

CONTENT-RICH LITERACY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS (ELA)

INTRODUCTION

ELA teachers are faced with a task that might seem straightforward upon initial consideration. They are asked to provide their students with literacy skills that can be applied to any other academic discipline (Di Domenico, Elish-Piper, Manderino, & L’Allier, 2018). As it turns out, that task is not as easy as it seems. Each discipline adheres to specific linguistic conventions (Smagorinsky, 2015). A law student will need to learn legal jargon and argumentative tactics his high school English classes may have not necessarily instilled in him. A chemistry major will find herself writing a thesis that uses scientific terminology and reasoning skills that were never broached upon by her language arts teachers.

To complicate matters, the very subject of ELA is constantly in flux (Smagorinsky, 2015). At numerous conventions over the past few decades, members of academia have attempted to alter the standards of ELA education so that they reflect the rapid linguistic and technological changes that have taken place. With these changes in mind, we must ask ourselves, “What are the best tactics an ELA teacher can use to provide his or her students with literacy skills, and how can those students acquire a set of literacy skills specific to the discipline of English language arts?” Thankfully, recent writings have provided us with thorough and thoughtful answers to both of those questions.

DISCIPLINARY LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR ELA CLASSES

Before considering the discipline-specific literacy strategies teachers may use in their ELA classes, we must first establish a clear definition of the discipline of English. Peter Smagorinsky recognizes that, although the status of ELA and its component activities is always changing, it is best to view ELA from a traditional standpoint—as a study of composition (writing), literature (reading), and language (grammar) (Smagorinsky, 2015). From this traditional perspective, ELA teachers can attempt to employ tactics that will improve their students’ reading, writing, and grammar skills.

When teaching composition to students, teachers must strive to instill in them what D.H. Hymes called “communitive competence.” Rather than adhering to a standard form of English, students must learn to tailor their writing to suit specific occasions. It is essential for ELA teachers to provide students with the ability to decode the texts they read. For instance, they must recognize when a work takes a satirical viewpoint, so that they do not misinterpret the message of the writer. They must also be able to read constructively by tying in the experiences of characters to their own experiences (Smagorinsky, 2015).

Smagorinsky identifies language study as one of the “most vexing challenges” faced by ELA teachers. He encourages teachers to impart upon their students a “repertoire of speech patterns.” In other words, they must recognize that there are various styles of speech employed by people from different ethnic backgrounds, geographic regions, and social groups, and students and teachers must value these styles in the same manner in which they value the English found in their textbooks (Smagorinsky, 2015).

For additional guidance in their efforts to instill disciplinary literacy in their students, ELA teachers should look to the authors of Project READI (Goldman et al., 2016). As part of their project, they developed six READI learning goals for literary reading: 1) reading closely to pick up on literary

techniques employed by authors; 2) synthesizing within texts to arrive at generalizations regarding theme and language within those texts; 3) using evidence, warrants, and claims to construct arguments; 4) establishing criteria to judge interpretive claims and arguments; 5) identifying how an author's choices of language support the claims asserted by that author; and 6) realizing that texts are open dialogues between readers and texts. As these goals center on literary argumentation, teachers who employ them in their classrooms will hopefully see their students grow confident in their abilities to write persuasive essays.

Cynthia Shanahan has established four approaches for ELA teachers to consider as they introduce disciplinary literacy into their classrooms. They must encourage their students to read multiple interpretations of the same text. Teachers must also ensure that their students understand the structures of the arguments asserted in each text they read. Students should strive to become fluent in the language of literary criticism. Finally, students must learn to identify the themes in the works they read. These approaches will enable students to develop interpretations of various texts and share their findings with their teachers and peers (Shanahan, 2015).

INFORMATION LITERACY

Information literacy has been defined as the ability "... to locate, correctly evaluate, successfully use and clearly communicate information in its various formats." In an era during which technological changes are occurring at a mind-bogglingly rapid pace, students need to have a thorough understanding of the newest tools that could enable them to acquire and communicate information with ease. While teachers of all disciplines should make efforts to inculcate their students with information literacy skills, ELA teachers are lucky, in that they have ample opportunities to embed information literacy skills into their curricula (Gregory, 2018).

Jamie Gregory encourages teachers to use the Guided Inquiry Design process when working to make their students information literate. The process consists of eight steps: open, immerse, explore, identify, gather, create, share, and evaluate. Steps 3-5 encourage students to research on their own and adjust the scopes of their research, so that they can change the ways in which they perceive the world and not feel constrained by their teacher's perspective (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2015). Ideally, this process will enable students to enter the "Third Space," as they will be able to merge their personal and cultural knowledge with the knowledge they are expected to acquire in the classroom (Gregory, 2018).

Gregory uses an example from her own school in order to demonstrate how ELA teachers can provide information literacy instruction (Gregory, 2018). She mentions that students, in preparation for a Law Day essay contest, had an opportunity to learn about various databases that would assist them in their research. The teachers also showed students how to use advanced search features, and students ultimately had an opportunity to deliver their essays to an audience of lawyers. This example shows us that information literacy instruction works best when it is merged with Guided Inquiry Design.

TEACHING LITERACY SKILLS TO STRUGGLING READERS

ELA teachers should be well-versed in various pedagogical theories when they are attempting to teach literacy skills to students who speak English as a second language. The Cultural Historical Activity Theory, for instance, came in handy when Katherine Frankel was evaluating a ninth grader who spoke Nepalese as his first language. The theory “emphasizes the social and mediated nature of learning as it occurs over time and in particular contexts.” It seeks to “re-mediate” students, as it focuses on activities that enable students and teachers to create new methods of learning and teaching. In his Enhanced Reading class, the student read over 50 books—a number of which were graphic novels. The pictures in the graphic novels made it easier for him to understand what was going on, and this in turn helped him strengthen his reading skills and develop a passion for drawing (Frankel, Jaeger, Brooks, & Randel, 2015).

New Literacy Studies are the examination of literacy as a “social practice.” Maneka Brooks used this theoretical approach to study the experiences of a long-term English learner (LTEL) whose standardized test scores indicated a struggle to be proficient in English. Having begun to learn English in kindergarten and now in tenth grade, the student’s preparation for the test was vastly different from what she was ultimately asked to do on the test. As Brooks monitored the student’s ELA classroom, Brooks saw that students were asked to make meaning aloud and read in groups. In addition, the teacher would provide students with oral interpretations of the texts they were reading. Once she realized that these practices were hindering the student’s progress, she could begin to look for alternative methods that would allow the student to strengthen her literacy skills (Frankel, Jaeger, Brooks, & Randel, 2015).

SUMMARY

Embedding disciplinary and information literacy instruction into the ELA curriculum is a task that may seem daunting at first, but there is no reason for teachers to fear. With frameworks such as Guided Inquiry Design and Project READI, teachers will enable their students to conduct research and interpret texts with confidence. The Cultural Historical Activity Theory and other pedagogical theories can enable struggling readers to read, write, and decipher language with confidence. When teachers stay on top of the changes that have been made to the ELA discipline and are willing to try out different methods of literacy instruction, they can be confident that their students will grow as readers, writers, researchers, and critical thinkers.

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