

My Community and Me: Using Communication Skills Across Content Areas

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Traditionally, literacy was defined as the ability to read and write. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2013), this definition has evolved and expanded to now include the ability to effectively utilize technology, build cross-cultural relationships in order to solve problems, multitask, use multimedia texts in a variety of ways, and attend to ethical guidelines. This notion of literacy as a social practice (Perry, 2012) is embedded in several strands of various Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) across content areas. For example, the English Language Arts TEKS include a Reading strand, a

Writing strand, and a Listening and Speaking strand. The Social Studies TEKS include a Social Studies Skills strand that highlights collaboration involving the four communication skills, and in the Mathematics TEKS, students are expected to develop number literacy, communicate mathematical ideas, and use problem-solving methods to offer solutions.

Essentially, being literate means that a person will be able to successfully communicate ideas in a variety of settings in society. Each of the tasks outlined by NCTE requires a citizen to use reading, writing, listening, speaking, or a combination of the four skills to convey messages, collaborate, and facilitate problem solving. By integrating the communication skills across the curriculum, teachers can ensure that students are receiving the required curricular content as well as the skills needed to be contributing members of society. This column discusses examples of how the four communication skills can be connected to other content areas using the theme “My Community and Me.”

Reading

A myriad of picture books lend themselves to the theme of community. By choosing books that center on the same theme students will be writing about, students can make stronger connections and deepen their understanding of the content being taught (Jacobs, 2002). The following are books that can be used to teach reading comprehension skills while learning about community.

- *On the Town: A Community Adventure* by Judith Caseley (2002) follows Charlie and his mother as they stroll through their

community documenting the variety of people that make their community work. In addition to being used to teach reading skills such as sequencing, this text might encourage students to consider the important members of their own community and the role each member plays.

- *The Great Fuzz Frenzy* by Janet Stevens and Susan Stevens Crummel (2005) chronicles the chaos a tennis ball causes as it rolls through a prairie dog burrow. By asking questions about which actions of the prairie dogs represent good citizenship and through discussing the prairie dogs' behavior, students can generate connections about the ways in which their actions affect others in the community.

Writing

Students need authentic writing assignments, "texts that are used outside of a learning-to-read or learning-to-write context" (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006, p. 346) that center on people, places, events, and ideas they care about (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013). Reading in a wide variety of genres can improve writing (Park, 2016), and understanding how a writer uses craft to engage the reader can serve as a model for students to create their own texts (Culham, 2014). Students can use the mentor texts described below as a guide to create authentic pieces about places in their communities.

- *Twilight Comes Twice* written by Ralph Fletcher and illustrated by Kate Kiesler (1997) uses vivid, poetic descriptions and colorful oil paintings to paint a picture of the two moments of twilight that occur at dusk and dawn. The text's powerful words such as, "Dusk pours / the syrup of darkness / into the forest" and "With invisible arms / dawn erases the stars / from the blackboard of night," may inspire advanced writing students to build eloquent descriptions of places in their community, line by line (see Figure 1).
- *My Little Island* by Frane Lessac (1987) tells the story of the narrator and his friend Lucca as they return home to their Caribbean island. Using a mixture of simple, compound, and complex sentences, the reader travels through the town with the boys absorbing elements of the island community through descriptive sentences such as, "On the way to my aunt's house we pass dozens of brightly painted wood houses. From the road they look like little rainbows sitting on hills" (p. 4). This text serves as a mentor for intermediate writers to help encourage them to transition from relying on simple sentences to employing more sophisticated sentence constructions.
- *That's Not My Bunny* written by Fiona Watt and illustrated by Rachel Wells (2005) uses repetitive sentence stems and a variety of adjectives to inform the reader of qualities the pet bunny does or does not possess, and each page includes a texture that corresponds with the descriptive word. These simple sentences can be used by emergent writers and students who need the extra support of sentence stems to describe places in their own community (see Figure 2).

Listening and Speaking

Listening and speaking skills are also important components of what make a community function effectively. Student groups

in the classroom function as a micro-community and can run more effectively if they have procedures in place for listening and speaking. Utilizing methods such as Kagan Cooperative Learning can ensure each student learns to listen to group members and share their ideas, resulting in increased engagement in activities (Kagan & Kagan, 2009). Combining cooperative learning strategies with social studies and math content that connects to the theme of community allows students opportunities to practice reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

- *Community Mapping with 3-D Shapes.*

Move students into collaborative groups, providing each student with a placemat map (see Figure 3), a can of Play-Doh, and two game chips. Using Talking Chips (see Figure 4) as a procedure for sharing ideas, tell students they will need to decide the locations that should appear on their community map and which 3-D shape (cylinders, cones, spheres, rectangular prisms, and triangular prisms) will represent each location. For example, a sphere may represent a science center while a rectangular prism may represent a public library. Once the students decide which 3-D shape will represent specific locations, the students generate a key that corresponds with their chosen shapes. The students apply their spatial reasoning and shape knowledge as they design their community, all while developing their listening and speaking skills. Reading and writing skills can be enhanced by writing about building locations in relation to each other and by making inferences about locations on the maps.

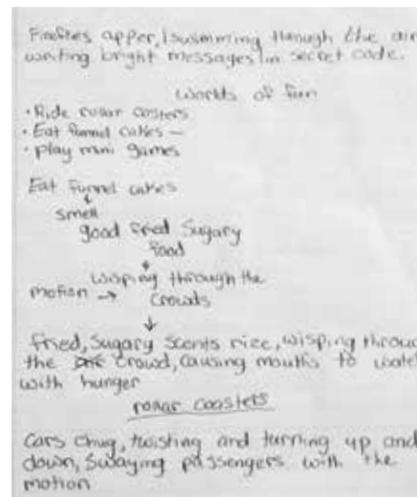


Figure 1. Example of student-generated sentences using *Twilight Comes Twice* as a mentor text.



Figure 2. Example of student-generated sentence using *That's Not My Bunny* as a mentor text.



Figure 3. A 3-D shape mapping activity of community places.

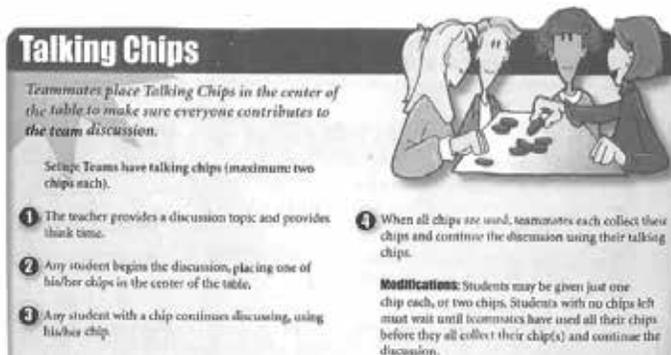


Figure 4. Procedures for Kagan cooperative learning activity “Talking Chips.”

- 4-C’s of a Primary Source (Houchens & Guyette, 2015). Students can work in collaborative groups to analyze a primary source, a photograph of their community. Have students create a 4-square chart with concentration, connections, context, and conclusions placed in the four sections.
 - › Overarching questions: What is the purpose of this source? What did it tell us about the time and place it was created?
 - › Concentration: Describe everything in the photograph—materials, setting, colors, people, content, date, etc.
 - › Connections: Does it remind you of anything in your own life and time?
 - › Context: Think about the artifact surrounded by the people who lived during the same time the artifact was created. Do you know any events that happened before this source was created? What might have happened after?
 - › Conclusions: How will you answer the overarching questions at the top of the page? Make sure to use the information from the photograph along with your thinking about the context to draw conclusions and make inferences.

Conclusion

The theme of “My Community and Me” allows Pre-K through third grade students the opportunity to utilize communication skills

across the content areas of English Language Arts, social studies, and mathematics. Using the activities described in this column as a starting point, educators can seamlessly integrate concepts from each of these content areas, helping students solidify content knowledge and strengthen the connection between reading, writing, listening, and speaking—essential skills in the elementary classroom (Vaca, Vaca, & Mraz, 2016) and beyond.

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