Chapter 12
Expanding the Definitions of Text and Literacy in the Secondary Content Areas: Content Pedagogy as Literacy Practice

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ABSTRACT

Content area teachers are often prepared to instruct with texts that are heavily grounded in written language despite research that demonstrates that literacy and text expand beyond these parameters. Traditional content literacy/reading courses maintain preservice teachers’ traditional understandings of text and of literacy as reading and writing, and they do not take into account broader definitions of text and literacy. This chapter describes how the authors, faculty in a medium-sized university teacher education program, redesigned their secondary content literacy course. The intention was to help preservice teachers better understand the nature of literacy in their particular disciplines and to demonstrate how to incorporate a variety of texts to effectively teach their content material. Sample lessons and assignments are described and student responses are discussed in terms of their larger implications for teacher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Leading literacy researchers (e.g., Alvermann, Gee, Kress, Lankshear & Knobel) contend that notions of literacy are changing largely due to technological advancements. However, there remains a disparity between what experts describe as current literacy practice and what schools emphasize in the teaching and learning of literacy and technology. Traditionally, schools have embraced the idea that reading and texts are tied to print-based media. Yet, as Wade and Moje (2001) assert, when educators rely on print texts, they miss out on multiple ways to engage students in a variety of texts and run the risk of privileging a certain type of student while marginalizing others. This means if educators are to best meet the needs of all their students, a shift in thinking must take place. This shift requires incorporating texts that come in multiple formats, including those created with digital media. It will also allow digital texts to take on a new authority in the classroom, positioning them as legitimate forms of communication. Kajder (2007), who works extensively with digital media and literacy, points out, “Teaching through a multiliteracy or multimodal approach is a very different kind of teaching, one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic, opening up what counts as valued communication within the classroom and inviting new voices into the classroom interpretive community” (p. 93).

So what does this “different kind of teaching” look like in the content area classrooms? It involves purposefully integrating literacy into content area classes to improve adolescents’ literacy skills, as well as their content knowledge. This approach is supported by the work of Cantrell, Burns and Callaway (2009). After a yearlong professional development project focusing on supporting content area teachers’ literacy implementation, they found the content area teachers “believed that literacy was integral to their content area” (p. 76). Yet, this support focused on traditional literacy practices, just as many traditional preservice classes and in-service professional development programs do when examining literacy’s role in the classroom. Neglecting new literacy practices in schools means educators “disregard the vitality of their [students’] literate lives and the needs they will have for their literate and social futures at home, at work, and in their communities” (Lewis & Fabos, 2005, p. 498). This chapter describes how the authors redesigned a content literacy course required by all secondary education majors at their institution in order to help preservice teachers better understand the complex nature of literacy in their content areas, as well as in their students’ lives, and to introduce an expanded definition of text as a way to support the diverse literacy learning needs of their students.

Traditional content literacy classes do little to prepare future teachers for the changing definitions of literacy and text. Just as classroom teachers struggle with how to effectively incorporate technology and other new literacies into content learning, so do many teacher educators. We provide teacher educators with an example for approaching the task of integrating multiple forms of literacy and texts into content area instruction. Through modeling an understanding of an expanded notion of literacy and text, teacher educators can assist future teachers in making the changes necessary to update literacy education in the PK-12 classroom.

BACKGROUND

Challenges to rectifying a disparity between students’ literacy needs and schools’ literacy approaches are multiple. First, as witnessed in our own professional experiences and as discussed by other researchers of content literacy, there may be a resistance among teachers, especially those who understand literacy as strictly reading and writing, to explicitly implement a broader notion of literacy into their content classrooms (e.g., Cantrell, Burns & Callaway, 2009; Draper, 2010). While a number of factors contribute to
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