult to render them as strategies, difficult to model and difficult to teach to students. In turn, time spent modeling could take away from time spent engaged in reading and discussing text. Finally, because the strategies are unique to each discipline, strategies are not transferable to other disciplines, which could create confusion for some students.

Likewise, the generic-strategy approach has both its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of the generic approach is that teachers and students can develop expertise with a core of evidence-based literacy strategies that in turn creates a common reading vernacular. In addition, because students repeatedly encounter the strategies, they can develop independent strategic reading routines. However, as critics have pointed out, since these strategies may not be specific to the disciplines, teachers and students may fail to make appropriate modifications to the strategies to fit specific text and reading expectations.

Over the past decade, state and national standards have evolved to reflect the literacy

demands of the 21st century. The newly adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) exemplify this focus on literacy. The literacy strand of CCSS not only emphasizes the importance of literacy in the English Language Arts classroom but within a variety of subjects as well (i.e. science, social studies, and technical areas). Given the increasing expectations placed on secondary teachers in public school settings, it is not unreasonable to suggest that we as secondary teacher educators must reevaluate how we prepare content-area teachers. Those of us committed to literacy instruction in the disciplines welcome the opportunity to discuss how we might create 21st century pedagogy to better address the specific literacy demands placed on our students who will be teaching in secondary disciplines.

Problems Court Discussion

The discussion portion of our Problems Court provided much insight from our colleagues. Vocabulary and the ability to actively engage in dialogue or text about the disciplines, seemed to be the major focus of conversation. Many participants emphasized the nuances of the disciplines, the role language plays and the unique Discourse of each discipline. Without question, the audience believed an understanding of the language precedes students' ability to participate in the Discourse of the discipline. Another thread of the conversation explored the challenges of teacher knowledge in regard to the disciplines. Several participants shared anecdotes about teachers who have a solid understanding of their disciplines but do not fully understand how to scaffold their students' literacy growth in the discipline. We see this as indicative of the reality that many content teachers have not had the opportunity to consider how their intimate knowledge of their content allows them to unconsciously work within the Discourses of their disciplines. In our view, this represents an important issue that literacy specialists can address in their efforts to collaborate with content teachers.

Other participants in the Problems Court shared stories of teachers who, they believe, do not have strong understanding of their disciplines and overly rely on generic strategies that may or may not foster literacy in that particular discipline. In our view, these anecdotes served as reminders that literacy specialists can be important resources for teachers who are struggling to master the Discourses of their disciplines. When this dynamic exists, literacy specialists can work with these teachers to help them develop the content-specific knowledge needed by helping these teachers unpack and explore the nuances of their disciplines. In sum, the participants in the discussion recognized a need for change; a move away from the century of varying perspectives and rift that has not served our students. As one participant stated, "We are holding onto the model of conflict from the 20th century. How can we revisit the past, make changes, and make the learning come alive for the students?"

In recent years, some members of the literacy research community have urged researchers to view literacy development more comprehensively (e.g., Dillon, O'Brien, & Heilman, 2000; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004; RRSF, 2002; Tracey & Morrow, 2006). For instance, in their critical essay, Dillon et al. (2000) censured the literacy community for its division -- the result of differing theoretical perspectives. Dillon and colleagues urged the literacy community to move beyond the internal discord and embrace research that is not limited by a single theoretical perspective. This message did not go unnoticed. Purcell-Gates and colleagues (2004)

advocated a model that embraces literacy development situated in socially constructed literacy practices. In other words, Purcell-Gates et al. did not view literacy development through a single lens. Instead, they attempted to create a new model in which both cognitive and sociocultural practices affect literacy development. We feel that such a widened lens may be necessary to develop a model for discipline literacy in the 21st century.

Enacting a Collaborative Perspective

We believe that developing a widened lens for viewing the nuances of content literacy is crucial for the development of a more collaborative relationship between content teachers and literacy specialists. For example, the sociocultural perspective reminds us that we must remain aware of the need for teachers to help students make connections between school-based knowledge and literacies and their lives outside of school. As Draper et. al. (2010) noted it might be difficult “to demonstrate how adolescents might use their new understandings of molecular bonding outside of school settings, even though science teachers agree” that it is important to do so (p. 13). Using a collaborative model, a science teacher and a literacy specialist might create a project in which students develop presentations (e.g. Webpages or digital stories) that highlight the destructive effects a chemical spill might have on a local watershed. Engaging in a project like this would help students make connections between their newly developed knowledge of molecular bonding and their community. The science teacher would be able to assist the students in their efforts to explore and describe the effects of the chemicals leeching into the watershed. Similarly, a literacy specialist would be able to help uncover some of the nuanced vocabulary and processes that would need to be explicated to make the presentations accessible to community members. Myriad possibilities exist for collaboration between both teachers and the students on this sort of project. Moreover, engaging students in such a task would enable them to make concrete connections between complex, discipline-specific content and their lives outside of the classroom. Imagining possibilities like these and bringing them to discussions of how we can improve content area literacy instruction is an important first step in moving away from a divisive model of discipline literacy in order to create an atmosphere of collaboration and inclusion that will help students and teachers reach their full potential.

References

- Bond, G. L., & Bond, E. (1941). *Developmental reading in high school*. New York: Macmillan.
- Brozo, B., Meyer, C., Steward, T., & Moorman, G. (2011). New perspectives on disciplinary literacy. Problems Court presentation, American Reading Forum, Sanibel, FL.
- Dillon, D.R., O'Brien, D.G., & Heilman, E.E. (2000). Literacy research in the next millennium: From paradigms to pragmatism and practicality. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35 10-26.
- Draper, R.J. (2008). Redefining content-area literacy teacher education: Finding my voice through collaboration. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78(1), 60-83.
- Draper, R. J., Broomhead, P., Jensen, A. P., Nokes, J. D., & Siebert, D. (Eds.). (2010) *(Re)Imagining content-area literacy instruction*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Flesch, R. (1955). *Why Johnny can't read*. New York: Harper.

- Gee, J. P. (2008). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (3rd Edition). London: Routledge.
- Gray, W. S. (1919). *The relation between studying and reading*. (Proceedings of the fifty-seventh annual meeting of the National Education Association, pp. 580–586). Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Gray, W.S. (1925). A modern program of reading instruction for the grades and high school. In G.M. Whipple (Ed.), *Report of the National Committee on Reading: 24th yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part 1* (pp.21-73). Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing Company.
- Herber, H. L. (1970). *Teaching reading in the content areas*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Krashen, S. D. (1988). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Prentice-Hall International
- McCallister, J. M. (1936). *Remedial and corrective instruction in reading: A program for the upper grades and high school*. New York: Appleton-Century.
- Moje, E.B. (2007). Developing socially just subject-matter instruction: A review of the literature on disciplinary literacy teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education* 58, 263-268.
- Purcell-Gates, V., Jacobson, E., & Degener, S. (2004). *Print literacy development: Uniting cognitive and social practice theories*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- RAND Reading Study Group. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Arlington, VA: RAND.
- Shanahan, T., & Shanahan, C. (2008). Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content-area literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78(1), 40-59.
- Thorndike, E. L. (1917). Reading as reasoning: A study of mistakes in paragraph reading. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 8, 276-282.
- Tracey, D.H., & Morrow, L.M. (2006). *Lenses on reading: An introduction to theories and models*. NY: Guilford.
- Whipple, G. (Ed.). (1925). *The twenty-fourth yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Report of the National Committee on Reading*. Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing.
- Yoakam, G. A. (1928). *Reading and study: More effective study through better reading habits*. New York: Macmillan.