

# Entering the Conversations

PRACTICING LITERACY IN THE DISCIPLINES



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Principles  
**in Practice**

LITERACIES OF THE  
DISCIPLINES

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# Introduction

The three of us who have come together to write this book—Trace, Andrew, and Patti—imagine you, our readers, to be teachers and teacher educators like ourselves, working in the current moment to do two things: (1) to provide our sizeable classes of diversely prepared students the kinds of content area and literacy instruction that theory and research in our field recommends and (2) to fulfill local- and state-level policy requirements for teaching and learning in our schools. And like you, we’re aware that theory and research findings in literacy education, couched as they often are in thick descriptions of teaching and learning, do not always seem to align easily with legislated mandates for literacy teaching and learning, couched as they often are in bulleted lists of learning goals and assessment program checklists. This has led us to ask two questions that we imagine many of you share: What do curricula and instruction look like that are theoretically sound, that are recommended by research in education, *and* that fulfill current legislated requirements for students’ literacy and subject matter learning experiences? And, in particular, what do they look like when those requirements named in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (NGO and CCSSO) emphasize the importance of having students read and write information-rich texts in multiple genres and media? Because these questions get at the heart of the work asked of teachers of the English language arts and literacy today, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has issued several policy briefs, among them *Literacies of Disciplines*, reproduced on pages xi–xv of this book, to support the development of such curricula and instruction.

## **Teaching Literacy and Subject Matter Together**

NCTE’s *Literacies of Disciplines* brief informs policymakers of a number of things that are well known to those of us who are teachers of literacy. First, literacy is not a monolithic competence. “Rather, it is a set of multi-faceted practices that are shaped by contexts, participants, and technologies” (1; all page numbers cited are from the Web version). Put in the language of schooling: the demands for reading and writing and what counts as effective reading and writing differ in different

disciplines and subject areas. In some disciplines, such as the study of imaginative literature, texts in which language use draws attention to itself are appreciated; discourse shaped in extended metaphors, figurative allusion, and onomatopoeic cadences is valued. In other disciplines, such as mathematics, in which economy of expression is appreciated, discourse shaped in equations, charts, and graphic figures is valued. And in still others, such as film studies, in which the grammar, syntax, and organization of moving images are intrinsic elements in the making of meaning, discourse shaped in multimedia is valued. Furthermore, patterns of discourse in different disciplines have traceable historic roots that explain in part what makes them different from one another as surely as do the activities and ideas they inspire and document.

For reasons like these, the *Literacies of Disciplines* policy brief indicates that asking students to use only certain common strategies for reading and writing in their various content area classes does not help students to read and write the different kinds of texts they are expected to comprehend and compose in those different subject areas. Rather, the brief claims that literacy “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” (2). For emphasis, and to foreground subject matter instruction for a moment, we want to add another to the brief’s claim: subject matter instruction, like literacy instruction, is most successful when teachers engage their students in thinking, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and interacting in discipline-specific ways (see Figure 1).

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**Figure 1.** Ideas from the *Literacies of Disciplines* brief that influence our thinking.

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1. The demands for reading and writing and what counts as effective reading and writing differ in different disciplines and subject areas.
  2. The patterns of discourse in different disciplines have traceable historic roots that explain in part what makes them different from one another as surely as do the activities and ideas they inspire and document.
  3. Subject matter instruction, like literacy instruction, is most successful when teachers engage their students in thinking, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and interacting in discipline-specific ways.
  4. In the world beyond school in which we and our students live, few enterprises are defined by disciplinary boundaries; most draw simultaneously on knowledge and practices developed in several disciplines.
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The body of educational research underlying these claims emerged in the middle of the twentieth century in the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement and has since been confirmed and extended in sociocultural and new literacy studies (NLS). In Chapter 1, “What We’ve Learned from Teacher-Led Reform Movements in Literacy Education,” we refer to these bodies of research as we share personal anecdotes that tell the story of how our profession came to understand the reciprocal roles that literacy and subject area learning play in the service of each other. Then, in Chapter 2, “Teaching Literacy and the Subject Matter All at Once, All Together,” Patti—a teacher educator—describes a workshop she offers in teacher education courses and professional development settings that draws attention to activities developed and widely circulated in the WAC movement that have enabled us to teach literacy and subject matter, all at once, all together. In the workshop, as participants try their hands at writing-to-learn strategies they might use with their students, they develop a body of knowledge about the subject they happen to be writing to learn about. The subject that Patti asks workshop participants to write to learn about is children’s play.

Why children’s play? Most obviously, the subject works beautifully in the workshops and in Patti’s teacher education classes because play figures strongly in participants’ shared experience: everyone in every workshop has some experience and something to say about children’s play. But additionally, as participants investigate children’s play in talk and writing, the function of role-play in learning inevitably emerges as a topic of discussion—not only as subject matter of children’s play that they’re discussing, but also as a strategy for teaching and learning about other subject areas. Because role-play figures significantly in how we three teach the literacies of disciplines in our various settings, we conclude Chapter 2—which focuses on the use of literacy practices to produce subject matter learning—by shifting our attention to the subject matter learned. We do this to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between literacy learning and subject matter learning. A bonus for the three of us who wrote this book is that as we share with you writing-to-learn activities that produce disciplinary knowledge, we also make you aware of a slice of the knowledge that participants produced in this workshop: the role of play in learning. We’re hoping this role will be floating around in the back of your mind as we make our argument in Chapters 3 and 4 for role-play as a strategy for teaching the literacies of disciplines.

### **Boundaries of Disciplines Are Flexible and Porous**

Another important fact that the *Literacies of Disciplines* brief draws to the attention of policymakers is this one: “[W]hile 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” (1). To this, from our perspective as teachers, we would add: in the world beyond school in which we and our students live, few enterprises are defined by disciplinary boundaries; most draw simultaneously on knowledge and practices developed in several disciplines. Think, for example, of the project to eliminate AIDS that has biologists, chemists, sociologists, historians, geographers, as well as practitioners in human medicine—doctors, nurses, technicians—and social work, and others, working on a common cause. Often this work is described as conducted in the field of AIDS studies. The term *field* in this case is used to signal the fact that in the world beyond school, knowledge is informed by multiple disciplines simultaneously. Likewise, the field of education is informed by psychology, sociology, history, linguistics, subject area studies, and other disciplines. Because we recognize that practitioners of disciplines are also often practitioners of professions, in this book we show how we invite students to role-play by trying on for size the literacies of professional practitioners—such as legislators—born of the literacies of disciplines and moving across multiple disciplines.

As teachers who want our students to participate actively, even enthusiastically, in their learning, we are well aware that schoolwork that captures students’ interest and imagination often takes shape in projects that are not only real or realistic but also meaningful to them. More often than not, such projects involve students in interdisciplinary studies, which—from our perspective as teachers of literacy—offer students rich opportunities to discover the value of the subject matter content *and* the literacy practices that different disciplines lend to the project work. It’s been our experience that interdisciplinary projects also allow students to discover the differences between the bodies of knowledge and the literacy practices of different disciplines.

To be sure, we are not the first to make these observations. They are rooted in the work of Progressive Era educators such as John Dewey and William Kilpatrick. Kilpatrick gave currency to the term *project method* in his classic article in the field of education entitled “The Project Method” (1918). In the article, Kilpatrick offered a view of teaching and learning intended to serve as an alternative to an efficiency model of education being firmly established in America’s public schools in the early years of the twentieth century, a model many critics of current trends in education suggest we are unwisely implementing once again. Instead of lining up as many students as might fit in horizontal and vertical rows in classrooms for lectures, drills, and testing in multiple-choice, pencil-and-paper assessments (the essence of the efficiency model so popular in those years), Kilpatrick argued, we might better prepare students to think, live, and act in a democracy if we conceived of education as part of life, not just fact-filled preparation for it. To do so, he recommended that we engage students actively and socially in purposeful proj-

ects in fulfillment of which they would learn to read and write as they *do* history, mathematics, science, etc. In keeping with the values of his time, Kilpatrick offered examples of the kind of project method instruction he imagined: engaging girls in making dresses; boys in getting out a school newspaper; a class in developing and performing a play; students role-playing da Vinci painting the Last Supper or Demosthenes rousing the Greeks against Philip II of Macedon.

While it goes without saying that these are not the kinds of projects in which most of us engage our students today, like Kilpatrick, most of us today conceive of education in school as part of life, not just fact-filled preparation for it. Many of us, ourselves included, design units of study as *projects* to engage our students actively in the discipline-based roles and practices—including literacy practices—that produced the subject matter they are expected to learn. One reason we do this is because, like Kilpatrick, experience has taught us that when our students are interested, invested, and actively engaged in their learning, their chances of being successful learners are dramatically increased. We also do this because, like Kilpatrick, we are persuaded that asking students to assume roles—perhaps not da Vinci or Demosthenes, but instead perhaps wildlife biologists or elected officeholders—enables them to identify with the subject matter we are asking them to learn and with the activities of those who produced it.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Andrew, who teaches fifth grade, and Trace, who teaches eighth grade, offer thick descriptions of projects in which they engage students in twenty-first-century versions of what Kilpatrick called on educators to do a century ago: to play the roles of discipline-based workers and to engage in discipline-based practices as means of learning both the subject matter and the literacies of disciplines. And while Andrew and Trace engage students in inquiry-based projects for these reasons, they do so for other, equally important reasons as well: (1) to learn how the subject matter and the practices—including the literacy practices—that produced the subject matter developed in the first place and (2) to learn how the practices continue to be used to develop still other subject matter. Andrew's and Trace's reasons for asking their students to practice playing the roles of discipline-based workers and to engage in discipline-based literacy practices go beyond Kilpatrick's, however, because they recognize that it is no longer sufficient for students to learn a body of information in school and expect that it will serve their needs as individuals, workers, and citizens throughout their lives. All of us living now—children, parents, grandparents—must be lifelong learners. If we are awake, we know that we live not only in an age of knowledge explosion but also in an age of technological development that enables us to use emerging knowledge in ways that even a philosopher and educator as wise as William Kilpatrick could not have imagined at the beginning of the twentieth century. Citing Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon (1996), a 1999 report of the National Research Council titled *How*



*People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* put it this way: “[I]nformation and knowledge are growing at a far more rapid rate than ever before in the history of humankind. . . . [T]he meaning of ‘knowing’ has shifted from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find and use it” (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 5).

In light of current understanding of what it means to know, we are persuaded that learning the generative practices—including literacy practices—of knowledge making in disciplines is as important to a sound, productive education as learning slices of the subject matter these practices have already developed. Because knowledge is in flux, constantly being updated, students need to learn the practices that make, refine, and revise knowledge. In the chapters that follow, we describe how we make the literacy practices that produce knowledge the subject of critical study in our classrooms and how as students use those practices, often taking on the role of those practitioners, they learn the content required in their subject matter courses.

In Chapter 3, “Transforming Vision, Re-creating Disciplines,” Andrew describes a project he developed for a fifth-grade classroom that allows him to integrate all the strands of his required curriculum—English language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics—into what he calls a “coherent narrative.” The project, a study of the reintroduction of the wolf into the western United States, asks students to work and think like wildlife biologists, historians, legislators, and policymakers. In the process, Andrew’s students raise questions like these: What does daily life look like for a wolf? How do wolves behave? What interactions do they have with other animals? How did wolves become endangered in the United States? Should wolves be protected? Who has the authority to protect them? Should they be reintroduced into the United States? If so, where should those wolves come from? Working to answer such questions, Andrew’s students take on the role of practitioners as they talk, listen, read, write, graph, and design texts much like those composed by the disciplinary specialists who actually raised and answered these questions in an interdisciplinary collaboration. In the process, these students also re-create content area knowledge in science, social studies, and mathematics. In other words, by “doing” the work of these specialists in the field, students learn discipline-based literacy practices from the inside out. In this chapter, you’ll witness Andrew and his students “pivot” on a foundation of knowledge they construct using the literacy practices of one discipline to understand the literacy practices of other disciplines in order to construct knowledge in them.

In Chapter 4, “Spinning Revolutions and Creating History,” Trace describes a quite different unit of study that she developed to engage an eighth-grade humanities class (combined English and social studies) in an investigation of primary documents and discourse practices developed during the American Revolution and

other periods of dissent and civil disobedience in America (e.g., the writings of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass). In a final project, having studied the concepts and practices, including the literacy practices, of revolutionaries, Trace's students investigate and decide on social situations that might move them—or others—to revolution in the current moment. After deciding on a situation they believe calls for revolution, Trace's students develop a variety of purposeful genres of writing—documents designed to announce, describe, and argue for revolution (e.g., pamphlets, YouTube public service announcements, bumper stickers, declarations of independence, constitutions, letters to editors, etc.). They also compose what Bakhtin calls speech genres associated with public discourse (e.g., speeches, debates, etc.). Having studied revolutionaries who made American history as well as the literacy practices they used to do so, Trace's students take on roles and exercise practices that demonstrate what they have learned both about a foundational topic of study in American history and about rhetoric, the bridge that connects Trace's English and social studies curricula.

Like Andrew's students, Trace's begin to learn literacy practices by taking on roles and re-creating genres of writing from the inside out. Rather than being handed a generalized list of “accepted” writing practices, these students compose effective genres of communication in light of the rhetorical constraints facing those whose work in the world shaped the genres in the first place.

In Chapter 5, “Learning for and with Our Students,” we reflect together on our preparation as teachers and how we learned to be learners for and with our students in ways that benefit our teaching of subject matter and the literacy practices that produced it. In doing so, we take some time to illustrate how we use formative assessment in our classes to learn for and with our students and how we participate in professional learning communities (PLCs) to learn for and with our colleagues. And finally, we return to the questions with which we began this introduction to our project:

What do curricula and instruction look like that are theoretically sound, that are recommended by research in education, *and* that fulfill current legislated requirements for students' literacy and subject matter learning experiences? And, in particular, what do they look like when those requirements named in the Common Core State Standards emphasize the importance of having students read and write information-rich texts in multiple genres and media?

And now we begin where teaching the literacies of disciplines began for us, with work developed in the Writing Across the Curriculum movement.

The authors of *Entering the Conversations* invite us into their classrooms and professional development workshops to see how students at all levels of instruction can learn both the subject matter and the discipline-specific practices for reading and writing about that subject matter. Yes, the inquiry-based, project method instruction the authors describe helps students meet requirements for literacy and subject matter learning experiences, including those named in the Common Core State Standards. But more important, we see the engagement and enthusiasm of students caught up in their roles as knowledge makers. As emerging field-based specialists, these students address real-world issues such as the reintroduction of wolves to US ecosystems and how to shape attitudes toward social revolution. In doing so, they demonstrate the value of having students read and write information-rich texts in multiple genres and media.

As natural legacies of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, the authors' approaches to teaching literacies in the disciplines present a portrait of teachers as continual learners for and with their students. These approaches can help change the conversations about best practice in literacy learning and teaching, whether in the English classroom or across the disciplines.

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