Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges

Volume 21 | Issue 1 Article 4

9-6-2018

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Recommended Citation
Gregory, K. H., & Colclough, M. (2018). Community College Discipline Faculty Perceptions of Role as Literacy Educators. *Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges, 21* (1). Retrieved from https://commons.vccs.edu/inquiry/vol21/iss1/4

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Community College Discipline Faculty Perceptions of Role as Literacy Educators

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ABSTRACT

Approximately a quarter of community college students are entering college-level courses underprepared for the literacy and critical thinking skills required to be successful in discipline courses (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Discipline faculty are considered experts in their content area and are often not trained in pedagogy and literacy instruction, yet they are faced with meeting the diverse literacy needs of their students while still maintaining high content-focused expectations within their courses. This phenomenological case study investigated community college discipline faculty's perceptions and practices regarding integrating literacy instruction within their disciplines. Data were collected from community college faculty through demographic questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. In general, the faculty articulated that it was not their role to integrate literacy instruction into their content-specific coursework, yet they often felt they had to in order to meet the needs of their students. The findings provide insight for professional development programs and indicate areas for future research.

Developmental education students are not the only students who are academically underprepared for college. Despite testing out of developmental education courses through their high school GPA or placement tests, many students are entering college-level courses with inadequate literacy.

Keywords: disciplinary literacy, literacy education, higher education, community college

COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISCIPLINE FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF ROLE AS LITERACY EDUCATORS

Approximately a quarter of students are entering community college underprepared for college-level coursework and enroll in at least one developmental course during their college career (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Developmental education students are not the only students who are academically underprepared for college. Despite testing out of developmental education courses through their high school GPA or placement tests, many students are entering college-level courses with inadequate literacy (reading, writing, and critical thinking) skills (Duff, 2010; Hyland, 2006; Lea & Street, 1998; Tsui, 2002). Thus, discipline faculty are faced with the challenge of meeting the diverse

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literacy needs of their students while still maintaining high content-focused expectations within their courses.

Discipline faculty, while credentialed in their content area, often do not have the pedagogical background to integrate literacy instruction into their curriculum (Furco & Moely, 2012; Hammer & Green, 2011; Moje, 2008; Thibodeau, 2008; Tsui, 2002). This presents challenges for faculty when they are faced with students who struggle with reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. In addition to taking developmental courses, students can benefit from literacy support in learning assistance centers. However, researchers argue that such support does not provide enough literacy experiences specific to the disciplines (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2006), and faculty can better support students by integrating discipline-specific literacy instruction into the content courses (Heller, 2010; Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

Much research has been conducted on integrating literacy instruction into the content areas at the secondary level, finding that many high school teachers view themselves as both content area and literacy educators (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2008; Sturtevant & Linek, 2003). These content area teachers have higher self-efficacy for teaching literacy (Cantrell et al., 2008; Furco & Moely, 2012; Thibodeau, 2008) and understand the importance and transformative nature of integrating literacy instruction into the discipline (Sangster, Stone & Anderson, 2013).

However, when shifting to higher education, there is a paucity of research on this topic. Heller (2010) argues the importance of integrating discipline-specific literacy instruction into college content courses because these skills are essential in university and professional education. Interestingly, Tsui (2002) found that some college discipline faculty did not believe it was their responsibility to teach literacy skills within their college classroom. In order to better understand this phenomenon in today's community college setting, research is greatly needed to explore faculty's beliefs, experiences, and practices in relation to literacy instruction in their content courses.

METHODOLOGY

Following the ontological belief that there is not one universal truth of faculty perceptions of identity, we adopted a constructivist paradigm for this phenomenological case study. Utilizing a constructivist approach allowed us to represent the subjective voices of the participants so the academic and research community could better understand their views and experiences. Under the umbrella of the constructivist paradigm, phenomenologists value individual and collective experiences, investigate the connection between self and the world, and strive to understand and describe experiences from the participant's point of view (Crotty, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012; Hays & Wood, 2011). In this phenomenological case study, we explored the lived experiences of community college discipline faculty and the meaning behind those experiences in order to better understand the faculty's perceptions of their role as literacy educators.

The purpose of this phenomenological case study is to describe community college discipline faculty's perceptions and performance regarding their role as literacy educators within their disciplines. The following research questions are addressed:

(1) How do community college discipline faculty perceive their role as a literacy educator?

(2) In what ways do community college discipline faculty integrate literacy instruction into their courses?

(3) What do community college discipline faculty perceive as the barriers to integrating literacy instruction into their courses?

Context and Participants

In order to gain an understanding of community college discipline faculty's perceptions of their role as literacy educators, we conducted this study at a large, multi-campus, Mid-Atlantic community college. Full IRB approval was granted prior to the start of this study. Through a review of publicly posted syllabi and the first author's prolonged engagement with many faculty members at the college, we were able to identify several faculty members who incorporated intensive reading and writing assignments in their undergraduate social science courses. Three full-time faculty members, representing history, philosophy, economics, and speech communications agreed to participate in this study. The names below are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

The first participant, Scott, came to the community college after working in the business field for ten years. He has taught economics at the college level for nine years and has neither K-12 teaching experience nor any prior education coursework. He requires his students complete reading assignments in the textbook, journal articles, news articles, and credible websites. His students are also required to write a five-page research paper. He typically teaches six classes and has roughly 180 students each semester.

The second participant, Heather, came to the community college upon completing her master's degree program. She has taught communication studies for four years and has neither K-12 teaching experience nor any education coursework. She requires her students complete reading assignments in journal articles, news articles, and credible websites. Her students also are required to write and present three speeches over the course of the semester. She typically teaches six classes and has 165 students each semester.

The third participant, Ruth, came to the community college after teaching elementary school and completing her graduate work. She has taught both online and face-to-face history and philosophy courses for approximately 20 and has no formal education coursework. She requires her students complete reading assignments in the textbook, write several essays, and defend their arguments with logical reasoning and evidence. She typically teaches five classes and has roughly 150 students each semester.

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Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to data collection, we reduced the data by identifying the topic, research questions, previous literature, access to participants and setting, trustworthiness strategies, and keywords to use as the a *priori* codes. We bracketed our assumptions by completing reflexive journal entries.

Data were collected from each participant through two data sources: a demographic questionnaire and an individual semi-structured interview (see Appendix A). At the beginning of the interview, each participant completed a brief demographic questionnaire regarding his or her education, training, experience as an educator, and specific discipline.

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants in a private location on campus. During semi-structured interviews, the researcher uses a protocol with questions and follow-up probes. However, the participant is able to influence both the content and structure of the interview through his or her responses. The interviews consisted of 14 questions with connecting probes in three main categories: faculty background and expertise (e.g., Describe your level of preparedness and self-efficacy as it relates to literacy instruction.); faculty perceptions regarding integration of literacy and content (e.g., In your opinion, whose role is it to teach college students literacy skills? Explain your thoughts and reasoning.); and faculty recommendations (e.g. What recommendations, if any, would you give to new faculty in terms of the support system for students in discipline courses who need literacy instruction?).

After conducting semi-structured interviews with each participant, we completed a participant contact summary sheet (see Appendix B), transcribed the interviews, and wrote a brief summary of the interview. We sent it to the participants requesting clarification, additions, or changes. Only one participant, Scott, provided additional thoughts and feedback to clarify some professional development he had completed. The transcript and interview summary were updated accordingly. Additionally, we journaled about any assumptions or biases we had at that point.

Using the previously developed a *priori* codes, we analyzed and manually coded the data in the first transcription. During this analysis, we noted meaning units, themes, subthemes, and participant quotes through the process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). We compared the coding of the first transcription using comparative pattern analysis. We collapsed codes based on the themes and subthemes and then created a revised code book to use in the analysis of the second transcription. We continued this iterative process until all transcriptions were coded. We agreed upon a cross-case display to represent the themes and findings across the participants. We wrote a narrative of the findings, showing the essence of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994) by including participant quotes and thick description.

Trustworthiness

We used several strategies to build trustworthiness during this study. First and foremost, we worked together as a research team in order to reduce researcher bias and build triangulation of investigators. The first author had prolonged engagement with many faculty members due to her current professional role at the college. We conducted member checking by including summarizing and clarifying probes during the interviews. We also sent a summary of the interview to the participants and requested verification and feedback. We used thick description in the explanation of the research process and data findings. Finally, we kept a detailed audit trail of all materials and documents pertinent to each stage of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participants provided rich data during their interviews in regard to their perceptions of and experiences with integrating literacy instruction into their content courses. The findings are thus organized per research question.

How do community college discipline faculty perceive their role as a literacy educator?

All participants adamantly believed they were content experts and not literacy instructors, despite the fact that they all included some form of literacy instruction and writing support within their classes. Their formal training was in their specific content area, and they perceived they were not fully prepared to teach literacy within their classes. Scott clearly stated, "I'm not an English teacher and I don't profess to be." Heather admitted, "I love to read; I read all the time, but as far as teaching someone how to read, I don't know if I would have the patience for it." While all three participants provided some literacy support in the classroom, they were not at a point where they perceived themselves as actual literacy educators.

All three participants seemed to have a clear understanding of the definition of literacy instruction when they verbalized their thoughts. Ruth explained, "Reading is really an activity of thinking, not just reading or deciphering words on a page. It's more thinking about what they're seeing." However, as the discussion progressed, it was clear that there was some confusion in terms of how that would look in their classroom, often failing to recognize that literacy instruction included support for reading, writing and thinking. Scott was adamant that literacy instruction should not be mandated by administration and the faculty member should decide when to include literacy instruction. All participants recognized that students have clear literacy needs, both in reading and writing, but they struggled to determine how to best support their students. They all recognized that their lack of training in literacy instruction prevented them from seamlessly integrating literacy instruction into their course.

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Scott articulated that it was acceptable in higher education to lack formal education or literacy training, as required in many K-12 settings. He stated, "We're hired for our subject matter expertise, so I think that's okay at the college level....I think that what winds up happening is you develop those skills as you go, through trial and error." Heather suggested that teaching literacy in content classes at the K-12 level was possibly spreading the content teachers too thin. She also recognized that there was much more responsibility placed on the teacher at the K-12 level; whereas, in higher education the student should take more responsibility for learning. With that said, she argued that "there has to be some type of incentive for students to learn themselves. They have to see the benefit...or they are not going to put in the work to make the changes." Finally, Ruth discussed a disconnect between K-12 and college educational practices, noting that public school systems put too much emphasis on standardized testing and not enough on critical thinking. She concluded that this resulted in her students struggling with utilizing college-level reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.

Two faculty noted that their confidence in their pedagogical and literacy-related decisions improved over their career. Scott shared, "I'm certainly better now than I was nine years ago...and that's been a result of me adapting and changing to what I see coming in." He was motivated by his students to learn and progress, stating, "What's unique about college is your audience isn't trapped. So if you aren't good at it or you don't get good at it, then the market speaks to you and they leave." Heather had low self-confidence in teaching reading skills but high self-confidence in teaching writing skills, but she attributed this to her level of experience and knowledge of the writing process. Ruth recognized that she was overwhelmed with how difficult teaching was becoming, and she was at a loss as to how to support students' vocabulary and comprehension skills. In respect to literacy instruction specifically, all three participants felt relatively low self-confidence in ability and knowledge. They unanimously agreed that literacy instruction was mainly the responsibility of English or reading faculty, as indicated by Ruth's comment: "I really think it's English. I think that belongs in English. Because in history, it's a different specialization. So to be asked to teach [English] while teaching history, it doesn't work."

In what ways do community college discipline faculty integrate literacy instruction into their courses?

All three participants included literacy instruction in their courses, although two mainly focused on the writing process and one on reading support. Writing support included the use of a rubric, information literacy instruction, written and verbal formative feedback, and summative peer feedback. Reading support included the use of graphic organizers during chapter readings, vocabulary instruction, and comprehension strategies.

Scott provided his students with a guide and rubric to help them organize their research paper. He included several milestones for students to receive feedback from him during the process of completing the research paper. This entailed individual written and verbal formative feedback, which he identified as being

very time consuming. Students also received summative feedback from classmates at the end of the semester. Scott added that he supported students with recognizing credible sources, conducting research, and avoiding plagiarism. Heather also provided her students with a guide and rubric to help them organize their speeches. She incorporated several opportunities for students to provide peer formative feedback as they worked through the writing process. She also provided individual formative feedback to her students. Finally, she recorded the students giving their speeches so they could use it formatively as they prepared for their next speech. Ruth stressed the importance of vocabulary support and worked extensively with her students on building knowledge of discipline-specific terms, both before and during reading. She worked with her students on developing graphic organizers of the content to support comprehension.

In the instances when faculty chose to include literacy instruction in their courses, they cited several reasons. Scott made a clear connection between literacy instruction and the outcomes of both the current course and future coursework: “This is important that I train them to do this [writing] because the next place they go they’re going to get hit with [higher level work].” He felt good about providing writing support because he recognized that the literacy ability of the student was correlated to course success. He also made a connection between the students’ literacy ability and the workforce. He justified supporting students with their writing because “many of my business administration students are looking to go into the business world, and that’s, in my opinion, what they are going to be doing.” Scott was adamant that it was his responsibility to support his students with their writing. He stated, “I feel indebted. I feel like I owe that to them, that I prepare them for that so they don’t get hit with that [when they enter the workforce].”

Heather made a clear connection between literacy skills and entering the workforce and felt that it was important for her to help her students “make the connection of how [writing ability] might be useful to them.” She also made a connection between a student’s writing ability and level of motivation:

I think that [student motivation] comes from being able to see a connection between what they are learning and how they are going to use it. I think that when they can see the connection…when students are goal oriented and feel that they have the ability to achieve those goals, then there is going to be [higher] motivation…if students are either not goal oriented or their goals are not the goals that are focused on in their educational aspect of their lives or where it might be going, then they are not going to be a motivated to learn.

She felt that it was her role to provide opportunities for students to develop their writing and organizational skills within the context of the course’s curriculum so that they would be better prepared to enter the workforce.

Ruth felt that students’ general vocabulary knowledge was poor and she needed to help them build this vocabulary knowledge in order to succeed in the class and the workforce. She stated, “They are not only vocabulary terms, but also

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historical terms, so you need to know the meaning." Without this knowledge, she felt that students would struggle in her class, in their career, and in life. She felt it was her role to help build their vocabulary so that they had a solid foundation for the future.

While there were support systems outside of the classroom between the learning assistance center and the library, the faculty members showed a lack of faith in incorporating these support systems regularly and admitted that they would use them more if they felt it was high in quality. Instead, the faculty members provided one-on-one support for students in class and during office hours when time permitted. On occasion, Heather sent students individually or brought the whole class to the learning assistance center for help with writing, but there were not enough computers to accommodate her whole class. Scott felt that it was the students' responsibility to seek help in the learning assistance center, and he felt the college could help to raise students' motivation to attend by providing food during the workshops.

What do community college discipline faculty perceive as the barriers to integrating literacy instruction into their courses?

Participants identified several barriers that impeded their ability to integrate literacy instruction in their courses: course loads, students' use of time, and faculty's expectations of student skills.

The biggest barrier was their large course loads (five to six classes and 150-180 students a semester), and the ensuing time needed to prepare, grade and give feedback prevented them from having enough time to reach out to students in need. Heather explained,

There isn't time for me to seek out students for one-on-one meetings so that if they really need help, they have to come to me. And if they don't, then it's very easy for a student to get lost. There is quite literally not the time for me to track them down and say, 'Hey, why haven't you come to class?' or 'Why haven't you turned in your outline?' I can't do that.

Each of the participants experienced this struggle with time. With their limited time to support students, they felt it was necessary for them to focus on the course content rather than the literacy skills needed for the assignments.

Scott added that the lack of time prohibited him from trying new things and doing more in the classroom. He clarified his frustration: "I'm discouraged. I still do it like I did in the beginning. I still do all these papers and projects and I get overwhelmed by it because there are so many students." Ruth also felt overwhelmed from the high work load, changing student body, and increasingly demanding administrative duties.

Heather added that the students' ineffective use of time was a barrier. She attempted to support students' literacy needs by incorporating peer formative feedback during class but found that students didn't always use their time wisely: "People who were supposed to be evaluating them, they didn't really give them any good feedback so they weren't taking the time to do it…it

was hard to actually get them to still do it." The lack of space and availability of computer labs also prevented her from doing more formative literacy instruction during class time. Finally, the lack of college funds to support faculty development or alternative instructional options for students was also a barrier.

Another barrier experienced by the faculty was the incoming skill levels of the students. All three participants expected that students coming into college level courses held a certain level of literacy skills. Organization skills, mainly connected to writing assignments, especially were necessary for success in each of their courses. The participants recognized that students were weak in this area and they realized they needed to provide literacy instruction to raise this skill level. This mismatch between expectations and reality was frustrating and discouraging for all three.

One way to combat this barrier of students' incoming skills is to conduct pre-assessments. Scott felt that faculty assessment of students' skills was important, although he recognized that this was difficult with his large class sizes. In order to do this effectively, he assigned several milestones for the research paper so he could give individual feedback and support. In terms of reading instruction, he did not check on the students to see if they comprehended the textbook chapters; he expected them to either possess adequate reading skills or know where to go for support. He was able to assess comprehension as the students conducted research and pulled material for their papers.

All three faculty included reading and writing assignments throughout the semester and were able to use those assignments to assess literacy skills. Heather did not assign textbook reading assignments, but she did expect them to possess adequate reading skills when reading articles and websites. She was able to assess their comprehension as they researched and pulled material for their speeches, but she found that students tend to use fact pulling strategies rather than higher level analysis.

Scott and Heather provided a lot of support to help students identify credible sources. In addition, they both found that some students have difficulty paraphrasing information and some students intentionally plagiarize material. In both cases, they found it difficult to provide the level of instruction needed to combat these issues.

Ruth discussed the importance of students completing their reading and writing prerequisites prior to coming into college-level discipline classes. She found it difficult to support students who did not as they struggled with reading, writing and critical thinking skills. As she felt they should have learned this prior to her class, she struggled with whether or not to support their needs in her class.

The final barrier discussed by faculty was the students' lack of initiative. Each participant felt that students need to show initiative and ask for help as there is not enough time for faculty to follow-up with every student. However, they were discouraged because this was not common practice. In general, they noted that students did not ask for help with reading, but they did ask for help with writing and organization. Scott found that the majority of his students

would attend optional class sessions just to receive feedback from him on their progress on their papers. Ruth could only identify one student who took initiative and went to the learning assistance center.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study supported the current and previous research that states that content teachers often do not have the pedagogical background to integrate literacy instruction into their curriculum (Furco & Moely, 2012; Moje, 2008; Thibodeau, 2008; Tsui, 2002) and that some college discipline faculty do not believe it is their role to teach reading and writing skills within their college classroom (Tsui, 2002). The results of this study begin to fill a gap in the research by providing insight on the perceptions of community college discipline faculty regarding their role as a literacy educator, their literacy practices within their content courses, and their perceived barriers to integrating literacy instruction. Faculty development programs can build upon this research to provide pedagogy and literacy professional development opportunities for discipline faculty.

In order for faculty to respond to the call of Heller (2010) and Wingate and Tribble (2012) to integrate more literacy instruction into their disciplines, they will need to strengthen their role perception as a literacy educator. One way to do this is through professional development and collaboration with literacy experts. The faculty in this study recognized this need, as shown in Ruth's simple statement: "I know I need full training." Her immediate request was for training in how to develop students' critical thinking skills. Professional development workshops focusing on the pedagogy of teaching literacy within their specific discipline would strengthen discipline faculty's knowledge and self-efficacy. Professional learning communities could focus on discipline-specific literacy instruction where faculty could collaborate with other faculty within their discipline, as well as literacy experts, to explore strategies for integrating literacy instruction into the curriculum, course activities, and assignments.

Scott had several ideas for helping faculty develop their ability to provide literacy instruction in the classroom, one being release time for faculty: "I'd love to see in a perfect world where we teach less; how about five classes in the fall and four classes in the spring, and then you promise that you allocate that remaining time to refining your material." He also suggested teaching assistants, but was quick to worry about losing control of his class and students:

> How about an assistant to help with [literacy instruction]? And it doesn't have to be my assistant necessarily, but it could be a staff member that service five faculty members and could do office hours, coaching, or grading, you know, some more of the simple stuff. But here again, it's a pride thing. I'm just reluctant to let go of stuff. It's all in my circle and I like it there.

He recognized that he would be interested in pursuing training sessions on incorporating peer formative feedback in his class. With support from colleagues

and trained literacy experts, faculty could explore these ideas and build their knowledge and experience with integrating literacy into their content areas.

More research is certainly needed to investigate the role discipline-specific literacy could play in higher education, the perceptions discipline faculty hold in regard to integrating literacy into their courses, the current literacy practices utilized in discipline courses, the impact discipline-specific literacy instruction has on student motivation and literacy skills, and additional barriers that impede disciplinary literacy. Further, as faculty participate in professional development opportunities that focus on discipline-specific literacy and begin to integrate literacy instruction into their courses, research is needed to determine what impact, if any, this has on faculty's perceived role as a literacy educator, their actual practices within the classroom, and their self-efficacy with such an integration.

LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

The data were collected from three participants, each of whom were chosen through convenience sampling. They were from the same department, college, and geographic area. This presents the risk of not fully identifying the diverse perspectives around integrating literacy instruction. Triangulation of data could have been strengthened by including observations in the classroom to see the amount, level and quality of literacy instruction provided. In addition, being that the first author has a professional relationship with the faculty members, there is the chance that they responded in ways that would be socially and professionally desirable. Additionally, it could become an ethical dilemma if data shed a negative light on the faculty members. When we composed the descriptive narrative the findings, we attempted to use soft and honest language while protecting the integrity of the faculty members.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your current faculty position?
2. What education degrees have you earned?
3. What disciplines have you taught over your career?
4. List the levels and number of years for each of your positions?
5. How many classes and students do you teach each semester?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Faculty Background and Expertise:

1. Describe your educational background and professional experience as it relates to
   a. Your discipline
   b. Literacy
   c. Education/pedagogy
2. Describe any professional development you have participated in related to literacy. When in your career did you participate in this professional development?
3. Describe your level of preparedness and self-efficacy as it relates to literacy instruction.

Faculty Perceptions Regarding Integration of Literacy and Content:

1. When I say literacy instruction, what does that mean to you?
2. Content-area literacy is pushed throughout K-12 schools. Students are accustomed to receiving integrated instruction. Do you think this trend should continue in higher education? Explain. What would be the benefits? What would be the drawbacks?
3. In your opinion, whose role is it to teach college students literacy skills? Explain your thoughts and reasoning.
4. Explain your course expectations for class assignments as it relates to literacy.
   a. Level/ability of students
   b. Reading assignments
   c. Writing assignments
5. In your literacy-related assignments, how do you convey your literacy expectations about the assignments?
6. For students who need support with literacy components of these assignments, what resources, if any, do they have (in and out of class)?

7. In thinking back to your definition of literacy instruction, what literacy instruction, if any, do you provide in the classroom?
8. Has there been a time when it has not been relevant to incorporate literacy instruction in your class?

Faculty Recommendations:

1. What barriers, if any, impact your ability to integrate literacy into your course work? How do you overcome these barriers?
2. What do you perceive as the general consensus amongst your colleagues in terms of integrating literacy and content instruction?
3. What recommendations would you give to new, inexperienced faculty in terms of
   a. Student literacy needs in discipline courses
   b. Support system for students who need literacy instruction
   c. Strategies to use in the classroom to develop literacy skills alongside discipline content

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONTACT SUMMARY SHEET

Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Contact:
Date:
Today's Date:

1. What were the main issues or themes that stuck out for you during this contact?
2. What discrepancies, if any, did you note in the interviewee's response?
3. Was there anything else that stuck out as salient, interesting, or important during this contact?
4. How does this contact compare to other data collections for this study?