

6

Designing an Effective Academic Literacy Course

Ruth Schoenbach

In Chapter One, we introduced the pilot Academic Literacy course, our definition of academic literacy more broadly as it is embedded in subject-area classes, and a brief overview of the Reading Apprenticeship framework, which is the foundation of this work. Chapters Two through Five have presented detailed explorations of students and teachers who are developing the kinds of Reading Apprenticeship classroom environments that can lead to more engaged and strategic reading. Here we return to a discussion of the stand-alone Academic Literacy course described in *Reading for Understanding* and offer design guidelines in terms of structure, curriculum, and classroom interactions to guide other educators in creating effective Academic Literacy courses in their own settings.

Since the publication of *Reading for Understanding* in 1999, we have witnessed a proliferation of courses called Academic Literacy that cover a very wide range of curricular and course designs. Publication of *Building Academic Literacy: An Anthology for Reading Apprenticeship* and this companion book provides an opportunity to articulate some design guidelines that we believe will increase the likelihood of more students making significant—even, in many cases, dramatic—improvements in their academic literacy. We realize, even as we articulate these guidelines, that educators may be constrained in ways that will interfere with some of these recommendations. We offer guidelines here to describe what we believe

will result in the biggest gains for a wide range of students, particularly those who struggle with reading assigned academic texts.

Academic Literacy Course and Curriculum Design Guidelines

The Academic Literacy course should be seen as a course for most or all ninth-grade students to prepare them for rigorous academic reading and writing across the disciplines, not as a “remedial” course

As the positive results in the pilot Academic Literacy class described in Chapter One suggest and as Lisa Messina and Elizabeth Baker argue in Chapter Three, a wide range of students can benefit from participation in an Academic Literacy course. A well designed Academic Literacy course can support, challenge, and engage students from struggling readers to more able but disengaged readers, to avid readers who can extend their range of reading expertise. As a result of our experience, listening to stories of Academic Literacy classes around the country and beginning to collect new data on student outcomes, we believe that Academic Literacy classes that target students scoring in the bottom quartile on standardized tests are much less successful than schools offering Academic Literacy as heterogeneous classes for all (or almost all) ninth-grade students.

The curriculum for an Academic Literacy course should provide students with opportunities to explore a core set of ideas about literacy and their own literacy identities using texts written by a diverse group of authors in multiple genres

The anthology that this book accompanies, *Building Academic Literacy: An Anthology for Reading Apprenticeship*, is designed as a resource for such exploration. Selections in the anthology, written by a di-

verse group of authors, represent multiple genres: poems, directions, newspaper articles, and a variety of types of narrative and expository texts. All the selections in the anthology focus on a broad but powerful set of themes related to the content of Unit 1: Reading Self and Society. In addition, the readings have been chosen—and have been field-tested—with an eye toward providing a wide range of text styles and difficulty levels. To help teachers have a sense of the range of the difficulty of these selections, we have appended a “Readability Rating” of the selections from the anthology using the Degrees of Reading Power levels (see Appendix H). Nevertheless, we urge teachers to remember that readability formulas do not include intangible variables such as students’ interest and background knowledge related to the various readings and to remember the limitations of readability formulas in general. Although word length, sentence length, and other measures can help teachers and students gauge text difficulty to a degree, they are not always good predictors of what texts students will find accessible.

The anthology selections in Part One: Literacy and Identity, offer students many points of exploration, identification, and difference. The links to the personal and social dimensions of the Reading Apprenticeship framework are powerful and can pull in even very reluctant readers. The second set of selections, Literacy and Power, address an aspect of Reading Apprenticeship’s social dimension that we believe is especially critical for students who are skeptical about the value of literacy in their lives. The selections in Part Three, How We Read, address another topic central to the first unit of the Academic Literacy course. Students read and discuss these selections as they learn and practice a variety of strategies for making their own invisible processes of reading visible. A fourth core idea in Unit 1 of Academic Literacy is that different types of texts represent different discourse communities, each with particular ways of using language and structuring text. The selections in Part Four, Breaking Codes, present and explore a variety of discourse

communities and types of texts ranging from comics to technical writing, from cinema to hip-hop.

An Academic Literacy course should integrate Silent Sustained Reading with metacognitive logs as a powerful key routine

Perhaps the most important part of this first unit is that students begin Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) of self-chosen books. In SSR, students read a book of their choice for twenty minutes at least twice a week. Students are expected to read at least two hundred pages each month, to maintain a reflective reading log (see Chapter Three of this book), to write reflective letters about their reading to the teacher, and to design a project or presentation about their book. Far from discouraging students from reading, the seriousness with which SSR is treated soon communicates to students the importance of reading and has the effect of reengaging those who had stopped reading as they moved into middle school.

A great deal of rigorous research has established that extensive reading builds knowledge of content as well as language and fluency.¹ This is especially important for students for whom English is not their first language. In addition, the element of choice in reading is very important in increasing students' intrinsic motivation for reading, which has been shown to be significantly related not only to their identity as readers but to their ability to tackle challenging texts.² Unfortunately, some recent misrepresentations of this body of research on SSR have led some educators to question the value of this practice, claiming that there is no research to support the value of Silent Sustained Reading for improving students' reading.³

We agree that SSR can be implemented poorly, resulting in students' "just turning pages" and pretending to read. Holding students accountable to the classroom community helps reinforce the seriousness of this aspect of the Academic Literacy course. When implemented well with routines for accountability, a focus on the reading process (through metacognitive logs,) and opportunities and

expectations to share “book talk” with classmates in a variety of ways, SSR can be a key catalyst for students’ increasing engagement, fluency, and confidence as readers.

The curriculum for an Academic Literacy course should be designed with routines for scaffolding students’ strategic repertoire and increasing ability to use strategies appropriately and independently

Beginning with Unit 1 and continuing throughout the year, students are learning and practicing a variety of metacognitive, cognitive, text-wise, and knowledge-building strategies as they read selections about the core ideas and thematic topics that focus each unit. Teachers model strategies for students and provide guided practice to enable students to work in a variety of group structures (pair-share, small group, student-led whole group work, teacher-led whole group work, fishbowl.) Teachers plan deliberately to provide opportunities for students to become increasingly independent in their use of strategies.

The curriculum for an Academic Literacy course should both address and stretch beyond students’ sphere of knowledge and experience

Scholar and high school English teacher Carol Lee has created and conducted research on an approach she calls “cultural modeling,” in which African American students use their sophisticated, though often not explicit, knowledge of literary elements such as irony, foreshadowing, and subtext as they appear in popular culture, such as in songs or television commercials, to bridge into reading literature, which is further removed from their experience.⁴ The same underlying idea—helping students recognize the complexity of what they already know how to do in their “reading” of the media—motivates the second unit of the Academic Literacy course.

Unit 2: Reading Media was designed as a six-week unit that introduces students to commercials as visual texts similar in some ways to printed texts. Students also read a challenging theoretical essay on the role of media in our understanding of experiences in which we cannot participate directly. Students learn to investigate texts as authors' creations devised or constructed in particular times and places with specific purposes, intended audiences, and points of view. Students learn about visual metaphors, symbolism, persuasive argument, key messages, casting, storyboard sketching, production notes, and targeted audiences. They carry out final projects that require them to analyze and then produce persuasive media pieces, using the elements they have been studying. Ideas on resources and curriculum design for this unit can be found in Appendix A.

**The curriculum for an Academic Literacy course
should be built around thematic units,
using texts in varied genres and disciplines**

Research on the explicit teaching of reading comprehension suggests that students are more likely to acquire and transfer reading comprehension strategies to new situations when they learn these strategies within a meaningful and coherent unit of study.⁵ In addition, such thematic or topic-focused units offer students opportunities to build fluency and context knowledge as well as increasing confidence and motivation. Here we describe two such units in which students gain practice and confidence reading in history and in science: the Reading History unit created and taught in the pilot year of the Thurgood Marshall Academic Literacy course and the Reading Science and Technology unit created and taught at the school in the third year of the course.

Unit 3: Reading History was designed to help students put their personal experiences in a historical context by understanding the roots of modern issues of either immigration and social alienation or totalitarianism and aggression. The unit was designed to help stu-

dents reconceptualize the discipline of history as an interpretive enterprise rather than an exercise in memorization. Students were assisted in developing a set of strategies to enable them to learn from a set of subject-area textbooks as well as primary source documents. They built background knowledge through extensive reading across a variety of topic-relevant texts, including modern films about historical events. For example, in exploring the topic of genocide in modern world history, students collected and read articles about current events in the Middle East and Africa, as well as reports of hate crimes in American cities. They read analyses of the social, historical, and psychological precursors and explanations for intergroup hostility and violence. They viewed historical documentaries about the Armenian genocide, as well as segments of *The Wave* and *Swing Kids*. *The Wave* is a film depicting the unintended and horrific outcome of an experiment in in- and out-group identity formation among teenagers, and *Swing Kids* is a film set in Nazi Germany as a group of jazz-loving teenagers comes of age and is forced to make choices, taking on or resisting roles in Germany's increasingly totalitarian and genocidal society.

Finally, as a culminating unit, students assumed the role of historian in an investigative project centered on the Holocaust. Working in groups and with both primary and secondary source documents related to a specific event such as the Warsaw ghetto uprising or the evolution of anti-Semitic laws in Germany, students interpreted and analyzed and finally presented their historical analyses of the event they had investigated.

Academic Literacy course teachers at Marshall designed Unit 4: Reading Science and Technology using the same curriculum design of the Reading History unit. This unit is also coherently focused, with a variety of texts addressing a central topic. The group of teachers who developed this unit chose the topic "Extreme Weather" to build on the base of knowledge students had from the earth science course they were taking concurrently.

When teachers are already so pressed for time, finding resources to develop curriculum units can seem like a daunting task. To minimize the burden, this group of four teachers divided responsibility, each finding texts on one of the subtopics: hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanoes, and earthquakes. Their primary source was the Internet, especially the U.S. Geological Survey Web site (<http://pubs.usgs.gov>) and the Discovery Channel's site (www.discovery.com). Other Web sites that can be helpful for educators wanting to develop thematic or topic-focused units in science and technology are the Web sites of the National Association of Science Teachers and the American Academy for the Advancement of Science. The Unit Curriculum overview in Appendix A includes these as well as other Web sites educators can use as starting points for finding resources for the Media Literacy and Reading History units.

Classroom Interactions

Academic Literacy classrooms should foster conversations focused on comprehension as well as on content

The work of comprehending reading materials takes place in the classroom; the teacher scaffolds the learning and serves as model and guide. This work is metacognitive; *how* readers make sense of text is as important as what sense they make of it.

Teachers should beware of these common pitfalls:

- Teachers may ask students to carry out metacognitive routines such as “talking to the text” but overlook modeling the routine themselves in the context of various reading activities.
- Teachers may model metacognitive conversation about texts but not provide students with sufficient opportunities to practice internal and external metacognitive conversations themselves.

**A climate of collaboration and curiosity
about everyone's thinking should be developing
in an Academic Literacy classroom**

Class members draw on each other's knowledge, serving as resources to make sense of text together. They respect and value problem-solving processes; classroom norms support risk taking, sharing knowledge and confusion, and working together to solve comprehension problems.

Grouping arrangements support collaboration and inquiry, with students working independently, in pairs, in small groups, and as a class, depending on the task and the text. A shared vocabulary to describe reading processes and text features is evident in classroom talk, materials in use, and materials on display.

Teachers should beware of these common pitfalls:

- Teachers may focus on the cognitive and knowledge-building dimensions of Reading Apprenticeship but overlook the crucial social and personal dimensions of Reading Apprenticeship.
- Teachers may feel insecure moving out of the typical teacher-to-whole-class discussion, question, and practice mode to give students carefully structured and phased-in practice working on reading comprehension in pairs and small groups.
- Teachers may ask all the questions rather than developing students' capacity to ask their own questions.

**Student independence should be deliberately nurtured and
supported in an Academic Literacy classroom**

Students are agents in the process of reading and learning; they actively inquire into text meaning, their own and others' reading processes, the utility of particular reading strategies, and their preferences,

strengths, and weaknesses as readers. They are expected and supported to read extensively; course-related materials are available on various levels, and accountability systems are in place to ensure that students read large amounts of connected text. Over time, students are expected and able to do more reading, make more sophisticated interpretations, and accomplish more work with texts with less support from the teacher during class time.

Teachers should beware of these common pitfalls:

- Teachers may believe that students who are struggling readers (that is, unable to independently comprehend grade-level texts) are not capable of sophisticated and independent work; they may not “trust” them to take on more responsibility for their own learning.
- Teachers may not be able to gather sufficiently diverse texts to enable students to exercise choice over reading materials and to read extensively in their classrooms. School libraries may have few resources to supplement classroom libraries.
- Teachers may not know how to plan for providing students with significant opportunities and guided practice in identifying their habits, thinking patterns, confusions, likes, and dislikes in relation to the texts they read, thus not providing students with the opportunity to develop increasing independence and sophistication as self-directed, self-motivated strategic readers.
- Teachers may not know how to choose texts at appropriate levels or to structure and set tasks at appropriate levels, with sufficient support and sufficient challenge, to enable students to work more and more independently.

Structure, Context, and Schoolwide Design Guidelines

An Academic Literacy course should be part of schoolwide work on reading and writing across the disciplines

In schools where staff have integrated a focus on literacy into subject-area classes, the benefits of a stand-alone ninth-grade Academic Literacy class are significantly amplified. Subject-area teachers have the benefit of not having to introduce students to key strategic routines used by active readers, because students have already been introduced to these in their Academic Literacy courses. At the same time, as subject-area teachers ask students to use these routines in their science, history, literature, math, or even shop classes, students gain important practice transferring these strategies to new situations. For this to occur, teachers in other content areas should be introduced to and supported in learning to include reading in their disciplines as an integral part of thinking and learning in their disciplines. Chapter Nine of *Reading for Understanding* provides guidance for this kind of on-site professional development.

Teachers who teach Academic Literacy should have time to explore the ideas and practices described in *Reading for Understanding* before beginning to teach the course

For teachers to create the kind of classroom community of inquiry into reading that is the core of an Academic Literacy class as we designed it, they need opportunities to understand and explore the underlying ideas of the Reading Apprenticeship framework, and—crucially—to practice using the metacognitive strategies at the heart of this approach with texts they find challenging. Again, Chapter Nine, Professional Development: Creating Communities of Master Readers, is a valuable resource.

Academic Literacy should be a year-long course

Developing increased fluency and internalizing a more active and strategic repertoire for reading a widening range of texts takes time

and practice. Our experience indicates that a year-long Academic Literacy course is much more likely to have the kind of beneficial impact described in the pilot course than will a semester version.

Academic Literacy courses should involve community members to increase students' connections to and sense of purpose for work on reading

Efforts such as forming book groups that involve parents, students, and teachers, or arranging classroom visits by community members who discuss how the types of reading and writing they encounter in their daily work and personal lives are time-consuming but high-leverage activities which can significantly deepen students' sense of connection to literacy.

Final Thoughts and New Directions

Having described what we believe are the most critical elements for the success of an Academic Literacy course, we want to reiterate that we understand that there are many situations in which educators are not able to fully implement what we describe here as best practice. A variety of political, economic, and social factors constrain educators at all levels. Nevertheless, providing academically under-performing adolescents access to a rich and rigorous literacy learning environment, can have a tremendous personal and social payoff worth the effort it takes to work around these constraints as creatively as we can.

In the three years between the publication of *Reading for Understanding* and the writing of this book, there have been many excellent books written for educators interested in improving adolescent literacy. We point readers to some of them in the Bibliography. In these same three years, we have worked with hundreds of educators around the country who are breaking new ground in adolescent lit-

eracy. From Alaska to Arizona, Boston to Binghamton, Trenton, New Jersey to Chattanooga, Tennessee, innovative educators are finding new ways to nourish a next generation of readers, writers, and thinkers who help us and others see beyond today's constraints to futures we cannot yet imagine.

