



Adolescent Literacy: Content Literacy and the Common Core

Joan Sedita

A major tenet of the 6-12 Common Core literacy standards is that content teachers outside of the ELA classroom emphasize literacy in their planning and instruction. One of the architects of the six major Common Core literacy shifts (Coleman) is that students should learn through domain specific texts in science and social studies classrooms. Rather than referring to the text, they should be expected to learn from what they read. The title of the literacy standards, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*, makes it clear that content teachers are key to ensuring that students have college and career ready literacy skills at graduation.

The most recent research on effective instruction for improving the literacy skills of adolescent students supports this emphasis on content literacy instruction. In the report *Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents*, Torgesen and colleagues (2007) noted that in order to meet adolescent literacy goals all teachers must be involved, especially since most middle and high school students spend most of their time in content-area classes and must learn to read expository, informational, content-area texts with greater proficiency. The report said, "Although reading strategies might be taught explicitly in a designated reading support class, students are unlikely to generalize them broadly to content areas unless teachers also explicitly support and elaborate the strategies' use with content-area texts" (p. 12).

Reading Next (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004) identifies 15 elements of successful programs designed to improve adolescent literacy achievement in middle and high schools. Six of these elements directly address content literacy instruction: *direct, explicit comprehension instruction; effective instructional principles embedded in content; extended time for literacy; text-based collaborative learning; diverse texts, intensive writing.*

In 2008, the Institute of Education Sciences published the practice guide *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al.). The goal of the guide was to present specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations that educators can use to improve literacy levels among students in Grades 4–12. The report made five recommendations about improving practice, three of which directly address content literacy instruction: (1) *Provide explicit vocabulary instruction*, (2) *Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction*, (3) *Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.*

Regarding content writing instruction, *Writing Next* (Graham & Perrin, 2007) summarized the results of a large-scale statistical review of research into the effects of specific types of writing instruction on adolescents' writing proficiency. The report identified eleven elements of effective writing instruction, and all eleven elements represent instruction that can be embedded in content classroom instruction for all students: (1) *Writing strategies*, (2) *Summarizing*, (3) *Collaborative writing*, (4) *Specific product goals*, (5) *word processing*, (6) *Sentence combining*, (7) *Prewriting*, (8) *Inquiry activities*, (9) *Process writing approach*, (10) *Study of models*, (11) *Writing for content learning.*

Content Literacy Alignment to Common Core Standards

It is important to note that the Common Core literacy standards *complement* rather than replace content standards in subject areas. Content teachers need to keep literacy achievement goals in mind along with coverage of content information. Which Common Core literacy standards are most associated with content literacy instruction? That is, which 6-12 literature and informational text standards should content teachers be most focused on? Here are my suggestions:

Reading Standards

- #1 & #2: Students should be able to determine what texts say explicitly and to summarize them, make logical inferences, and cite textual evidence to support conclusions.
- #4: Students should be able to interpret words and phrases as they are used in text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings.
- #5: Students should be able to analyze the structure of text, including how sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of text affect meaning.
- #8: Students should be able to synthesize and compare information from print and digital sources and critically evaluate the reasoning and relevance of text evidence.

- # 10: Students should be able to read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently.

Writing Standards

- #1, #2, & #3: Students should be able to write effective arguments, informative text, and narratives.
- #4, #5, & #6: Students should be able to use the writing process and make their writing appropriate to varying task demands, purposes, and audiences.
- # 10: Students should write routinely over extended and shorter time frames.

Language Standards

- #4: Students should be able to determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and reference materials.
- #5: Students should demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
- #6: Students should acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level, and demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge.

In addition to the specific standards listed above, I think it is also important for content area teachers to understand the focus of the Common Core on making sure students develop comprehension skills to understand steadily increasing complex texts. Students must learn to read and learn from complex text because this is the demand that will be placed on them in college and career. For too many years, content teachers have avoided using text as the vehicle to learn information because student literacy skills were not sufficient. I like to use the metaphor that content teachers have been *giving the students fish*, but not *teaching them how to fish*. It is important for content teachers to understand that the Common Core asks that they not simply use more complex text – rather they need to do the more difficult task of teaching students how to read and understand subject-area text.

Joan Sedita is founding partner of Keys to Literacy, a literacy professional development organization that focuses on adolescent literacy. www.keystoliteracy.com

References

- Biancarosa, C., & Snow, C.E. (2006). *Reading next—A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Coleman, D. (2011). Common core instructional shifts. <http://engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts/>
- Graham, S., & Perrin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools—A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Kamil, M.L., Borman, G.D., Dole, J., Kral, C.C., Salinger, T., & Torgesen, J. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Effective classroom and intervention practices: A practice guide* (NCEE#2008-4027). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.
- Torgesen, J.K., Houston, D.D., Rissman, L.M., Decker, S.M., Roberts, G., Vaughn, S., et al. (2007). *Academic literacy instruction for adolescents: A guidance document from the Center on Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.