

# CONTENT-RICH LITERACY IN ELECTIVES

## INTRODUCTION

As teachers prepare students to be successful in post-secondary education and in the workforce, there is growing concern that some students are not progressing beyond even the most basic literacy skills. While teachers may be able to recognize this deficiency, many feel that they do not have the knowledge or expertise to address it effectively. This is especially true in an elective course where, in addition to meeting unique content requirements, teachers are faced with unique challenges. They may have to deal with students pulled for various "more important" requirements. They may fall victim to schedule issues or changes. Elective teachers may feel overlooked or unsupported when new initiatives are introduced. One such initiative that has received well-deserved attention over the last decade is the push for integrating literacy into all content areas. Teachers of electives courses are not exempt from this focus, but often need specialized tools and strategies, along with the support to implement them effectively.

## LITERACY IN AN ELECTIVES CLASSROOM

“Literacy has come to represent a synthesis of language, thinking, and contextual practices through which people make and communicate meaning” (Weidner, 2013). This includes using listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing skills to gain information within a specific discipline. Additionally, the concept of text now includes “not only print forms of communication but also non print forms that are digital, aural, or visual in nature.” This indicates that literacy has expanded beyond the act of reading and writing to being able to express oneself and interpret the world around us using written, spoken, or heard language. (Dehner, 2018). Current literacy standards ask students to focus on details, identify and analyze themes, and cite evidence to support their claims. Electives classes provide many opportunities to gain experience with these skills through observing, discussing and writing about these areas. In a music classroom, reading music promotes the ability to read text and symbols, and learning music by rote develops speaking and listening skills (Ming, 2012). In an art classroom, students can hone these skills by analyzing and discussing painting, sculpture, photography, and various other visual art forms, all immediately accessible and engaging to most learners, despite their reading level (Zindler, n.d.). While electives offerings vary greatly among schools and this reading does not aim to be an exhaustive collection of ideas and strategies, arts educator Eliot Eisner maintains a compelling sentiment that is widely applicable: “In order to read a poem, an equation, a painting, a dance, a novel, or a contract each requires a distinctive form of literacy” (Ming, 2012). It is incumbent on the electives classroom teacher

to identify how literacy concepts are used in their discipline and provide students with strategies to practice and grow as learners.

## **STRATEGIES FOR EMBEDDING LITERACY**

Disciplinary literacy strategies focus on discrete ways that reading and writing are used in the specific discipline being studied. The idea here is not that electives teachers should become explicit teachers of reading and writing, but rather that they should emphasize the reading and writing practices that are specific to their subjects (Chauvin, 2015). Research shows that using tools and strategies such as graphic organizers, outlines, and guided discussions help to support students at all levels of literacy proficiency. The following examples present glimpses of literacy rich classroom environments where motivation, literacy strategies, and reading across the curriculum effectively come together (Meltzer, 2001).

### **Physical Education**

Integrating literacy skills into a physical education classroom may not be so obvious on the surface, but it is easily done without drastic changes to a lesson. One could use a graphic organizer such as a Venn diagram to compare and contrast different sports or an enumeration chart to show the steps or processes in a game. Think-Alouds are another appropriate instructional strategy for students in this setting. Having the students verbalize each step of a practice drill while performing it, or demonstrating correct body formation or body shape while engaging in the activity helps to reinforce literacy skills (Ming, 2012).

### **Art**

A visual art classroom is ripe with opportunities for embedded literacy. It would be easy to adapt content framing questions that students may apply to text in another content area and apply them to various works of art.

Wonder: What do I wonder and notice about this work of art?

Organize: What is happening in this work of art?

Reveal: What does a deeper exploration of [a specific artistic elements or technique such as color, line, shape, scale, brushwork, composition, etc. reveal about this work?

Distill: What is the essential meaning of this work of art?

Know: How does this work of art add to my knowledge about [specific topic]?

As students gain practice with this set of structured questions, they internalize this habit of mind, awarding them the confidence to approach more complex texts and broaden their understanding of the world (Zindler, n.d.). Students in art class could also practice the literary skill of sequence writing. Even simple art projects have steps and having students practice this strategy can act as both formative and summative assessment tools for you and the students (Dehner, 2018). Students can create their own table listing “First, Next, Then, and Finally,” or the teacher can create a handout for them.

## Music

Music and literacy apply similar skills for processing, decoding, and analyzing materials (Weidner, 2013). Standards include common themes such as demonstrating independence, broad content knowledge, the ability to comprehend as well as critique, and the incorporation of multicultural perspectives. Therefore it is no surprise that high quality musical and literacy instruction both pursue similar goals and apply many of the same concepts and processes. Common literary techniques can be applied to music analysis with little adaptation. For example, music teachers can use a structured “Sight Reading Walkthrough” before singing or playing a piece for the first time to help familiarize students with the structure and other elements of the musical text before they need to be concerned about the content and their individual role. The teacher can complete the organizer on the board or projected screen as students respond to questions such as “What is the starting key, tempo, and time signature?”, “Where are the significant changes in the key/time/tempo/style?”, and “What challenges do you anticipate with this piece?” (Weidner, 2018). During the reading of a piece, you can encourage students to annotate musical texts, either by writing in the margins of their music, or by using a sticky note. Annotating is a strategy to help make an abstract thought process more concrete. (Weidner, 2018). Students can also annotate unfamiliar musical terms. Before asking or using a dictionary, have the students use context clues to describe the setting in which the term appears and hypothesize its meaning (Weidner, 2013). Some pieces of music lend themselves well to a plot analysis technique. Students will be familiar with a plot diagram from ELA classes, and just as in literature, music has material which is introductory, building, climatic, resolving, and concluding (Weidner, 2013). Deliberate listening while creating a plot diagram gives the students a familiar approach to critical thinking, just applied in a new setting. It also allows the teacher the opportunity to introduce or reinforce relevant musical terminology such as motive, phrase, etc. Including simple literacy strategies such as these enhances musical comprehension and potentially even musical enjoyment.

## CONCLUSION

Using research-based learning strategies to foster critical thinking and understanding can enhance literacy skills in all classes, including electives areas. Even when the content does not always rely heavily on printed text, embedded literacy- reading, speaking, listening, and writing- can still be an important tool for students to increase understanding and make connections across content areas (Ming, 2012).

## References

- Chauvin, R., & Theodore, K. (2015). Teaching Content-Area Literacy and Disciplinary Literacy. Retrieved December 9, 2019, from <http://www.sedl.org/insights/3-1/>.
- Dehner, M. (2018, December 10). 5 Ways to Bring Literacy into the Art Classroom. Retrieved December 9, 2019, from <https://theartofeducation.edu/2018/12/10/5-ways-to-bring-literacy-into-the-art-classroom/>.
- Meltzer, J. (2001). Supporting Adolescent Literacy Across the Content Areas. Perspectives on Policy and Practice. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED459442>.
- Ming, K. (2012). 10 Content-Area Literacy Strategies for Art, Mathematics, Music, and Physical Education. Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 85(6). Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ979370>.
- Weidner, B. (2013, January). Supporting common core reading literacy in the music performance classroom. Retrieved December 9, 2019, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320041192\\_Supporting\\_common\\_core\\_reading\\_literacy\\_in\\_the\\_music\\_performance\\_classroom](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320041192_Supporting_common_core_reading_literacy_in_the_music_performance_classroom).
- Weidner, B. (2018). Content Area Literacy in Ensemble Music Education: The Before-During-After Instructional Framework. Journal of Music Teacher Education, 27(3), 10–23.
- Zindler, R. (n.d.). How to Use Visual Art to Build Literacy. Retrieved December 9, 2019, from <https://ww.greatminds.org/visual-art-literacy>.