The purpose of this department is to address issues and present evidence-based practices related to subject matter learning. We intend to provide readers with ideas and information about content literacy that will positively impact student achievement. In this inaugural column, we assert that teachers can increase achievement of struggling and diverse students if they engage in reflective practice and possess a content literacy toolkit comprised of strategies for increasing motivation and building academic vocabularies.

Too Many Are Striving or Struggling

Juan, Ibrahim, and Mary are in fifth grade. All have strengths, but this year they are showing the effects of the “fourth grade slump” (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). They are surviving but not flourishing in school. During these watershed years (fourth through sixth grade), it is imperative that students like them become engaged in content literacy learning because of the ever-increasing academic demands of school.

Evidence about reading achievement presents significant challenges to teachers. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005), 38% of U.S. students were found to have reading proficiency levels below “basic.” Indeed, between 1992 and 2005 there was no significant change in the percentage of fourth graders reading at or above the “basic” category in the United States (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). The results from international literacy assessments suggest the fourth-grade slump is not solely a U.S. phenomenon (Mullis, Martin, Gonzalez, & Kennedy, 2003; OECD, 2001).

Early problems with reading often remain with children. Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, and Fletcher (1996) tracked children with reading difficulties from third grade to ninth grade and discovered depressed reading achievement persisted for at least 74% of the students. Struggling readers are especially vulnerable to failure with content text (Brozo & Simpson, 2007).

The growing number of inclusion students places further demands on teachers responsible for meeting content standards. Estimates vary, but most agree that about 20% of all children have some type of reading disability (Shaywitz, 2003).

Students in poverty also present special challenges to elementary teachers. At the same time, evidence from large-scale literacy assessments (e.g., NAEP; PISA; PIRLS) suggests children from low socioeconomic groups who have high engagement in reading also have higher reading achievement than might otherwise be predicted. Nevertheless, children of poverty without appropriate instructional supports to boost motivation and skills do compare less favorably with their more economically privileged peers (Berliner, 2006).

Finally, an unparalleled level of transnational migration has meant ever-growing numbers of students with limited English skills. The United States Department of Education estimates there are more than 5 million school-aged children in this category, two times the number of just one decade ago (Hawkins, 2004). Content teachers face unique challenges meeting the content literacy needs of these language-diverse students.
What Should We Do?

To assist students’ transition to adolescence and help them avoid a slump in motivation and achievement, teachers’ knowledge of content literacy practices is critical. Content literacy practices are those that braid together language arts and content material. They cause students to use and communicate content knowledge in meaningful ways. Content literacy practices, modeled by the teacher and internalized by students, have been shown to elevate overall literacy abilities and increase academic achievement (Brozo & Simpson, 2007).

In order to provide responsive content literacy instruction for diverse learners, teachers need an extensive and flexible toolkit of practices and strategies. Possessing such a toolkit is critical for teaching content area knowledge and skills (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Effective content literacy toolkits may be especially helpful to struggling readers and children with disabilities (Brozo & Simpson, 2007), as well as youth of color (Jiménez, 1997) and those receiving special education services (Fisher, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2002). Evidence points to ways students from diverse backgrounds can improve their reading and thinking abilities when instruction is focused on content literacy learning (Braunger, Donahue, Evans, & Galguera, 2005) and when strategies and materials are adapted to their unique learning needs (Pearman, Huang, & Mellblom, 1997).

What Should a Toolkit Contain?

Because many who fall into the fourth-grade slump exhibit undeveloped vocabulary, narrow comprehension, and declining interest in reading (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002), teachers need a content literacy toolkit comprised of strategies and practices related to three basic elements.

1. Motivation and Engagement

Teachers who craft content literacy experiences based on principles of motivation and engagement will have in their instructional toolkits a range of strategies for doing the following:

- Elevating self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996)
- Engendering interest in new learning (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004)
- Connecting outside with inside school literacies and learning (Pintrich & Schunk, 2001),
- Making an abundance of interesting text available (Sadoski, Goetz, & Rodriguez, 2000)
- Expanding student choices and options (Guthrie & Davis, 2003)
- Structuring collaboration for motivation (Anderman, 1999)

2. Academic and Instructional Language

A teacher’s content literacy toolkit will also need a repertoire of strategies for imbuing students with the knowledge of and skill for acquiring academic language (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). With this knowledge and skill, students can develop understandings of specialized vocabulary necessary for comprehending content texts and generating thoughtful responses to those texts (Qian, 2002).

3. Reflection and Experimentation

The most important component of any toolkit is the reflective and experimental disposition of the teacher. This is because the teacher, more than any other factor, is the greatest source of variance in student achievement (Hattie, 2003). Successful teachers reflect regularly and frequently about their practice, their students, and their knowledge of the content they teach. These teachers seek fresh ideas to enhance their classroom instruction. They tend to avoid the tedious and mundane. Their reflective nature is used as a catalyst for experimenting to discover what works with their students. These teachers create learning environments that are connected to the real world and carefully constructed to meet the needs of all their students (Cooter & Flynt, 1996).

In summary, it is clear that as students are expected to read and learn from content texts, they need teachers who have the knowledge and skills to engage their imaginations and expand their understanding of disciplinary language. Students also need teachers who can reflect on the effectiveness of their practice and creatively modify instruction to meet the content literacy needs of all students.
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References


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