EXPLORATORY PIECE

Building the Discipline-Specific Classroom: A Pedagogical Discussion

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Recent discussions with colleagues about student progress and well-being seemingly lead to discipline-specific reading concerns. Further cross-campus conversations reveal that the concern about how students can best manage heavy reading loads in often unfamiliar subjects transcends developmental education as seasoned and successfully-transitioned students find themselves unprepared for upper-level reading demands. Faculty representing different departments and varied teaching levels have a request for those in student support roles: How best can I help my students?

Yet, this conversation is not new. In 2008, Shanahan and Shanahan implicated an increasing need for literacy, particularly higher-level literacy skills, because assessment data revealed that today's adolescents had not improved and were perhaps worse readers than the previous generation. The authors' conclusions for addressing this need included direct guidance for learners in meeting particular disciplinary reading and writing demands. So how *can* educators best serve student disciplinary literacy needs now?

Fortunately, some key recommendations offer a nice curriculum-development starting point. Duke and Pearson (2002) indicated that effective comprehension instruction should be balanced between explicit comprehension instruction strategies and extensive time and opportunity for textual practice, production, and discussion. Graham and Hebert (2010) confirmed that successful classrooms should use integrated methods: "writing practices complement reading practices and should always be used in conjunction, with each type of practice supporting and strengthening the other" (p. 29). Furthermore, in a recent analysis of common practices for content-area instruction, Gabriel and Wenz (2017) suggested that, although educators differ on *how* to teach disciplinary literacy, most agree that effective instruction views learning as an apprenticeship into communities with agreed-upon conventions that guide the production, dispensation, and evaluation of disciplinary knowledge. Thus, the central goal of disciplinary literacy instruction becomes to help learners achieve insider access in these communities so that learners are active rather than passive observers.

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Given these guidelines, educators can construct a course basis that builds upon what is known and adopts a blended approach from Gabriel and Wenz's (2017) identified practices—discipline-specific strategy instruction using complex disciplinary texts, general strategy instruction to enhance foundational skills that then fit content-area reading and writing tasks, and engagement in the discipline that immerses students in the act of creating content-area texts by *doing* the specified discipline. Why address all three practices? Because one may not be enough. For students to be successful, courses should avoid teaching strategies, even content-specific ones, in isolation, or risk teaching learners skills they have difficulty generalizing. Instruction should be fluid across the literacy that students will need rather than just the skills educators think students should have. After all, the ultimate goal is for students to invoke their own learning solutions to the different problems they will encounter, so transferability is crucial. Students then confirm newly acquired knowledge by producing work within the demands of a certain discipline, making practice and modeling essential. Additionally, after ten years of classroom experience as an instructor, I notice that students often struggle with inferencing—or reading between the lines—regardless of discipline, so insight into decoding and understanding inferences would benefit generalized student comprehension.

Keeping in mind this conceptual base that focuses on disciplinary literacy as well as inferencing and textual decoding strategies, The University of Texas will pilot a course this summer that attempts to address both faculty concerns and student needs. The course will offer

a blend of short stories based on student interest and selected chapters from the differing disciplines the stories invoke. This proposed course allows students to engage with texts, adapt inferencing strategies, and continue practicing literary analysis as they learn the underlying premise of various disciplines. As an example, students would start with the excerpt from Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1980) in which two computer programmers question the computer they designed, Deep Thought, which is "the second greatest computer in the Universe of Time and Space" (p. 112), about the answer to life, the universe and everything. The satirical response pokes fun at philosophical texts while it entertains. For the humorous argument to be successful, however, students must understand the basic message, purpose, and structure of typical philosophical readings. Thus, students would then read chapters from Nagel's (1987) philosophy text *What Does It All Mean?* Additionally, they will read *How to Think Like a Computer Scientist* (Wentworth, Elkner, Downey, & Meyers, 2018) since Adams also satirizes computer programmers. Students will learn strategies for approaching these disciplines, read the texts accordingly, and then comparatively analyze the short story to identify the basis for the humor and ultimately evaluate its effectiveness.

This proposed course represents just one of many possible proposed courses for addressing discipline-specific literacy curriculum needs. Its premise is based on student interest because part of the challenge of becoming a *good* reader is feigning interest when texts are uninteresting, or more appropriately, too unfamiliar to be interesting. Thus, an important goal of instruction is teaching students to become engaged enough to comprehend challenging texts. But again, this is just one proposed course, the results of which will be revealed after the pilot.

Until then, let this exploration begin a discussion. What *does* effective discipline-specific curriculum look like?

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