Literacies *of* Disciplines

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The Issue

Consider this: Fourth graders in the US score among the highest in the world on literacy assessments, but by tenth grade the same students score among the lowest. We know that the texts read by tenth graders are longer and more complex, demand greater abilities to synthesize information, and present conceptual challenges. All of these features are compounded by the fact that much of the reading done by tenth graders—actually all students beyond the fourth or fifth grade—is grounded in specific disciplines or content areas.[1]

The discrepancy between adolescent readers in the US and their peers elsewhere in the world and the apparent decline in literacy capacities as students move beyond elementary school suggests a problem that needs attention. A first step in addressing this issue is to examine the meanings carried by literacy and disciplines.

Literacies and Disciplines

Research over the past few decades shows that literacy is not a single or monolithic entity. Rather, it is a set of multi-faceted social practices that are shaped by contexts, participants, and technologies. This plurality is reflected in the many ways terms are taken up and used in research on literacy. For example, a survey of studies published in the *Journal of Literacy Research* found a wide range of meanings associated with the term *context*, which suggests that many related terms, including *literacy*, have multiple meanings. The plurality of literacy extends beyond the print-only world of reading and writing to new and developing technologies, along with visual, audio, gestural, spatial, or multimodal discourses. It is much more accurate, then, to adopt a perspective of plurality, to focus on literacies, recognizing the multiple values and meanings along with the ways literacies are inflected by different contexts.[2]

Disciplines is likewise a complicated term. One complication arises from the fact that disciplines, as they are conceived in higher education, do not exist in secondary schools. Content areas or school subjects in secondary schools are organized differently—social studies, for example, does not exist as a discipline although it is a high school subject—and school subjects often operate to constrain or control how knowledge is presented, while disciplines emphasize the creation of knowledge. Furthermore, while it is possible to identify general qualities— problem solving, empirical inquiry, research from sources, and performance—that distinguish academic areas from one another, the boundaries of disciplines are increasingly flexible and porous. No single discipline can function as a rigidly fixed container of knowledge. As Carter (2007) puts it, it is more productive to "emphasize not

disjunction but junction, the intersections of disciplines, the connections between research and teaching, and the ties between writing and knowing. From this perspective, the issue is not so much writing in or outside but writing of the disciplines" (410).[3]

Developing a New Model

Putting literacies next to disciplines adds another layer of complexity. Traditionally literacies and disciplines have come together as teachers have required students to utilize common strategies of reading and writing in each of their content-area classes. Research shows, however, that this approach does not engender student literacies in multiple disciplines. As Moje (2011) explains, "strategies—absent some level of knowledge, a purpose for engaging in the literate practice and an identification with the domain or the purpose—will not take readers or writers very far" (52). Instead, instruction is most successful when teachers engage their students in thinking, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and interacting in discipline-specific ways, where literacies and content are not seen as opposites but rather as mutually supportive and inextricably linked. When put next to literacies, then, disciplines represent unique languages and structures for thinking and acting; disciplines are spaces where students must encounter, be supported in, and be expected to demonstrate a plurality of literacies. This means taking a much more nuanced approach to disciplines and at the same time affirming the plurality of literacies. As such, all teachers play an equally important role because no one class or teacher can best develop students' literacies apart from discipline-informed resources and lenses.[4]

What Are the Benefits of Literacies of Disciplines?

Research shows that when schools create explicit spaces for students and teachers to discuss the overlap and the differences among disciplinary literacies, teachers become more effective, and students develop new ways of representing and generating knowledge. Learning in the discipline is fostered by multiple literacies, and the learning of literacies is likewise expanded. This process, in turn, enables students to traverse and to transfer learning across disciplines—thus enhancing their ability to become learners who make connections and draw distinctions to function more effectively, whether in classrooms or on-the-job.[5]

Classrooms where literacies of disciplines flourish are nurturing environments for formative assessment. The specificity of discipline-based literacies enables teachers and students to focus on only a few issues at a time, an essential feature for formative assessment because it allows teachers to give students the feedback they need to evaluate their own work without imposing grades. Teachers can use formative assessment to shape instruction based on student progress; considering student performance enables teachers to pinpoint areas where students may need more focused teaching. And teachers in specific disciplines are best prepared to assess student literacies in a given field. The processes associated with formative assessment help students relate new concepts to their prior knowledge in any discipline, making them more likely to transfer learning from one context to another.[6]

What Support Do Literacies of Disciplines Need?

Implementing literacies of disciplines will require significant attention to professional development for teachers. Teacher learning is an integral element not just of the teacher's continuing professional education, but also of student achievement. Teachers may learn in varying contexts—through their teaching experiences, school communities, conversations with colleagues, hallway interactions with students, or through professional development opportunities like workshops, inservices, or classes.

Regardless of how they learn, that learning will have a direct effect on what their students are able to accomplish. As the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are implemented in most states across the nation, new forms of professional development will be required. The CCSS give literacies of disciplines a central position, and teachers will need professional development that addresses how the learning of literacies may be approached within their disciplines.

The professional development that will provide teachers with the resources and strategies necessary to support students in acquiring plural literacies needs to be sustained and systematic because episodic or unfocused learning experiences will not give teachers from multiple disciplines sufficient opportunities for effective learning. One of the most powerful forms of professional development is communities of practice. The National Writing Project exemplifies this approach by bringing together English language arts teachers from multiple schools for an intensive and

sustained experience of learning, and research shows that this learning is transformative for teachers and their students. However, for literacies of discipline to flourish, a more cross-disciplinary form of professional development is needed.[7]

How Can We Develop Communities of Practice That Support Literacies of Disciplines?

By working with colleagues from several fields in the context of a long-term intentional community, teachers can become more aware of how their professional knowledge is developed through informal interactions. They can come to see their colleagues as resources for learning, and they can move smoothly between teaching and learning, implementing and reflecting on that implementation with colleagues. They can also gain deeper understandings of disciplinary literacy expectations by reading and discussing publications that address this issue. Experiences like these enable teachers to move beyond thinking of professional development as a one-time event and instead view it as an ongoing, recursive process that improves their own learning across different spaces and contexts. With this kind of professional development, teachers can support students as they learn to explore the multiple literacies of disciplines.[8]

Endnotes

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