

# THREE VIEWS OF CONTENT-AREA LITERACY: MAKING INROADS, MAKING IT INCLUSIVE, AND MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

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## Abstract

*In this paper, the authors will discuss three views of content-area literacy that arise from their respective practices. The first view, Making Inroads, raises issues related to working with secondary content area teachers and suggests means for accommodating them. The second view, Making It Inclusive, describes the adaptation of an existing content area reading class to address the preparation of teacher-candidates in areas related to English-language learners. Making Up For Lost Time, the third view, describes a private practice that serves the needs of young adults who have been successful in school, yet find high-stakes testing for college and graduate study to be challenging. Underpinning all three views is the importance of recognizing learners' particular contexts.*

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As professors of literacy, we share a commitment to developing cross-curricular literacy understandings. While much has been written about content-area literacy since Herber's seminal work in 1978, the particular contexts in which we work have presented three unique sets of challenges that only recently have begun to surface in the professional literature and professional conversations, if at all. They are as follows:

- convincing middle and high school content-area teachers that they should share accountability to develop literacy in their subject areas,
- broadening the notion of content-area literacy to incorporate strategies for English language learners' particular needs, and

- assisting young adults who previously have been successful in school, but for whom content-area literacy becomes problematic when they are faced with high-stakes testing.

With its 2006 publication of *Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches*, the IRA and its collaborators foreground the role that literacy professionals play when working with secondary content-area teachers. Snow, Ippolito, and Schwartz (2006) note a number of challenges embedded in this role. First, most secondary teachers lack basic knowledge about literacy instruction, knowledge that their elementary counterparts routinely gain as part of their undergraduate preparation. Second, secondary teachers view their role as conveyers of *content*, the breadth of which is ever-increasing in their respective curricula. Third, because of the departmental organization of secondary schools, they most often teach over one hundred students a day, each for only a brief period of time. Students, as a result, see many teachers during the day, with no single teacher monitoring their progress and, therefore, feeling ownership for their literacy needs. Sturtevant (2003) cites an even bigger problem, however, in acknowledging that "many content-area teachers do not believe that they *should*[emphasis ours] include literacy-related strategies in their repertoire of teaching practices" (p. 10). Indeed, the secondary content areas are fraught with historic and systemic roadblocks for making inroads into literacy.

Complicating the development of content-area literacy at all levels of schooling is the rising population of students for whom English is not their native tongue. Presently, half of all public-school teachers have at least one English language learner in their classrooms and this number is likely to increase. In 1994, only 28 percent of public school teachers with English-language learners in their classrooms had undergone any training, even an in-service workshop, preparing them for teaching these students. Traditional English-as-a-Second-Language programs have focused on issues of language theory and practice, with little or no attention to academic language across the curriculum or the contexts in which language is used. Not surprisingly, in a 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (Gruber, Wiley, Broughman, Stizek, & Burian-Fitzgerald, 2002) over 41 percent of our public school teachers reported feeling inadequately prepared to teach English-language learners. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the education of English-language learners is often compromised before they attain proficiency in English. Recent work in sheltered instruction (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000) holds promise for helping to meet these students' needs for academic language as well as academic content but there still is much work to be done.

The issue of working with adults whose content literacy has been superior, earning them high grades in selective high schools, but who suddenly find it insufficient for meeting the demands of the SATs, GREs, MCATs, and

LSATs is not well-researched. For example, the most recent edition of the venerable *Handbook of Reading Research* (Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000) included no studies of this aspect of literacy. These students usually are not guided by school or university personnel and most often contact the specialty schools and tutors on their own. Their goal is to enter prestigious universities, doing whatever it takes to get there, hopefully without anyone's discovery that they needed outside help. The well-kept secret of the good to superior students who pay for coaching in high-stakes tests remains all but overlooked.

In this paper, we shed additional light on these aspects of content-area literacy by discussing issues that have arisen in our practices. Told in our respective voices, each view reveals how we have considered the context in which we work and made decisions accordingly. In *Making Inroads*, we share strategies that have been successful in working with secondary-education teachers. In *Making It Inclusive*, we describe the adaptation of a content-area reading class to make it more appropriate to English-language learners' particular needs. Finally, in *Making Up For Lost Time*, we address ways in which content-area literacy applies to preparing students for success in high-stakes testing. We hope that these experiences will enrich the overall body of knowledge about content-area literacy.

### **View #1: Making Inroads**

The assistant superintendent stood before the middle and high school teachers gathered for the district's mandatory In-service Day presentation. She introduced me as the expert who would be speaking to them about how to teach reading and writing in the content areas and then immediately left the auditorium. As I stepped up to the microphone, participants began passing out sections of the daily newspaper to their colleagues. As if on cue, they opened them, held them in front of their faces, and began to read. I said to myself, "This is not going to be easy."

I did not remember reading about passive aggression in the content-area literature, but here it was, greeting me at the start of what was likely to be a very long day. I later learned that the decision to dedicate an In-service Day to "Teaching Reading and Writing in the Content Area" and to have me speak was made unilaterally by Central Office—just one of many top-down decisions made in this school district. Teachers and principals had been asked for no input; they simply had been told that they needed to know more about teaching reading and writing in the content areas and that failure to attend my session would result in the loss of a day's pay. It was clear from their body language that they had to be there in body, but they were not planning to participate in spirit.

Fortunately, most secondary audiences with whom I have worked have not been so overtly resistant, although there probably have been others who have wanted to do the same under similar conditions. I have come to understand that most requests for reading-and-writing-in-the-secondary-content-area presentations do not emanate from the teachers themselves. On the contrary, most secondary teachers believe that the responsibility for literacy resides with those who teach "down there" in the lower grades or "over there" in the English department. Students should *know it* by the time they get to the middle and high schools.

Those of us who are in love with literacy and have made it our life's work understand the critical importance of shared accountability for developing fully literate people. We know that the task extends far beyond reading groups and the elementary school. We know that it is pervasive, cross-curricular, and cross-grade and age levels throughout a learner's life. We know that the accountability for developing it belongs to everyone. We are the choir, and no one needs to preach to us. Unfortunately, most secondary teachers are not in this choir, and we must reckon with the reasons why. Secondary content-area teachers have spent their educational lives studying content, becoming experts in their disciplines. To them, reading and writing are subjects, not processes. Other than their own tacit understandings as adult readers and writers, they are not even aware of what is involved when one reads and writes. And, certainly, learning about these processes doesn't seem age-appropriate for high school! In our zeal as literacy professionals, we sometimes forget this, and haughtily assume that those who don't share this zeal are somehow inferior, uncaring, or professionally incompetent. They are not. They simply come from a different schema, one in which content is most important. Coming to terms with this bias and meeting our secondary colleagues on their own terms is the first step in making inroads.

### ***A Trip Analogy***

Many of us who study literacy fell in love with it as elementary teachers and this alone presents a huge hurdle. There is nothing worse for a high school physics teacher than to think that some elementary teacher (whom he hears spent her undergraduate degree studying cut-and-paste and sandbox play anyway) is going to try to tell him how to teach physics or that she is going to imply that he has to teach things that *she* should have done "down there." On that fateful In-service Day, I thought on my feet and began my presentation with the following trip analogy. I have used it ever since when I speak to secondary content-area faculty.

When my children were 8 and 12 years of age, I took them on a cross-country trip. During the year that preceded this trip, we researched and planned extensively. The USA is a big country with much to see, and we

had only 35 days and a limited budget to spend. We read brochures, consulted travel agencies and friends who had made similar trips, and ultimately prepared personal "wish lists" of places each of us would like to see. We compared lists, found commonalities, and developed an itinerary that would take us from the east coast to the west coast along a northerly route, and back by a southerly route. Along the way, we would stop for a few days at key locales where there was a lot to see. We would spend a day or two in other interesting areas but, unfortunately, some sights would simply have to be "drive-bys," time only to grab a quick look before motoring on to the next destination.

The extensive research that went into planning this itinerary was very important and kept us from wasting time by wandering around aimlessly, hoping to find something worthwhile. However, this itinerary was only one part of our trip. We had to make an equally important decision about the kind of vehicle that would take us on this journey. We considered flying from city to city, but it was too expensive. The train? Too expensive, and the tracks didn't run to all of the places we wanted to go. Go by car? Too cramped for four people to coexist peacefully for 35 days! Finally, we settled upon a van, in which each family member would have his or her own row of seats and private space. Yes, the itinerary was important, but, without the vehicle, it would have remained just an armchair fantasy.

In schools, we take students on a thirteen-year trip—kindergarten through grade 12. In preparation, we develop a well-researched itinerary. It is called the curriculum, and it is developed through many agonizing decisions about what to see (study), how long to stay (length of unit), and what topics will have to be only "drive-bys" (quick mentions that will be developed more fully later—or not at all). While this itinerary is important, it will remain as a static document, sitting on a shelf, never reaching the travelers (students), without a vehicle to convey it. The vehicle that conveys our curriculum to our students is literacy: reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

I said to the group of secondary content-area teachers,

I do not intend to tell you what should be in your itinerary (curriculum). You are the experts. What I can share with you is information about the vehicle that will get the curriculum into your students' heads, rather than having it remain on your shelves.

I noticed that the newspapers had lowered to the point that I could see the white of their eyes. Maybe, just maybe, I had something to say to these folks.

### ***A Coaching Metaphor***

Building bridges from the known to the new is no less important for adults than it is for children. When working with secondary content area

teachers we are faced, for the most part, with people who have little prior knowledge of literacy. The question for me on that In-service Day became "What *do* they know that I can use as a 'hook' to help them see the place of literacy in their content areas?" I thought of sports that play such a significant role in the culture of secondary schools, and shared the following metaphor:

I have worked with a middle school science teacher for many years. She has either played, coached, or refereed field hockey since she was twelve years old. Although I am relatively un-athletic, I have spent much time sitting on the sidelines watching my very athletic children participate in organized team sports under the direction of skillful coaches. As my science teacher/coach friend and I have talked over the years, we have discussed the similarities between coaching and teaching, coming to the conclusion that some of the best teaching takes place on fields of play. Here is what we have noticed:

- *Coaches Don't Cancel the Season If They Don't Get Good Players.* They may wish they could, but they can't. They take who they get and develop them as far as they can. As a matter of fact, this is valued in sports, with awards given for "Best Coach," "Most Improved Player," and "Most Coachable." When a junior-varsity coach sees a varsity player performing well in her senior year, he feels justifiable pride in saying, "You should have seen her when she was a freshman. . . ." Starting as a novice and developing into a quality player are prized, both from the coaching and playing perspectives.
- *Coaches Engage Players in Playing the Game.* There is always a scrimmage. Certainly, coaches develop isolated skills, drilling on trapping the ball in soccer, hitting overhead lobbs in tennis, and rebounding in basketball. But, there is always a scrimmage, a simulation of the real game in which these skills come together. Without the context of the real game, the isolated drills are meaningless. Coaches know that players not only *won't*, but *can't*, get better if they don't engage in the game.
- *Coaches model the behavior they want to see.* I have yet to see a coach carry a lectern out onto the court or field, stand with arms folded, and lecture about how to play the sport. Yes, they give an intellectual description of serving, trapping, or intercepting, but they simultaneously model what it looks like. They give their novices opportunities to see what a mature player looks and acts like.
- *Coaches teach multiple appropriate strategies.* They know, for example, that strategies for controlling the ball are sport-specific. When the star basketball player goes out for the soccer team, the soccer coach does not say, "I watched you during basketball season and noticed that you have good ball-handling skills, so just do the same

here in soccer." To a coach this is ludicrous in that dribbling the ball with the hands is forbidden in soccer. Instead, the coach compares and contrasts his sport to others, talks about how to move under certain conditions, how to change directions under others, and so on.

Bringing this metaphor back into the academic classroom, we need to do the same. Ironically, the same coaches who accept these as givens on fields of play often do not consciously think of transferring these behaviors to teaching their academic classrooms. We have to take students where they are and develop them as far as we can. We must engage them in the processes of the academic game, avoiding thinking that "I can't have my students read the textbook . . . or write . . . because they're terrible at it." We cannot forget the importance of scrimmage because, like on the playing fields, students not only won't—but can't—get better without being engaged in the processes of reading and writing. They need to see and hear us modeling, thinking aloud the tasks related to reading and writing in different content areas. How does one who has studied science for four years of college go about writing a lab report? How does an historian judge whether or not a source is credible? We must resist assigning reading and writing without regard to any special strategies needed to become successful.

### ***The Importance of Working with a Real Teacher***

After sharing the trip analogy and the coaching metaphor on the In-service Day, I noticed that the newspapers had dropped so that I could see the curious but not-yet-totally-convinced looks on participants' faces. What caused the papers to be folded and put away, however, was when I began to share examples from my friend, the middle school science teacher. She was one of them—a biology major in college who had never heard anything about teaching reading or writing. Yet, she realized that her students were not doing as well as she would like them to and decided to collaborate with a reading specialist in order to reach them more effectively. I shared her reading guides, lessons that she had re-conceptualized in terms of *Before, During, and After* strategies, and writing assignments that incorporated scaffolds that moved students from novices to quality scientific writers (Topping & McManus, 2002). Her work gave the secondary audience models of what is possible when both content and process are combined.

As literacy professionals, we have much to share with our secondary education colleagues. However, attempting to foist our knowledge upon them without recognizing the context in which they do their work is "fruitless," at best, and "offensive" at worst. If we are to succeed in engendering shared accountability for literacy, we must first pave the inroads. Otherwise, their eyes will remain behind the newspapers.

## **View #2: Making It Inclusive**

A student teacher calls in a panic. Her placement is in a third-grade classroom, in a school district that encompasses both suburban and rural areas. She laments, "I don't know what to do. There is a little boy in my class from Romania. He has been in the United States for only two weeks. He speaks almost no English. Twice a week he leaves the classroom for half an hour to work with a specialist. The rest of the time, though, I am responsible for him. I haven't had any training in teaching students who are not native speakers of English. I'm not in the city, and I didn't expect to find myself in this situation. I have no idea what to do. Can you help me?"

I supervise student teachers and teach a class in reading in the content areas to junior and senior-level students at a regional public university. Many of my students are first-generation college students. Often, their homes lie within a 50-mile radius of the university. They are, for the most part, monolingual, female, and Caucasian; and they have had few experiences with individuals with dissimilar backgrounds. The classrooms, for which they are being prepared, however, look very different, with large numbers of students from varied cultures and socio-economic classes including many students for whom English is not their native tongue.

Within our state, children who speak a language other than English are the fastest-growing segment of the school-age population. Whereas K-12 enrollment has decreased slightly, the percentage of English-language learners has increased over five-hundred percent within the last decade, with the majority of English-language learners attending elementary schools (Pennsylvania English Language Learner Resource Kit for Educators, 2002). Although the largest number of English-language learners are native Spanish speakers, more than one-hundred countries and languages are represented in many metropolitan school districts. Suburban and rural districts, as evident from the vignette, are affected as well, particularly as the smaller number of English-language learners and the great number of languages spoken by the children make bilingual education less feasible and the procurement of other appropriate services more difficult.

A serious impediment exists to challenge our ability to provide the necessary preparation to preservice teachers at our institution. Our university is 1 of 14 within our State System of Higher Education. Currently, we are bound by a directive issued by the Board of Governors intended to increase four-year graduation rates that mandates that programs be delivered within 120 credit hours. Unless students pursue certification in more than one area, we are obliged to ensure that they can complete their program of study within this limited number of credits. A majority of our students pursuing certifica-



tion in elementary education, receive little training in issues relevant to English-language learners.

Consequently, I adapted an existing content-area reading class to address the preparation of our teacher candidates in areas related to English-language learners and consciously included strategies appropriate for English-language learners' particular needs. I incorporated the following principles regarding English-language instruction into the course design:

- English-language learners must be held to the same high expectations established for all learners.
- English-language learners need to receive instruction that builds on their previous educational experiences and that reflects their language-proficiency levels.
- The curriculum for English-language learners must contain challenging content in all content areas, and performance standards consistent to all students.
- English-language learners are to be evaluated with appropriate and valid assessments that are both aligned with state and local standards, and take into account the particular language-acquisition stage of the learners.
- The academic success of English-language learners is a shared responsibility; all teachers, including both specialists and classroom content teachers, must ensure that content concepts and academic English are explicitly taught.

In order to provide my preservice teachers with the necessary tools with which to instruct English-language learners, I introduce them to the concept of sheltered instruction, and various and specific strategies that will make the content more comprehensible. Sheltered instruction, a means for making grade-level academic content more accessible for English-language learners while at the same time promoting English-language development, extends the time that students have for getting language support while giving them a "jump start" on the discipline specific content that they need to acquire. This practice involves highlighting key language features, and teaching these consciously and deliberately within the context of a lesson, while also incorporating research-based strategies that serve to make the content more understandable.

Accordingly, I introduce the principles and strategies described by Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2000). I require them to develop a series of lesson plans in which they:

- Identify both content and language objectives.
- Choose age-appropriate content-area concepts.
- Identify and use, or create, supplemental materials and resources.
- Plan meaningful activities that integrate lesson concepts with language practice.

- Differentiate assessment according to students' levels of English-language proficiency.

I share the various types of text guides presented by Wood, Lapp, and Flood (1992). In short, I provide these preservice teachers with the tools that they need to ensure that academic English is taught simultaneously with academic content.

### **View Three: Making Up For Lost Time**

A frantic mother calls me and says, "My son is an honor student who has always done well in school. Today he received his PSAT scores and he is very upset. He wants to go to a good school and there is no way that he can with these scores. My husband and I both went to Ivy League schools and we want the same for him. We know that you are very busy but would you please take him on as one of your students? We are desperate."

In my private practice, I work with students who fit the "successful student" profile. They get A's and B's in their core courses, are placed in honors' courses and take AP courses for college credit. Many of them are editors of their school newspapers and mentors to less successful students. Yet many of these school successes feel inadequate when taking the SAT and the ACT. And beyond this level, many are anxious about the LSATs, the MCATs, and even the Medical Boards. The high school "brainiacs," as they are called, have their sights set on the Ivy League and other selective schools. They know, along with their parents, from their PSAT scores, that they need to work to raise their numbers in order to even be considered.

These students are able to verbalize the difference between their own schoolwork and work from outside the school. They have learned how to answer their teachers' questions, how to memorize words, how to write the appropriate essay, and how to do well in teacher-made tests. While they have figured out the formula of mainstream teaching and learning, they have not figured out the paradigm of the high-stakes test makers. They need to take their content-area reading to a new level. They need to go beyond the classroom, beyond their school textbooks, and beyond their teacher made tests. They need to transact with texts and come up with something new for themselves. The most important aspect for them to learn is to be able to practice their own original thinking. The students need to "own" their reading and take responsibility for learning. Once they become active readers, they will have more confidence and, most assuredly, more success. I have found that these "high-powered" students need to:

- slow down and think about their reading,

- become aware of test design and practice test taking,
- read outside of their schoolwork,
- garner vocabulary from their new reading,
- work on their writing under time.

Over years of working with this type of student, I have developed a successful plan and tutorial program for bridging the gap between success in school to success in these high-stakes tests. This program prepares them for the Verbal or Critical Reading and Writing sections of the SAT, for example. It takes content-area reading outside of the box and into the real world. It requires these successful students, who have worked hard throughout their schooling, to work harder than they have ever worked before, and it requires them to think harder than they ever have before.

I begin the program by delving into the students' textbooks and outside readings to discuss the content. I base this on the concept that the content is somewhat familiar to them and they have already read or heard some of it. In this way, the students can see the difference between the way they used to read and the way they should be reading. I use protocol analysis to discuss line-by-line the meaning of the text. I model this by doing an interactive read-aloud with them so that they can hear the type of thinking that is possible. We discuss the vocabulary from the text in detail. We enumerate the multiple meanings of selected words and then check to see if we missed any by checking an unabridged dictionary together.

While we slow down in our reading before we speed up for test taking, we also work on analyzing the test design. We go over the way multiple choice exams are written and discuss the various choices. I use authentic released exam questions and we take the tests and discuss the choices together. Students work on the answers and orally label what the alternate choices are and why they are not the "right" answer.

After we work on the design of the exam itself, we work on practice under time and pressure. Again, we step back to analyze the answers, both right and wrong. In fact, it is through the wrong answers that we gain the most insight. In each case, both student and teacher analyze the "wrongs" in a Talmudic way. The teacher and student reverse roles constantly as they figure out the problem that the student encountered. Why were these "wrongs" wrong? What clue did I miss that would have helped me to get the right answer?

All of my successful students read their school textbooks and assigned readings. However, they do not read materials from outside of their own worlds. In order to fill this gap, I assign readings from top journals in varying fields of study. The students must read an article a day from a different assigned journal. I give them five to seven journals a week from which to choose

articles. They return to the tutoring sessions with short summaries in hand and ready for lively discussion. Some of the journals that I use are: *Scientific American*, *Science*, *Science News*, *Smithsonian*, *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The New Yorker*, *The Biblical Archeologist*, *Commentary*, and *The Nation*.

Vocabulary discussion and the love of words naturally evolve from this kind of interactive teaching. For most students, this is the first time that they have worked one-on-one with a teacher and discussed language and words. They start to notice and pull words from their readings both inside and outside of school. My experience is that most of my students enjoy this in-depth and lively discussion well beyond the high-stakes tests. Many former students have attested to the fact that these sessions and discussions have made them life-long readers and writers.

While most schools foster the writing process in which students are encouraged to brainstorm and think things through, high-stakes tests give limited time for writing. Most states require some kind of writing assessment at varying grade levels, so my students are familiar with this dichotomy. There are several parts to the new SAT Writing section (Fox, Israel, & O'Callaghan, 2005). They are:

Identifying errors in sentences (18 questions), improving sentences (25 questions), improving paragraphs (6 questions), and essay writing (1 essay, 25 minutes).

The goal in the new SAT is to write a cogent essay in twenty-five minutes. In addition, students are required to identify errors in sentences, improve sentences and improve paragraphs.

In order to prepare for this part of the SAT, I have my students write responses to opinion pieces in the various journals. We work on the plan, the execution, and the revision in twenty-five minutes. I show them how the essays are scored using a holistic approach. I teach them to think of this six-point holistic rubric as their guide when they write. I use a reciprocal-teaching method to have them improve their own essays by checking their grammar and usage. In this way, they prepare for the other sections of the writing section in an authentic way.

Clearly, this is hard work. Only serious students who are willing to read, write, and think can be successful in this program. It is not a "cookie-cutter" program where students memorize lists of out-of-context words. It is a program that takes the best in pedagogy and marries it with eager, bright students. It is a program that takes content area reading to another level.

## Summary

Our experiences in the content areas take cross-curricular literacy beyond the conventional classroom and into strata that require strong consideration of context. As you have seen through the vignettes above, we actively reflect on where our constituents are in their understandings, identify their needs, and negotiate the difference. At one level, this seems only to be common sense. At another level, however, we find ourselves simply employing the concepts of schema theory, as good literacy practitioners should do with all students. Our students are just older. Whether working with content-area teachers, teachers-in-training, or school-successful young adults, we must recognize where they are as learners and build appropriate scaffolds. In other words, we must practice what we preach.

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