

## MEETING THE NEEDS OF SECONDARY STUDENTS: ONE TEACHER CANDIDATE AT A TIME

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### Abstract

*Access to equitable literacy instruction remains a major barrier to future opportunities for many students across the country. Due to this, most teacher education programs require students to take a literacy course that focuses on disciplinary literacy. As teacher educators in different states, we noted resistance from our students in understanding the importance of all content area teachers contributing in their instruction to the literacy skills of students. In an effort to make this need practical, a partnership between teacher education students in California and freshman composition students in Texas was created. This qualitative study demonstrated the potential active learning opportunities of teacher candidates and highlights the need for programs to be responsive to trends in education, the needs of students, as well as current events.*

Keywords: literacy, teacher education, disciplinary literacy

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There is a continuous, shifting change in the landscape of today's secondary classroom. The need for teachers to adapt and adjust is critical and necessary as evidenced by the current challenges our world is facing as a result of COVID-19. As teacher educators in Texas and California charged with preparing candidates to enter middle and high school classrooms, the authors felt the pull of these changes and needs long before a pandemic altered our world.

In addition to serving as faculty members in education preparation programs, the authors are both former English Language Arts high school teachers, and currently teach disciplinary, or content area, literacy courses. Most states require that teacher candidates successfully complete a disciplinary literacy course (Draper, 2002, Masuda, & Ebersole, 2013 Park, 2013, Siebert & Draper, 2008). However, these courses often focus on how content area teachers can enhance the reading skills of their future students. The authors both recognized such tendencies in their own courses. In an effort to increase teacher candidates' abilities to incorporate writing and respond to the writing of their future students, the authors developed a partnership and facilitated a collaboration among graduate teacher candidates in California and freshman composition students in Texas, utilizing technology as a mode of interaction.

During this study, college freshman composition students digitally shared their literacy narrative drafts with the teacher candidate graduate students, and then scheduled a virtual meeting. The writing students' literacy narratives detailed a time in their life when writing had a significant effect on them. After reading the literacy narratives, the teacher candidates were tasked with responding both in writing, and interactively in real-time by meeting via Zoom. To facilitate this interaction, both the teacher candidates and the freshman composition students were asked to select a time and date that would correlate with their individual schedules utilizing a Google document (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
*Zoom Schedule*

**1-February 11: 10 am (CA) 12pm (TX)**  
**LINK HERE**

Please **RECORD** your Zoom Meeting. Teacher Candidates save the recording to your Google Drive, Module Folder.

	Name	Email Address
Freshman Comp Student		
Freshman Comp Student		
Freshman Comp Student		
Teacher Candidate		
Teacher Candidate		

Following the two types of interactions, (written and virtual) the teacher candidates reflected on their experiences working with writing students, providing written feedback, and considering how this experience informed their understanding of literacy in their respective content areas.

The teacher candidates generated reflections that contained important information to consider as the authors worked to ensure that graduating teachers grasped the importance of literacy across content areas and were able to adapt and utilize technology as a necessary teaching tool.

**Disciplinary Literacy in Teacher Education**

Disciplinary literacy encompasses a wide range of skills, strategies, and knowledge. However, the authors describe disciplinary literacy as a framework that acknowledges that each content area, or discipline, has its own methods of knowing, of utilizing language, and engaging in communication. Disciplinary literacy draws on the idea that discourse is a “way of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network” (Gee, 2001, p. 1). It is imperative that teachers of all content areas “know how to create a classroom culture of engaged academic literacy” (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, & Murphy, 2014, p. 2).

Despite the fact that disciplinary literacy enables teacher candidates to examine the way their chosen field utilizes language and communication; many still show negative responses when they first encounter literacy or a teacher education literacy course. For example, in a study conducted at the University of Hawaii, teacher candidates revealed that they “initially thought literacy was just reading and writing” (Masuda, & Ebersole, 2013, p.50). Furthermore, as evidenced by students in the authors courses, a common belief, and one that is a detriment to secondary students, is that literacy is the sole job of the English teacher. The authors have witnessed these misconceptions over and over in courses and this partnership was an effort to remedy some of these misconceptions.

### Teaching Writing

One element the authors believe is important to emphasize in the literacy course offered through educator preparation programs is writing. Teacher candidates must understand more than reading and reading strategies. As teacher educators, the authors are concerned with studies, like those written by Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken's (2009), which revealed that 71% of teachers surveyed said they "received minimal to no preparation to teach writing during college (preservice preparation)" and that only 44% of in-service teachers reported professional development about teaching writing (p. 148).

The authors agree with Sperling & DiPardo, 2008 that writing is one of the most basic elements of English Language Arts and should be ever present in their curriculum. However, the authors argue, content teachers should "devote significant attention to the teaching of writing if they expect students to learn how to write within their discipline" (Kiuahara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009, p.151). The assignment presented in this research created an opportunity for teacher candidates to consider the methods needed to support the teaching of writing and written communication within their future classrooms.

### Findings and Discussion

#### Teaching Literacy Skills as Educators

The teaching goal for this assignment was to facilitate an opportunity for the teacher candidates to recognize the importance of their role in supporting literacy acquisition. Oftentimes, non-English teacher candidates will see this as the role of the English teacher and not realize their own need to provide opportunities for students to engage in literacy activities. Through this experience, all teacher candidates gained a deeper understanding of the need to promote and practice literacy as a change agent that provides students with opportunity for future academic and career goals.

#### Defining Literacy

As a result of this assignment, the teacher candidates were able to better understand and define literacy, as it applied to their content area. One candidate shared, "as a social science teacher it is my job to teach students argumentation and critical thinking and give them opportunities to showcase these skills through their writing." Another candidate, seeking a health certification, recognized writing as important but sought to "make writing enjoyable and about topics that they are excited about or eager to research" explaining that "those are the experiences I want my students to be a part of."

These are important reflections because the authors recognize that teacher candidates "perceptions of what counts as literacy can influence the pedagogy and curriculum in which they engage their students" (Masuda & Ebersole, 2013, p. 48). Without a definition or personal understanding of literacy, and what it may mean to be a teacher of literacy, future teachers will struggle to find ways to incorporate meaningful literacy practices.

#### Literacy Is Across Content

One of the most difficult tasks in an education literacy course is to get students to buy in, to believe that literacy is a skill in all content areas and that writing can be implemented in their future classrooms. As a result of this assignment, teacher candidates formulated new understandings of the importance of their role in supporting literacy. One physical education teacher candidate reflected on the experience, "I could have them write a food journal and track their physical activity outside of class for the entire school year." The health teacher candidate explained, "I believe I should incorporate short writes". While clearly a surface level understanding of how writing could be incorporated in their content area, this is still an important finding. It is important to facilitate opportunities for teacher candidates to explore literacy ideas in order to expand their thoughts and beliefs about literacy practices (Barton, 2000).

### Expectations of Student Skills

The teacher candidates were surprised at the level of students' writing that they encountered. One future teacher expressed, "assisting these students with their writing was an eye-opening experience. I was shocked by how poorly written some of these essays were...I know not everybody is going to be an award-winning author, but I feel everybody should have the ability to write in clear coherent sentences and be able to form and support an argument throughout their paper. This experience helped me to understand the reason ALL teachers need to support literacy."

An English candidate reflecting on this experience wrote, "As this was one of the first papers that I had corrected for someone who was not a peer, I also got a new perspective on the writing level of those whose writing I will have to grade in the future. This experience also helped me to realize that just making the corrections is only one part of what needs to be done because once those corrections are made one would need to be able to explain why it has to be fixed and how to continue to do so in the future."

A 2015 community report written concerning the literacy rates near the university that the teacher candidates are enrolled in was shared with them during the course. This report alerts the community to the alarming literacy indicators in the area. For example, 71% of the county's third grade students do not read at grade level, making these students four times less likely to graduate high school as well as predicting future earnings of only \$20,000 per year on average (Hughes & Kaanon, 2015). The research in this county continues to show disparities in literacy rates among minority groups, socioeconomically disadvantaged groups as well as in the English Language Learner populations (Hughes & Kaanon, 2015). Despite having access to these statistics, it became clear that hands-on experience with students' writing was the best teaching tool utilized. While the teacher candidates were aware of the unique challenges of their geographical area, the ability to engage in dialogue with recent high school graduates, as well as reading their literacy narratives, made this understanding more personal. Rather than viewing the disparities as nameless numbers, the need to promote literacy became relevant through the social interaction provided in this study.

### Conclusion

Literacy is an ever-changing field. Educators are currently seeing the changes unfold as they work to continue to educate children across the world amidst a pandemic. Our promise to ourselves, as teacher educators, is to continue to search for ways to embrace the changing landscape of education. It is important for teacher educators to create opportunities for teacher candidates to explore the questions of content literacy and to facilitate spaces that encourage adapting and adjusting their literacy ideas and practices.

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