Dwelling in the Spaces Between *What Is* and *What Could Be:* The View From a University-based Content Literacy Course at Semester's End

James Damico, Ph.D
Indiana University
damico@indiana.edu

Julie Rust
Indiana University
jurust@umail.iu.edu

Situated within a university-based content literacy course, this article considers the spaces between the curricular realities of middle school and high school classrooms, what we call the 'what is', and potential alternative configurations of curriculum and instruction for these classrooms, what we call the 'what could be.' Our story centers on the culminating activity in the course that we designed for our students, a mock school-wide faculty meeting. We describe the ways our discussed and debated ideas about disciplinary literacy, interdisciplinary curriculum, technology integration, and whether or not curriculum and teaching could connect to broader purposes of citizenship education in a democracy. The article concludes with a reminder that the spaces between 'what is' and 'what could be' are always dynamic, fluid, and emergent as teachers and students (of all ages) collectively create and re-create what happens in these spaces.

> We can "employ a two-eyed approach: one eye fixed firmly on the world as it is, the other looking toward a world that could be but is not yet" (Ayers, 2004, p. 79).

Like many university course instructors working with pre-service teachers, we are familiar with students' petitions that each of our courses be practical, dedicated to preparing them for the 'here and now' of teaching, the *what is* in K-12 classrooms. We sympathize with this request and we do our best to meet this goal in our courses. Yet, like many course instructors, we are similarly committed to preparing our students to push beyond or transcend dominant configurations of curriculum, teaching, and learning in K-12 schools (*what is*) to envision, experience, and critically evaluate alternative ways of working with their future students. In short, we are invested in preparing them for *what could be*.

In our own teaching we have come to see how the *what is* and *what could be* are always at play, essentially in dialogue with each other, and that our pedagogical stances and practices can be summed up as a steadfast commitment to moving, as thoughtfully and gracefully as we are able, in the spaces between *what is* and *what could be* as we continue to define and redefine what constitutes these spaces. In this article, we explore our framing of *what is* and *what could be* in a recent university-based content literacy course in which we served as co-instructors. More specifically, our story centers on the culminating class activity we designed for our students, a mock school-wide faculty meeting. We describe the ways our students dwelled in the spaces between what is and what could be as they discussed and debated ideas about literacy learning in the content areas, interdisciplinary curriculum, how technology could be used in classrooms, and the view that curriculum and teaching needed to connect to broader purposes of citizenship education in a democracy.

Description of Content Literacy Course

Our content literacy course is required for all prospective middle school and high school teachers across subject areas. The course is framed theoretically with an understanding of literacy as social and situated (Bloome, 1985; Heath, 1983; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Street, 1984) because literacy practices differ across time and place. We also employ conceptions of disciplinary literacy, which posit that being literate differs across academic disciplines because experts in, for instance, science, math, and history read texts differently (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Our teaching is also guided by a commitment to new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004) and an emphasis on what it means to be *continuously* literate (Leu, 2000) as educators and students alike learn new literacies called for by new technologies.

Seventeen students were enrolled in the course: six were interested in teaching art, three each in science and English, two in special education, and one each in social studies, theater education, and EFL (English as foreign language). The primary goals of the course center on students being able to:

- understand the reading process as it relates to learning in content areas;
- identify special reading demands for each content area and develop appropriate instructional activities;
- develop subject-related materials appropriate and useful for learners who have various learning styles, reading interests and habits, diverse cultural and language resources and backgrounds, and a full range of reading abilities;
- use reading/writing/thinking activities in daily instruction;
- understand how to use technology to meet instructional and learning goals;

- integrate Internet-based texts and technologies into classroom instruction in ways that promote critical literacy;
- conduct inquiry into a social issue (e.g., immigration, funding inequities in education, childhood obesity) and describe how this inquiry process could be implemented in middle and secondary level classrooms;
- assess students' literacy skills in relation to learning in the content areas.

During the course we endeavored to meet these goals through weekly responses to readings, class discussions, in-class activities, and two major course projects. For the first major project, a "Materials and Strategies Project," each student selected at least four texts (of varied length, difficulty, and genre) and developed a small unit of study in her or his content area. This unit emphasized the ways core reading comprehension strategies--determining main idea, building on relevant background knowledge, generating and answering questions, inferring, monitoring one's comprehension, and synthesizing--could be implemented to ensure that middle or high school students engage deeply with the disciplinary content. We used Cris Tovani's (2000) highly accessible *I Read It, But I Don't Get It* for its practitioner-focused perspective as a guide for our students on this project. In terms of what is and what could be, this project leaned toward the former. Each student worked individually within her own content area and chose discipline-specific texts. The more explicit moves toward *what could be* included close attention to reading comprehension strategies and the requirement that each student use varied texts as they planned their units, opening up curricular space for alternative texts, such as a science teacher using an Emily Dickinson poem in her unit about pollination and an art teacher incorporating a range of texts (e.g., biography, essay, video) in a unit about painting.

With the second major course project, the "Critical Web Inquiry Project," the class collectively investigated the complex issue of internet piracy, working in small groups through a five-phase inquiry process, which included generating questions, choosing reliable and useful resources, examining resources, synthesizing findings, and communicating ideas (Baildon & Damico, 2011; Leu, Leu & Coiro, 2004). This project leaned toward *what could be* through its integration of substantive collaboration and extensive interdisciplinary investigation (5-6 weeks of the semester) of a complex topic.

We were impressed with the quality of work on both of the major course projects and felt successful in preparing students for the here and now as well as the future (what we envision will include more robust social learning opportunities, such as those involved in web-based inquiry projects). We wanted to find a more powerful way to end the course, for students to synthesize key ideas across the semester and apply what they learned. Recalling slightly disappointing culminating class sessions during previous semesters, where students somewhat begrudgingly shared "final class reflections," we knew that we wanted to do something different, something that invited and guided students to do more than just reflect on the semester. We wanted to transport them from a university classroom space into the halls and classrooms of the middle schools and secondary schools where they soon would be working.

Setting the Stage for the High School Faculty Meeting
Since we had a collection of prospective teachers representing various academic disciplines, we decided to simulate a school-wide faculty meeting, one based on the premise that our imaginary

school had received low English/Language Arts scores on recent standardized tests and simultaneously had some of its funding cut by the state. One of us suggested that our "teachers" ought to think creatively and proactively about these challenges and not, for example, circumscribe the conversation with an exclusive focus on how to boost test scores in the short term through a 'teaching to the test' approach. In advance of this school-wide faculty meeting, we sent the following e-mail to the students:

> We will be having a school-wide faculty meeting with the following overarching focus: to envision the type of curriculum, teaching, and learning we want to create in each of our content areas and then across all of our content areas. The four questions below will guide our discussion. Remember to bring in any resources (readings, course assignments, policy documents, videos, etc.) that you think might be useful to participate in this discussion.
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> • What do you want your content area to look like over the next five years? What are you doing as teachers? What are students doing? Who else is involved?
> • In what ways can you work individually within your disciplines to boost student motivation, literacy learning, and academic achievement?
> • In what ways can we work across disciplines or content areas to achieve these goals?
> • How can we thoughtfully and creatively respond to budget cut challenges?"

When our last class session began, the students, stepping into their future professional roles, were instructed to convene, first by academic subject area, to discuss their responses to the above guiding questions. Then the students were to proceed to another room (a university faculty meeting room with an integrated rectangular table and comfortable swivel chairs) for our school-wide faculty meeting. We led the hour-long meeting, playing the roles of superintendent and assistant superintendent of instruction. We chose not to audiotape or videotape the session for two main reasons: We did not want to increase the likelihood that the teachers would feel inhibited by a recording device, especially because we wanted them to feel comfortable sharing "exploratory" rather than just "final draft" talk (Barnes, 1976); we also believed not including recording equipment was more authentic (our sense was that a school faculty meeting like this would not be recorded). However, we did take copious notes during the meeting as well as reflective notes immediately after the meeting to document as best we could what transpired during this culminating class session.

Disciplinary Literacies, the Human Experience, Technology, and Education for Citizenship
The teachers addressed a range of topics during the faculty meeting, and here we frame what transpired during the discussion as an exploration of several significant questions.

How does literacy look similar or different in and across the academic disciplines? A science teacher was one of the first to speak and pointed out that the problems many secondary school students have with reading often surface in science class because of the complexity of science textbooks and articles. Eager to jump in, our one math teacher pointed out that students learn reading is not important in math because many math teachers just "give students the information they need." Because he believed in the importance of math students using reading strategies to learn math content, he described how he guides his students to read and evaluate

texts that include statistics. He also pointed out that reading is specific to particular academic disciplines, stating that it is a "false equivalency" to compare science and math reading. A representative from the humanities, our theater teacher, was the next to enter the conversation, and she stressed the importance of examining a text from "different lenses or perspectives." Using theater as her example, she pointed out the need for her students to learn how to read from the viewpoints of actors, the director, the set designer, and the sound and light designers and technicians.

As the teachers contemplated how these comments applied to their discipline, the discussion moved from how literacy looks different across disciplines to how it looks similar. A question from a science teacher was the catalyst for this shift: "I'd like to ask the English department, what skills do students need to succeed in English?" An English teacher responded by articulating the importance of "reading the text and the subtext" and the need to focus on core elements of literature, such as theme, plot, and character. The science teacher then asked if students "learn how to make arguments in English class." We interpreted this as an invitation to seek common ground between science and English; argumentation, the presentation of claims backed with sufficient evidence, is fundamental to both content areas. While not directly answering the question, the English teacher suggested that his department guides students to study literature to help "frame the human experience." He then suggested potential interdisciplinary connections to social studies and science by stating the importance of historical fiction and science fiction. Another science teacher took up this idea, pointing out that science fiction is about "learning to dream big" and "believing in the power of science and nature."

This led to some conversation about using different genres of text in and across subject areas (e.g., fiction and biographies in science and math), and one of us to asked if every teacher in the school, irrespective of content area, would agree to teach with different genres of text, including fictional narratives, nonfiction, and visual texts, such as images, paintings, and a diverse array of web-based texts. Some disagreement ensued. A science teacher questioned the feasibility of this for his chemistry class and an art teacher echoed this concern, stating that she needs to focus almost exclusively on specific art forms in her classes (e.g., painting or drawing). These concerns were also tied explicitly to time constraints in classrooms, thus representing a legitimate critique of interdisciplinary initiatives (which require sufficient time and resources for planning, teaching, and reflecting) and exemplifying the complications that dwell in the spaces between *what is* and *what could be*.

What concrete plan can we institute? And how should technology be integrated across classrooms? Concerns about time constraints also led to a practical proposal. Less than halfway through the one-hour faculty meeting, the one social studies teacher proposed an interdisciplinary-focused solution to the time constraints problem. She suggested that the teachers collectively decide on a topic, such as the 1970's, and then each subject area teacher dedicate ten minutes a week (or a day) to this topic. For social studies, she, for example, could focus on "the culture of the 1970's and movies like Star Wars." The teachers greeted this proposal with near unanimous approval and noticeable relief; it was not difficult to visualize the idea being enacted in their school, and it specifically addressed the goal of teachers forging more interdisciplinary connections.

One of the instructors re-entered the discussion at this point, asking the teachers to consider the ways they envisioned using technology, especially computers, in their classrooms. "One laptop per child" initiatives quickly became a topic of hot debate, and what we viewed as a healthy skepticism toward technology, which we had observed all semester, surfaced. One English teacher feared that such approaches might be a serious waste of money: "If they gave me thirty laptops. What would I do with them? Maybe I need only six." Even more critical, a science teacher proclaimed: "If we get a one-to-one laptop program in the school, I would quit. What we need is better, more up-to-date computer labs." Some of the art teachers were also vocal detractors, as one explained: "I don't think there should be any computers in art class… or they should only use them after they have worked with their hands."

More discussion and debate ensued and voices less critical of technology and laptop programs shared alternative views. Another art teacher, for example, made a compelling case for integrating technology in light of the academic discipline of art: "The world of art has changed such a great deal even in the past seven years. New art forms are being created through computers and the internet. We need to use computers. . . .We have to get beyond art as production. It is important for kids to write about art, analyze art, read about art, learn history of art."

What is the point of education anyway? With the faculty meeting beginning to wind down, ideas about the bigger picture came into view. After another art teacher stated that a primary goal for the faculty should be to "create lifelong learners and good citizens," a science teacher took up this idea and outlined a conception of "science for citizenship," advocating a way of conceiving and enacting an interdisciplinary science curriculum in ways that more deeply understand ecological problems, "promote environmental stewardship," and include varied hands-on experiences "out in the world." She also began to develop this idea as a way of envisioning curricular reform for the whole school through a more comprehensive conception of "Education for citizenship."

In many respects, this served as a fitting end to the faculty meeting and the course. Rich with constructive agreement and disagreement, the faculty meeting confirmed that these pre-service educators had strong, well-informed, and diverse ideas, plans, and questions about how to promote literacy learning in their particular content areas, about the possibilities of interdisciplinary curricula, about the affordances and constraints of technology in classrooms, and about the ways their work as teachers could link to larger goals about the purposes of education in a democratic society.

Final Thoughts

At semester's end we also recognized that we have much work to do as we continue wrestling in the spaces between what is and what could be in the content literacy course. We know that we want to provide students with a stronger grounding in disciplinary literacy (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008), more deeply integrate instructional approaches for English language learners (Freeman & Freeman, 2009), and better scaffold web-based inquiry projects (Baildon & Damico, 2011). We are also contemplating a course redesign to include two school-wide faculty meetings: one to launch the semester and one to conclude it. In between, students would build a portfolio of curricular ideas, activities, and materials to share, discuss, and debate

at the second school-wide faculty meeting during the culminating class session. In addition, we anticipate making explicit to our students the pedagogical strategy of "role playing," discussing how they might enact it to meet different learning goals in their own classrooms.

But perhaps most importantly, we now possess an even richer understanding that the spaces between what is and *what could be* are dynamic, fluid, and emergent, always reflective of what is most important to us as teachers and what is most important to our students. And we recognize the need to be in more direct dialogue and deliberation with our students about how they understand these spaces. We know that together we can continue envisioning and enacting better approaches for dwelling in these spaces in ways that honor the talents, skills, and needs of middle school and high school students as well as our own talents, skills, and needs as teachers and teacher educators.

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