Disciplinary Literacy
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Literacy in the content areas is a term that has been around for quite a while. However, with Common Core and the new Indiana State Standards that require more writing, critical thinking and analysis of nonfiction text, many educators are beginning to take a second look at this approach. In the secondary classroom, many educators are wrestling with the concept of how to teach the students in their classroom how to read and write successfully.

In 2001 there was a problem surfacing in education. Students were reading lots of literature, but not nonfiction and students weren’t equipped with any strategies when they came across words or text they didn’t understand. From this, Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum was born. However, studies showed that reading and writing across the curriculum wasn’t helping all students, particularly gifted students and the on track students, and by 2008 everything had plateaued.

In 2009, an educational committee comprised of educational experts, MS/HS teachers, and practicing field experts got together to discuss literacy in the academic disciplines. The educational experts and teachers asked the practicing field experts four questions:

What do experts in this field read?
How do they read it?
What do experts in this field write?
How do they write it?

From those conversations, the panel concluded that reading and writing across the curriculum wasn’t enough. They found that reading and writing in the content areas was so diverse that students must be taught specific strategies on how to read and write in each course.

From this study, Shanahan and Shanahan have suggested there are three components to Literacy.

1. Basic Literacy- skills students need in order to be fluent and able to decode.
2. Content Literacy- A “tool box” of strategies that can be used by students no matter what the field to help students with comprehension (usually taught in elementary school)
3. Disciplinary Literacy- Specific strategies that are used in each individual discipline.
   (taught by the content area teacher in each course beginning in grade 6)

Research recommends that 70% of the reading students will be asked to do at the secondary level will be informational. After the elementary years, text becomes longer, but it also becomes filled with content specific materials that are increasingly varied in vocabulary, text structures, purpose, and audience. Just because students are proficient in reading fiction, does not mean that those skills will transfer to nonfiction reading which is the majority of the reading learners will do throughout school and life. Research also suggests that the majority of students are not taught explicit reading strategies for reading in the academic disciplines.
With all of this information, Shanahan and Shanahan believe that disciplinary literacy is the best way to teach students how to read in the disciplines. The theory is that if students were taught to read history in a way that corresponds to how historians read they’d be better equipped to handle such materials. Many content area teachers have shied away from teaching secondary students reading strategies because they feel that they are not properly equipped to teach reading or don’t have enough time in an already crowded curriculum. However, disciplinary literacy maintains that content area teachers are the expert in their field, and are the most qualified to teach students how to read and write in their specific discipline. Disciplinary literacy is targeted to what we teach (how to read like a scientist) rather than how we teach (teaching students to read a science book so they can pass a test). Rather than teach students reading and or study skills, the focus of disciplinary literacy is that students not only have to learn the content of the academic discipline, but also how reading and writing are used in that discipline, and how it is different than any other.

For example, history requires an assumed background knowledge of vocab, is structured in cause and effect, and is often biased in nature, only offering one side or perspective. When students move to science, the text is often very visual, there is heavy emphasis on vocab, and the text is spiral in structure. When students move to math, the text is full of symbols, abbreviation, vocabulary, and numbers that students must decode in order to solve the problem. The text is very compact with little repetition, and again there is an assumed background knowledge that the reader will know which specific strategies are required in order to solve the problem. All of this thinking is discipline specific and all of this thinking is required by students every day. Students won’t do well if they are using intermediate literacy or one reading strategy in each class.

How can classroom teacher give students the strategies they need to be successful in the classroom? The key to success is knowing the types of information in each specific content area, how it is presented, and equipping students with the specific skills they will need to be successful. This will be possible by teachers modeling the thinking in their course or showing students how they are navigating the text, figuring out vocab or solving a problem. Teachers must remember that the knowledge needed to figure out the text in their course is different than any one else’s, so they must give students the necessary knowledge. It is through the thoughts and modeling of the classroom teacher that students will learn how to read like a historian, scientists, etc., and will be able to independently think and read critically in each academic discipline.

Sources:
