

## Characteristics of Literacy-Rich Content-Area Classrooms

Vicki Urquhart and Dana Frazee

What does today's classroom look like when teachers intentionally plan lessons that support adolescent literacy development? Research provides an answer: "School and classroom cultures that successfully promote the development of adolescent literacy skills are characterized by connections, interaction, and responsiveness, which lead to student engagement and reflection" (Meltzer, 2001).

Though socioeconomic status, class size, and teacher credentials certainly are important, research indicates that collective efficacy—a shared belief among teachers that they can help students succeed—has the greatest impact on student achievement (Goodwin, 2010). The following examples present glimpses of literacy-rich classroom environments in three content areas where motivation, literacy strategies, and reading across the curriculum effectively come together (Meltzer, 2001).

In literacy-rich mathematics classrooms, language processes support students while they are learning new content and help them demonstrate what they have learned.

- The teacher models problem-solving techniques such as think alouds, and students talk and write about how they solve problems.
- Students actively develop concepts with their teacher.
- The teacher helps students make connections to real-life applications.
- Students actively construct mathematics-specific vocabulary and explicitly use reader aids to enhance their understanding of mathematics texts.
- Students work in varied, flexible groupings to present mathematical solutions to problematic scenarios.

In literacy-rich science classrooms, reading, writing, and discussion are a daily occurrence.

- Students use a variety of texts, including academic journal articles, scientific websites, science fiction, and essays.
- Students have access to electronic media, film, visuals, and lab experiences, which further support reading comprehension.
- Students actively construct science-specific vocabulary and explicitly use reader aids to enhance their understanding of science texts.
- Students frequently discuss, present, and write about possible hypotheses, predictions, analyses, findings, and ideas.
- Students include elements of the writing process in their lab reports, solutions to problem sets, and research findings.

In literacy-rich social studies classrooms, students' interests are taken into account, and students work in various groupings on different kinds of assignments.

- Students use various resources, including reproductions of primary sources such as diary entries, maps, film, historical fiction, and newspaper accounts.
- Students explicitly call out reader aids, use specialized vocabulary in spoken and written communications, and investigate the thinking and approaches of anthropologists, archaeologists, economists, sociologists, and social historians.
- Students actively explore essential questions and make frequent connections between and among eras, people, and events from the past and present.
- Students use research skills and examine how languages develop and how various cultures use them.

We don't mean to imply that content-area teachers should become reading and writing teachers. Rather, they should emphasize the reading and writing practices that are specific to their disciplines. All teachers should use the tools

(e.g., graphic organizers, outlines, guided discussions) that research shows support all students—those who are experiencing success and those who are struggling.

In addition, the idea of a reading apprenticeship has been proposed as a model for direct, explicit comprehension instruction (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). In it, students act as apprentices to their teachers, who are the content-area experts, and learn how to read and write in a particular discipline. Reading apprenticeship classrooms focus less on strategy implementation and more on creating an environment in which students become active and effective readers and learners. To accomplish this, teachers need to plan along four dimensions—social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge building—and encourage metacognitive conversations in their classrooms (Jordan, Jensen, & Greenleaf, 2001).

- The social dimension focuses on establishing and maintaining a safe and supportive environment in which all members' processes, resources, and difficulties are shared and collaboration is valued. One simple and effective way to do this is to use the "turn to your neighbor" technique.
- The personal dimension focuses on improving students' identities, their attitudes as readers, and their interest in reading. It also promotes self-awareness, self-assessment, metacognition, and ownership. Teachers should gradually release the responsibility for learning to students.
- The cognitive dimension is where students are given the reading tools and strategies they need to read like experts in the discipline. Students need to practice these skills and receive feedback. Ultimately, students must learn to transfer their skills to new learning situations.
- The knowledge-building dimension focuses on building content, topic knowledge, and knowledge of a discipline's typical text structures and styles.

## Establishing Safe and Productive Learning Environments

Picture the following scenario: you are on a plane home after attending a conference on teaching innovations for the 21st century, and you have a binder full of conference material you want to read. In addition, you have a meeting scheduled with your superintendent an hour after your plane lands in order to share key ideas from the conference and a summary of the materials. It was raining when the plane took off, and the captain announces that the turbulence you feel will be getting worse. Everyone should remain seated for the duration of the flight, and seatbelts should remain tightly fastened. The young mother sitting next to you is trying desperately to soothe her 10-month-old baby, who is squalling and pulling at his ear. The woman apologizes for the noise, explaining that the baby has an ear infection. How well do you think you would be able to focus on your reading?

Truly, the environment in which reading occurs influences comprehension. When you ask young people about a good place to read, they respond with everything from "in bed" to "at the park," "in the car," or "by the pool." Although teachers have little control over the environment in which students read outside of school, they are able to create an environment in their classrooms that enhances learning. For example, research suggests students learn best in a pleasant, friendly climate where they

- Feel accepted by their teachers and peers.
- Feel a sense of safety and order because academic expectations, instructions, and purpose for assignments are clear.
- Feel confident in their ability to complete tasks successfully.
- See value in the learning activities. (Marzano et al., 1997; McCombs & Barton, 1998)

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