Teaching Disciplinary Literacy to Adolescents: Rethinking Content-Area Literacy

Article Summary

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This article was written by Timothy Shanahan and Cynthia Shanahan (2008) for the Harvard Educational Review on the topic of Teaching Disciplinary Literacy to Adolescents: Rethinking Content-Area Literacy. The main focus of this article was to have teachers come together through a project by Carnegie Corporation to develop strategies to link higher level reading with strategies for applying the basics of reading.

The beginning of the article was bleak. The article explains that the correlation between literacy and the workforce where the higher the specialized education you have the higher income you generate. The article explained that the United States has more high paying jobs going to non United States citizens as there are not United States citizens to compete in these job fields. Even though jobs are becoming available in the United States, literacy still remains a factor in those jobs. “Blue collar jobs require and depend upon reading (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 41).”

Shanahan & Shanahan (2008) go on to discuss the national and international literacy scores. The United States did not do very well with 15 year old students having 14 different countries ahead of them for literacy scores. The article discusses how the United States high school students would not be able to function in civic life or be able to take care of their health needs due to literacy issues in schools (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 42). Shanahan & Shanahan (2008) state that “According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), high school students are scoring lower in reading now than they did in 1992.”
The article also states that students who are on track to go to college are diminishing as students go from 8th to 12th grade (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

The article describes a literacy progression pyramid from Basic Literacy - decoding and higher frequency words; Intermediate Literacy - generic comprehension strategies, common word meanings, and basic fluency; and Disciplinary Literacy – skills specialized to history, science, mathematics, and other subjects. This is basically the stepping stones for how students respond to higher level thinking when reading. From this pyramid became questions about how to teach students higher level thinking strategies while reading high school subject material such as mathematics or history.

The Carnegie Corporation came up with teacher education projects for teachers of the arts and sciences. From these projects the teams sat down and created lists of how each area used literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). The team members read different types of documents to ensure that they were covering all areas of content literacy. Even these professionals took part in a think-aloud to help understand how high school students would comprehend the text chosen. From the think-aloud readings came “reading facilitators” as well as “strategies” across the content areas (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 48).

Through the project’s first year, the teams learned that each content area uses literacy in different ways. The science areas are more charted and graphed meaning that they use alternate
methods to get their point across such as pictures, graphs, diagrams, etc. The team found that history is more of a he said or she said text based on their credibility and relationship within history itself. Unlike with mathematics, who wrote it is irrelevant, just so long as it is true and correct therefore rereading is imperative. “In their field [mathematics], errorless proofs are by their very nature true, and the purpose of their work is to create these proofs; hence, to create truth (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 51). Basically, what they learned in the first year of their projects was this “Students’ text comprehension, we believe, benefits when students learn to approach different texts with different lenses (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 51).” Also stated is that the first year assisted with revealing three different approaches to reading from creating, communicating and evaluating knowledge (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

The project’s second year was just as productive as they focused on creating discipline-specific strategies. From this was born the concept of strategy instruction. Team members were reluctant to use this strategy which showed just how high school students felt as well. In the chemistry section, structured note taking was introduced. The team members were reluctant, but later accepted the idea once they used it. In the mathematics section, the team was introduced to a “big idea” summarizing strategy. In History, the team was introduced to a history chart strategy. Also introduced in the history section was the “multiple-gist” theory. This revolves around the idea that students would read multiple pieces of literature and keep adding to their summaries thus increasing length of writing as well as coherent thoughts.
Overall, this article has given us great strategies to use within our content area classes. One of the main points is that we, in the United States, need to increase our students’ literacy levels to compete for jobs within our own country. “Historically, instructional efforts in literacy have focused on highly generalizable skills and abilities, such as decoding, fluency, and basic comprehension strategies that can be applied to most texts and reading circumstances across the content areas (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p. 58).” For our students’ to have a future, we, as teachers, need to give them to tools and resources available to better their education now before it is too late.
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