

In the July/August 2016 Vol 60, No 1 Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, a team of authors write about the responsibility of literacy educators to work with content area teachers to implement what they call, content area literacy (CAL) instruction in classrooms. But content area literacy cannot be the only priority... learning certainly is important but the learning cannot be passive. Knowing how to engage students is critical for the content area literacy to have meaning.

Students need to learn to do or participate in the discipline rather than just be the receiver of knowledge. Teachers offer content but they still need to focus on the process of learning the content, e.g., how do students learn the content. We need to know not only the what (content) students need to know about the subject but also the how (process of learning) they learn about the subject. And, every content specific area requires different processes to engage students in the learning. Students need to know how to navigate the texts, whether they are traditional or non-traditional texts, and how those texts are organized. For instance, an article about science is not read in the same way as a short story. That means their teachers need to know a plethora of instructional practices that are appropriate for all content areas and address the needs of a diverse population.

Teachers need to recognize that they need to think about the “what” students need to learn and the “how” they learn it. For instance, a student in art class needs to think about what makes up the composition in a painting. They also need to know how the composition creates the finished product; a student in music class needs to be able to read music and also how that music creates that composition. We need to teach students the content but we also need to teach students how to read, write, think, and talk like an expert in the field.

Readers read for various purposes: to learn new information; to consider multiple perspectives on a topic; to validate what they already know; and for enjoyment purposes. They need to have the skills to understand academic vocabulary, interpret what they read, assess the accuracy of information, and link their new learning to their prior knowledge. They also need a clear, specific purpose for reading.

Instructional coaches help teachers navigate both the content and process of learning. And, although coaches are not experts, they collaborate with teachers who have the content knowledge. Teachers know the “what” and coaches help them understand the “how.”

Content area literacy refers to the topics that are inherent within the subject areas. Content is one thing; how to deliver that content is another. Think for a moment about the professor who is an expert in aerodynamics. In class, the professor lectures, writes notes on the blackboard, and never asks the students to collaborate or engage in conversation about the topics. Would the students learn as much from that professor as they would learn if they talked to each other about what the professor shared, asked questions about what they heard, and had an opportunity to access their prior knowledge about the topics? Instead of acquiring content knowledge passively through lecturing, students need to be actively engaged in knowledge acquisition through texts (traditional and non-traditional) they use. Teachers need to know how to develop the literacy skills of their students and what affects the way they learn. Coaches need to work with teachers to help them understand that their students need to “do something” with what they learn and not just spit back the information that they are given. I might know the steps leading up to a war and create a wonderful depiction of those steps but does that mean I understand the enabling conditions that created those steps or the long-range implications of those steps? Do I understand how to extend my learning so that I can think about how society was impacted politically, culturally, or economically by that war?

The Greek method of Trivium (Trivium. <https://en.wikipedia.org> ) has three distinct phases of learning:

1. Grammar: A solid grasp of the fundamentals, the mechanics of language;
1. Logic: The ability to create logical arguments, the mechanics of thought and analysis
2. Rhetoric: The ability to persuade, the application of language in order to instruct and persuade the listener and reader.

As coaches, we must help teachers understand that “grammar is the art of inventing symbols (regardless of subject area) and combining them to express thought; logic is the art of thinking; and rhetoric is the art of communicating thought from one mind to another.” It’s not just the “what” but the “how” that translates those symbols into learning.

Collaboration, ongoing conversations, continual planning, deep questioning, and shared learning are ways to ensure that content delivery moves from just repeating that content in multiple ways to synthesizing and analyzing that content. Coaches are the vehicle to help teachers move learning from consumption to production by meeting regularly with their teaching colleagues to discuss how their students learn and how their teaching influences that process.