



Short Communication

Disciplinary Literacy: The Other Content Areas

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Abstract

In response to the staggering number of students in our schools who continue to read below grade level in our secondary schools, secondary teacher preparation programs in 46/50 states currently require secondary preservice teachers to take some version of a content/disciplinary literacy course. Literacy requirements for all content areas vary, as do the skills necessary to read and understand the material/content. This is more true for elective content areas such as music, dance, kinesiology, art, theater, agriculture, and family and consumer science. This article will focus on art, its benefits to secondary students, and the necessary art literacy skills and best practices for preservice teachers.

Keywords: Disciplinary literacy, content literacy, art

1 Introduction

A staggering number of students continue to read below grade level in our secondary schools. In response to this problem, secondary teacher preparation programs in 46 out of 50 states currently require secondary preservice teachers to take some version of a content literacy/disciplinary literacy course. Those who don't currently require a course of this kind are Connecticut, Hawaii, New Hampshire, Wyoming.

Reading requirements for all content areas vary, as do the skills necessary to read and understand the material used in each subject. Many public secondary school teachers assume students learned to read in elementary school. However, the shift from reading narrative texts to reading for information begins to occur during late elementary, and students need support in how to read for information in all content areas. For many adolescent students, ongoing difficulties with reading and writing figure prominently in the decision to drop out of school (Baxter & Reddy, 2007).

The main hurdle many students appear to face is the ability to read and understand complex literary and informational texts. Informational texts may be challenging in particular because students often are not aware of the varied textual structures used across disciplines (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, and Baker, 2001). Reading for information in a science course requires very different skills from reading for information in a history course. This is also true for elective content areas such as music, dance, kinesiology, art, theater, agriculture, and family and consumer science.

2 The Problem

For approximately two decades, my colleagues and I taught Content Reading to all content areas, including kinesiology, dance, music, theater, art, and agriculture. During that time, we tried everything we could think of to convince students who majored in these content areas that reading and literacy were applicable to their specific content. Most of the time,

this was challenging because our students simply did not believe literacy played a role in their field of study.

Over time, the focus of the course evolved from Content Area Reading to Content Literacy to Disciplinary Literacy. Each change in focus of the course brought about a clearer picture of what the students in content areas such as kinesiology, dance, music, theater, art, and agriculture really needed.

My colleagues and I searched for textbooks and articles to support our new understanding. Unfortunately, very few textbooks and articles were available. So, we worked with professionals in the fields of kinesiology, dance, music, theater, art, and agriculture to determine exactly what literacy practices experts in their respective fields of study participate in to help us tailor our instruction accordingly.

We began with art. When we spoke with the art expert, Edie Wells, we learned that students who are literate in art need to read paintings, sculptures, etc. They need to be skilled at discussing techniques and styles, as well as to interpret the meaning of the works they viewed.

This was disciplinary literacy, and very different from what we had been teaching. Armed with this new understanding, we began to work with content experts in art to determine what their literate students really needed to know. From there, we developed strategies to teach this knowledge and skills to future art teachers.

3 Content Literacy vs. Disciplinary Literacy

Content literacy can be defined as the ability to use reading and writing for the acquisition of new content in a given discipline (McKenna & Robinson, 1990). Its focus primarily includes general literacy skills and strategies intended to enhance student understanding of the content (Miller & Veatch, 2011). Three principal cognitive components included in content literacy are: (1) general literacy skills; (2) content-specific literacy skills; and (3) prior knowledge of content (McKenna & Robinson, 1990). This instruction emphasizes students' application of prior knowledge to new information to construct understanding (Ryder & Graves, 2003).

Disciplinary literacy, however, focuses on teaching students how literacy is used in each content area, while also teaching students how to use discipline-specific literacy skills to access content knowledge. Students are taught to use reading strategies if and when they make sense for each discipline (Lent, 2016; Wolsey & Lapp, 2017). Disciplinary literacy emphasizes reading what experts in a particular field of study read, applying reasoning skills as experts in each field would, investigating areas of interest as experts would, and talking to each other as do experts in each field (Lent, 2016).

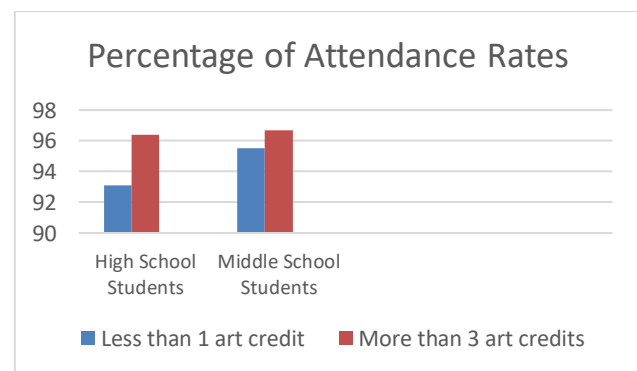
Rather than teaching students how to apply strategies to construct meaning, disciplinary literacy is about students learning how literacy is used in their particular content areas. Once secondary pre-service teachers begin to develop an understanding of what literacy looks like in their particular

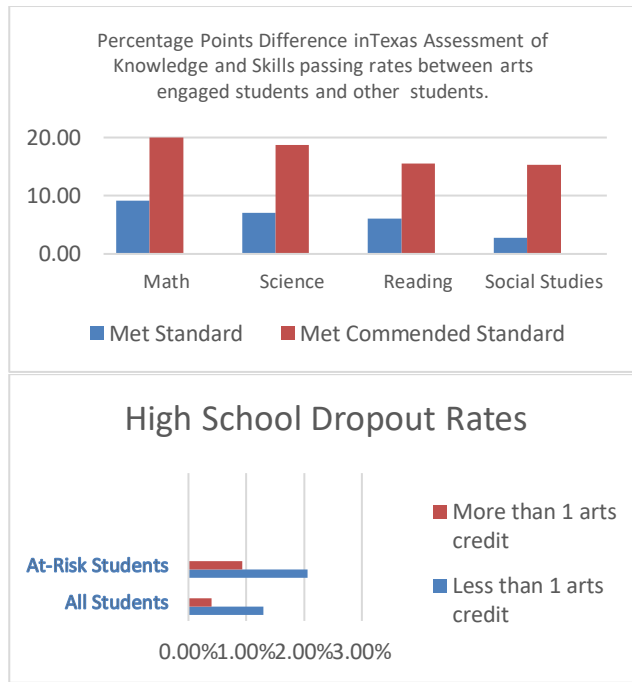
fields, they can then begin to work on how they can incorporate those unique types of literacy skills into their future classrooms.

Additionally, those pre-service teachers can begin to develop lessons/approaches that incorporate those unique literacy skills while teaching their content for use with their future students. Once secondary pre-service teachers understand how important teaching the unique literacy skills associated with their content areas is, they begin to more clearly see the relevance of the course as well as the relevance of literacy to their particular fields. This is particularly important for those pre-service teachers in fields such as music, dance, kinesiology, art, theater, agriculture, and family and consumer science. Disciplinary literacy is based in inquiry with an emphasis on how students use the information/knowledge they gain as a means to engage in work in their disciplines/content areas (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

4 Understanding Art Matters

The Texas Cultural Trust (2015) research demonstrated that participation in art courses contributed to a broad range of positive academic outcomes for Texas students. Across all subjects, students who completed a higher number of art courses performed better on state assessments. Students who complete more arts classes have up to a 15% higher pass rate on standardized tests than students with fewer arts classes. Across all grade levels, greater arts course completion was associated with higher attendance rates, with the greatest impact at the high school level. Texas high school students engaged in the arts had a 3.3% percentage point greater attendance rate—the equivalent of attending an additional week of school—than their counterparts who were not engaged in the arts. At-risk high school students who complete more than one art class are half as likely to drop out. Specifically, students who completed at least one art course credit in the 9th grade were less than one third as likely to dropout as students who did not complete one art credit. Thus, it is important for students to participate in and understand art. What role does literacy play in art?





5 Disciplinary Literacy in Art

To understand how disciplinary literacy looks in the field of art, first art must be defined. Art is primarily comprised of the following: (1) ability - the human capacity to make things of beauty and things that stir us; (2) process - the different forms of art such as drawing, painting, sculpting, architecture, and photography; and (3) product - the completed work (E. Wells, personal communication, January 22, 2018). However art is defined, it is important to know the vocabulary of art in order to understand it, as art is also a language. “I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say in any other way – things I had no words for” (O’Keeffe, 1926).

To be considered literate in art, individuals must know what the formal elements are and be able to recognize and discuss those elements in works of art. Those elements include line, color, shape, value, texture, light, space, time, and motion. When learning new terminology, it is important for learners to be actively engaged in vocabulary instruction, to make a personal connection with the vocabulary, to be given many opportunities to use the vocabulary and to be taught critical terms for the discipline in order for those terms to become a permanent part of a student’s vocabulary (Wolsey, 2017).

When learning new vocabulary in art, it is important for students to first be introduced to new terms. Teachers will want to begin with works of art that illustrate each term (visual literacy), and then allow students to discuss with a partner each work using the appropriate terms (speaking & listening).

The next step would be the application of those terms. One strategy for this step includes allowing students to work in small groups to find examples of art that demonstrate each term (investigating, reading, reasoning

and talking). Students can conduct a gallery walk of the examples and explain to each other how each term is demonstrated in the selections (reading, speaking & listening). Reading as it is used here refers to “reading” the work of art to determine the application of the formal elements within each work (E. Wells, personal communication, January 22, 2018).

To help students develop a deeper understanding of those terms, the art teacher could have each student select a work in an exhibit he/she responds to and then write about the logistics, artist, work, medium and content of the selected work (reasoning & writing). Then, the students will determine how the formal elements are presented in their selected works (reading & reasoning). Finally, the teacher can ask the students to share this information with the class (speaking & listening).

To aid students in mastery of the vocabulary terms, the teacher can have each student create a work of art that incorporates some or all of the elements (create). Following this step, the students can then display their creations for others to view. You will notice that none of the terms are taught in separate and isolated sections. Rather, students are experiencing vocabulary in multiple ways, which helps to make it part of their permanent vocabulary.

Steps	Method	Literacy
1) Introduce terms	*Selected works of art *Discuss using terms	* Visual literacy * Speaking * Listening
2) Application of terms	*In groups – find examples of art demonstrating the terms * Gallery walk	* Investigating * Reading * Reasoning * Speaking *Listening
3) Deeper understanding	* Students select art in exhibit they respond to *Students write about logistics, artist, work, medium & content *Share information with other students	* Reasoning * Writing * Speaking * Listening
4) Mastery	*Students create art-work that incorporates some/all elements	* Create

6 Discussion

Approaching pre-service teachers from a disciplinary literacy perspective helps them to better understand the role that literacy will play in their future classrooms. This approach to literacy is essential for creating a deep understanding of each content area. Pre-service teachers must embrace the idea that not only can literacy be used as a tool for learning; their future students will improve their literacy and their content knowledge at the same time!! Class content and literacy are not taught separately. Disciplinary literacy more readily illustrates the symbiotic relationship between content knowledge and literacy; disciplinary literacy is grounded in inquiry and emphasizes how students use the knowledge they are learning

as a tool to participate in work *within that discipline* (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

. When students engage in authentic literacy practices within a particular content area, they more deeply understand the information associated with that content area. Providing opportunities for students to experience engagement with each subject that mirrors what experts in corresponding fields experience creates a realistic and relevant approach to learning. This authentic engagement must occur within subject area classrooms in order for students to really learn the material. Otherwise, students will likely develop only a superficial understanding of the various classes they take, and their literacy will not improve as rapidly.

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