Disciplinary Literacy and the Value of Making Connections


It is vital that future teachers understand research-based strategies and methods that will best serve their students, especially today, when there is a shift from how we teach a text to what text we are teaching. Literacy research has moved from a content area reading approach to a disciplinary reading approach in which strategies that are unique to specific disciplines are used to help students comprehend discipline-based texts. In fostering this shift, we must not move away from encouraging students to make connections in disciplinary literacy.

Content vs. disciplinary

Content area literacy focuses on techniques that readers use to comprehend content area texts; disciplinary literacy shifts the focus to the way that readers need to critically think, understand, or engage in the reading of a specific text to construct and convey meaning in an academic subject. Research has documented reading strategies that good readers use, and these can look similar across disciplines; however, they tend to neglect specific information necessary for discipline-specific comprehension. Consequently, literacy instruction must shift from general reading strategies to more specific ones that can be uniquely used, in order to make sense of texts in specific academic disciplines. This means that the student must read like a historian, mathematician, scientist, and book critic.

Read like a historian

This type of reading engages students in historical inquiry through analysis and interpretation, involving critical literacy and inquiry-based learning. The strategies used in this discipline involve corroboration, analysis of multiple perspectives, questioning historical claims through evidence, determining importance, contextualizing sources, and summarizing and sequencing events.

Summaries would include the important social, political, economic causes or consequences of a historic event. Reading like a historian requires students to think critically and provide evidence from their reading. Students must be encouraged to make connections in this discipline in order to recognize how the ideas in the text connect to their experiences, beliefs, happenings in the world, and their knowledge of other texts.

Read like a mathematician

This type of reading focuses on abstract concepts regarding numbers and space. Mathematical texts are written in compact form, containing many concepts wrapped in a sentence or paragraph. Students must learn to analyze, reason, formulate, interpret, and solve a variety of problems.
Strategies in this discipline include visualizing and conceptually understanding mathematical language, drawing conclusions and determining importance, analyzing and communicating ideas effectively, interpreting and formulating procedures, investigating the reasoning and arguments of differing opinions, transcribing detailed mathematical arguments, and evaluating data. Students must be encouraged to make connections in this discipline by relating mathematical content to real-world situations. Project-based learning and meaningful learning experiences engage students and make mathematical learning relevant to students’ lives.

**Read like a scientist**
Strategies in this discipline include making predictions, asking and answering questions, defining the problem, contrasting fact from opinion, reevaluating, reviewing, and reflecting. Students need to make connections in this discipline in order to engage in real-world problems and science-related issues that affect their world and other human beings. These connections empower and engage students to discuss and debate relevant issues such as global warming, access to clean water, and renewable resources.

**Read like a book critic**
The study of literature involves critical literacy and analysis of texts that contain artistic uses of language and literary techniques used by authors to capture the human experience. In this discipline, elements of fiction and devices such as tone, foreshadowing, mood, and irony are explored, requiring the student to read critically in order to gain the most meaning.

The strategies used in this discipline include predicting, clarifying, drawing inferences, visualizing, analyzing text from differing viewpoints, questioning, examining story structure, leading discussions that include author’s purpose, and using summaries to identify the central issue, raise questions, identify literary approaches, and include characters’ emotional responses. Students must be encouraged to make connections in order to explore characters, scenarios, and viewpoints in an effort to explore questions involving purpose and meaning in their own lives.

Teaching literacy with a disciplinary literacy approach requires students to be immersed in the language and thinking processes of that discipline, learn the content in each discipline, and understand how and why reading and writing are used in each discipline. Connections are required in order to engage students in relevant and purposeful activities, which lead to engagement and motivation in everyday life. Engagement and motivation should remain our focuses in today’s classrooms in order to foster deeper comprehension and better learning in all disciplines.

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