

Academic Literacy: Making Students Content Learners

by Ron Klemp

One of the challenges facing today's middle schools is the demand for rigorous demonstrations of competency across the curriculum. High-stakes testing has opened discussion surrounding middle school students' ability to successfully negotiate the demands of texts used in classrooms across every district in the United States. In order to accomplish deeper understanding across subject areas, teachers and students alike are having to gear up to the demands of academic literacy.

Academic literacy can be defined as a continuing developmental process of knowing how to navigate through different forms of text. Becoming academically literate means that a learner has an inventory of effective strategies to meet the demands of different forms of text. As students encounter graphics, attend to text structure, and handle new and somewhat perplexing vocabulary, they will need to use strategies that may not be a part of their past reading experiences. In addition, the emphasis on integration of a language arts curriculum across and through all disciplines has challenged secondary teachers to "think differently about the role of literacy in understanding content" (Irvin, 1998). Essentially, the challenge for teachers is to devise ways to support students' emergence into becoming academically literate.

A recent NAEP report (Campbell, et al., 1998) noted that many middle school students fail to understand texts beyond a literal level. On the surface, this report may be startling. But on a deeper level this revelation is not surprising. Many teachers and older students reveal that in their middle school experiences they were rarely asked to do more than report what was read in the text or what was said during the teacher's lecture. Most adults admit to their own middle school student careers being the same. The teacher lectured and students took notes or read chapters and then reported the information back to the teacher in the form of a test, quiz, or essay. The need for academic literacy did not extend very far. In addition, the report noted that most middle school students do not use effective strategies. To get beyond the literal level, students will have to engage a type of reading that will foster deeper thought and analysis. In other words, they will need to attain academic literacy.

To understand the interactive role of literacy across disciplines, it is important to paint a picture of literacy at the secondary level. According to a joint publication by the Northwest Regional Laboratory, National Council of Teachers of English, and the International Reading Association, levels of literacy can be described as (but not limited to):

Basic Literacy—refers to the ability to decode, recognize, and comprehend printed signs, symbols, and words.

Proficient Literacy—refers to the ability to extend ideas, make inferences, draw conclusions, and make connections to personal experiences from printed texts.

Advanced Literacy—refers to the ability to use language to solve problems and to extend cognitive development. New understandings within and across texts and the ability to summarize, evaluate, and apply strategies to text and construct meaning from various perspectives also describe someone at an advanced level of literacy.

While these levels appear to be clear demarcations of ability, it is feasible that students could move between the various levels depending on prior knowledge of topics, language ability, and other variables that render the lines a little shaggy. A reader who may be at an advanced level could conceivably be faced with text that he or she can decode but not comprehend. In short, the academic literacy demands placed on students require functioning at all three levels. Students who have not acquired agility with academic literacy need concrete examples and continuous support to “mentally map” ways of meeting these demands. What some students lack is the insight that successful readers use when they shift approaches from narrative to expository or subject area text.

Here is an example of the type of reading demanded by one state’s sixth-grade history-social studies content standards: “Students analyze the causes and effects of the vast expansion and ultimate disintegration of the Roman Empire.” Within this standard, students are also asked to study the strengths and contributions of Rome, including Roman law, architecture, engineering, philosophy, and geographic borders, as well as learn about the Byzantine Empire and Constantinople. Subsequent to this content standard, students explore Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and the Hebrews (California Department of Education, 1999). In order to meet the demands of these standards, students will have to do a fair amount of reading, but not a recreational kind of reading.

For middle school teachers and students, the important factors for content-based academic literacy include the following:

- Knowing what to do when they encounter unusual or irregular words that make up so much content-specific vocabulary
- Understanding the organization of the text, which helps set the purpose for reading (that is, cause and effect, problem and solution, sequence, and so forth)
- Maintaining an inventory of effective strategies, including ways of prereading, close reading, re-inspecting, summarizing, and reflecting or reviewing

Today, the role of content-area teachers is to “encourage the thinking processes essential to understanding, i.e., to facilitate learning with text” (Readance, 2000). Teachers who see themselves as facilitators of learning will “apprentice” students to a variety of strategies based upon students’ understanding of the organization of text, a purpose for reading the text, and a variety of strategies to engage them in the reading of text. Inherent in this call is the necessity for all teachers to understand that literacy extends to all subject areas.

To become more successful in facilitating content instruction through academic literacy, teachers will need to approach their content through a process focus. Cognitive strategies serve as subtext to the curriculum. Content teachers may be “content rich, but process poor.” In other words, they are well versed in the content, but they might not have a command of strategies needed to enhance students’ comprehension of text. To become “process rich,” teachers will need to have “topical knowledge,” an inventory of different reading strategies, and knowledge of when to use a particular strategy. Teachers will also need to explore ways of sharing strategies among the disciplines.

The missing ingredient in middle school literacy efforts has been the lack of continuity across the disciplines. Rather than allowing strategies to remain covert and internal, content teachers will need to externalize and guide students in a way that embeds in academic literacy into a school-wide curriculum. The *Reader's Handbook* allows teachers to do that. The *Reader's Handbook* becomes a vehicle for sharing an inventory of strategies across the entire middle school. Not only do the teachers become “process rich,” but the students also begin to understand that there are different types of reading strategies that have distinct uses and some that cross over disciplines.

Through this overt approach to “unpacking” text, students will have topical knowledge of the strategies and also conditional knowledge, in which they know when to use a particular strategy depending on the text they are reading. Through effective teacher modeling with the *Reader's Handbook*, students will improve their ability to shift approaches to reading various forms of text. Students will become more effective learners, and teachers will bring a new dimension to their instructional practice that will allow access to the curriculum for all students.

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