

Content Area Reading and Disciplinary Literacy

A CASE FOR THE RADICAL CENTER

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Content area reading and disciplinary literacy offer different—and sometimes divisive—perspectives on teaching students to read subject matter texts. How can we rise above philosophical differences for the good of students?

In recent years, disciplinary literacy has garnered a great deal of attention both as a policy concern (e.g., Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Lee & Sprately, 2010) and as the focus of research (e.g., Dillon, O'Brien, Sato, & Kelly, 2010; Draper, Broomhead, Jensen, Nokes, & Siebert, 2010; Faggella-Luby, Graner, Deschler, & Drew 2012). Advocates of discipline-dependent literacies have been voicing serious doubts about the efficacy of the longstanding notion that every teacher is a teacher of reading. Calls

for more nuanced applications of this idea have been around for at least 20 years (O'Brien & Stewart, 1992). However, the “every teacher a teacher of reading” notion is so embedded in the secondary literacy vernacular and consciousness that many in the field have failed to consider the argument that this paradigm is outmoded and largely ineffective (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

We believe that many scholars and teachers have become so entrenched in their philosophical perspectives that there is a dearth of productive dialogue about this issue. We are concerned that a false dichotomy between content area literacy and disciplinary literacy is emerging from this lack of communication. We are not alone in this belief. Draper et al. (2010) have argued that an artificial *literacy-content dualism* is being created, which hinders healthy discussion about how to effectively teach students literacy in the content classroom.

In this commentary, we add our voices to the conversation about content area literacy as well as offer our perspectives on the recent calls for alternative practices grounded in disciplinary literacy. We conclude by advocating compromise based on honest,



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intelligent dialogue between literacy specialists and content area teachers.

Perspectives on Content Area and Disciplinary Literacy

Books, articles, commercial programs, professional development, and teacher preparation classes continue to be based primarily on an approach to content area literacy, critics claim, that has remained largely unchanged for nearly one hundred years (Mraz, Rickelman, & Vacca, 2009). Current research and practice have been heavily influenced by the work of the late Hal Herber and are based on the belief that general reading and writing strategies can find expression in a variety of content classrooms.

It is further believed that these strategies will increase engagement in reading and learning, improve literacy skills and abilities, and lead to greater knowledge acquisition (Brozo & Simpson, 2007; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2010). These beliefs are supported by research that has accumulated over decades (Alexander & Jetton, 2000; Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Meltzer, 2002).

We acknowledge the limits of this “outside-in” approach in which generic strategies are pushed into the process of disciplinary reading and learning. Indeed, some research suggests that students may be hindered by certain strategies (Alvermann & Hynd, 1989; Wade, Trathen, & Schraw, 1990). Dole, Brown, and Trathen (1996) found that “high achieving readers comprehend more when they used their own preferred strategies than when other strategies were imposed on them through instruction” (p. 82).

Disciplinary literacy approaches are based on a fundamentally different assumption. Unlike the outside-in approach of generic content reading, disciplinary literacy evolves from the inside out because the text itself and the goals for reading the text dictate the reading processes. For Shanahan and Shanahan (2012), “disciplinary literacy emphasizes the unique tools that the experts in a discipline use to engage in the work of that discipline” (p. 8). To do disciplinary literacy, Moje (2008) called for literacy scholars to assist content area teachers in locating

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the literacy practices unique to their disciplines. She suggested that “it may be most productive to build disciplinary literacy instructional programs, rather than to merely encourage content teachers to employ literacy teaching practices and strategies” (p. 96).

In their conception of disciplinary literacy, Draper and Seibert (2010) urged a broader definition of what counts as literacy and text, as in “the ability to negotiate (e.g., read, view, listen, taste, smell, critique) and create (e.g., write, produce, sing, act, speak) texts in discipline-appropriate ways or in ways that other members of the discipline (e.g., mathematicians, historians, artists) would recognize as ‘correct’ or ‘viable’” (p. 30).

Taken together, advocates of this view of disciplinary literacy see as its purpose the development in students of something much more than the ability to read and write in the disciplines. Their idea is that students should “become” members of a disciplinary culture. Although that is a desirable outcome for students interested in specializing in a discipline, like Heller (2010), we are not convinced this should be the goal of content area instruction for all students. We are especially concerned, moreover, about what a disciplinary literacy curriculum might mean for struggling adolescent readers. Faggella-Luby et al. (2012) demonstrate that although disciplinary literacy is a “potentially powerful idea, [it] cannot replace general strategy instruction for all adolescent learners because adolescents who struggle with reading and writing do not possess the foundational skills and strategies necessary to learn proficiently” (p. 69).

In spite of the seemingly opposing perspectives on content area and disciplinary literacy, we would like to see the field avoid creating what might be a false dichotomy and instead consider how a blend of practices from both approaches can serve the needs of *all* students.

Moving Toward the Radical Center

All theoretical frameworks are tested when they are put into practice. That is what teachers do with theoretical frameworks when they meet with challenges of teaching each day. Strong adherence to a single theoretical perspective is a luxury that real teachers with real students cannot afford. This belief has led us to advocate for a pragmatic approach—the radical center. We believe, therefore, that calls for the general content area literacy approach to be replaced by one that focuses solely on disciplinary literacy is

unproductive. After all, even Shanahan and Shanahan (2008), who argued the case for disciplinary literacy, find room for generic content literacy strategies within their developmental paradigm.

The critique of the generic content area literacy approach appears to be organized around two broad issues. One is that the general strategies' approach has failed to achieve what its advocates tout because of disciplinary teachers' resistance to the idea and practices of content literacy (Dillon et al., 2010; Draper et al., 2010). The second is that the real goal of disciplinary instruction in science, math, social studies, and literature is to develop in students the capacity to think, read, and write like an insider or expert, and that generic literacy strategies are inadequate tools for meeting this goal (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

With respect to the issue of teacher resistance to content area literacy, in our own experience we have come to recognize that resistance is often related to how generic strategies are offered to teachers. If they are forced on teachers blindly and uncritically, then resistance may be more likely. If offered with sensitivity to context, teacher agency, and purpose, then there is likely to be less resistance.

We have witnessed firsthand the benefits and transformative power of an approach that encourages teachers to explore feasible and relevant contextual applications of generic content area literacy strategies. For example, while working as a consultant on a curriculum reform project in Louisiana, Bill observed a highly skillful and knowledgeable middle grade science teacher in New Orleans breathe new life into the RAFT (Santa, Havens, & Valdes, 2004) strategy by having her students create dioramas of the systems of the body and then assume the role of docents guiding "museum goers" through lungs, intestines, and arteries. This science teacher, who had one of the strongest negative reactions to the content area literacy approach at the outset of the project, became one of its staunchest supporters after realizing she was free to adapt and personalize the strategies according to the content and needs of her students.

Carla's partnership with a rural school system in North Carolina illustrates how generic content area reading strategies can be adapted with the unique demands of the content in mind. In the project, Carla worked with teachers whose disciplines ranged from auto mechanics to chemistry. The project provided flexibility in implementing a variety of content area

literacy strategies and resulted in all the teachers actively using the strategies they had adapted to their discipline.

In response to the second big objection to content literacy, that the generic strategy approach cannot help students develop "expert" ways of reading, writing, and thinking in a discipline, we see this as a failure of dialogue (Trathen & Moorman, 2001). We argue that the generic strategy approach can, indeed, be of infinite value to students when content area teachers and literacy specialists engage in thoughtful dialogue about how to contextualize these strategies. When literacy specialists spend time talking with content area teachers, opportunities are created in which the processes and practices experts engage in as they "do" their disciplines are made explicit. These conversations can function as a vehicle for helping content area teachers demystify the literacies of their disciplines and ensure that these processes are made obvious to students.

For example, as a high school English teacher, Trevor struggled to help his students master the concept of tone when reading short stories. After meeting with his school's reading teacher, he was asked to consider how he personally identified the tone of a text. As a result of this recommendation, he came to understand that he unconsciously attended to the author's word choice and automatically understood how the feeling created by the words influences his interpretation of a story. By making this process explicit, he was able to help his students do the inside-out work of disciplinary reading.

Helping students develop facility with the nuanced processes of a discipline makes it possible for them to engage independently in the disciplines they study. To make this possible, content area teachers and literacy specialists must work together to develop an understanding of which tools will be most useful for students in their unique classroom contexts. Dialogue between content area experts and literacy specialists is the ideal context to develop tools that can supplement strategy instruction.

Sparking Productive Dialogue: Transcending Literacy–Content Dualism

We believe that sparking discussions about how to get literacy specialists and content area specialists to collaborate is a key to finding ways to support all students in the content area classroom. We need to

begin to look for ways to shift the focus away from the literacy–content dualism.

The field of content area literacy has begun to recognize the necessity of moving beyond the “every teacher a reading teacher” paradigm. This important shift in thinking presents an opportunity to open a dialogue between teachers of the disciplines and literacy specialists that explores how to overlay adaptable generic content and discipline-dependent literacy practices to meet the learning needs of all students. This dialogue should focus on how to teach in ways that build on what we have learned about strategy instruction *and* create classroom activities that highlight the processes that discipline experts use to engage in their disciplines.

We four authors come with our own unique experiences and theoretical perspectives that have shaped our views on the role of literacy in the disciplines. Yet through dialogue at conferences and via e-mail, we have found common ground and grown as researchers and educators. We strongly believe such a dialogue would benefit our field as well. Our youths deserve the best instruction we can offer, and we must never lose sight of the reality that growth and change are fueled by openness and imagination (Stewart, 2010). With that in mind, we challenge our colleagues with a stake in this issue to look for opportunities to examine critically their perspectives on content literacy and learning and remain open to possibilities for bringing together the best of seemingly competing approaches.

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