



Excerpt from Chapter 1 – Engaged Academic Literacy for All

from *Reading for Understanding: How Reading Apprenticeship Improves Disciplinary Learning in Secondary and College Classrooms, 2nd Edition*

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Engaged Academic Literacy for All

Usually, in a regular history class, the teacher would say, “Read from page so-and-so to so-and-so, answer the red-square questions and the unit questions, and turn them in.” And it wasn’t like you had to *read* it. . . If the red-square question was here, you knew the answer was somewhere around that area right there. It was something that you could like slide by without them knowing. I don’t know if they cared or not, but that’s the way everybody did it.

—Rosa, grade 9 student

Most teachers, if I talk to them, they’ll be like, “What, are you serious—this is college, you’re asking me how to *read*? I can’t help you. You should have learned that in eighth grade.”

—Kalif, community college student¹

AS A NATION and as educators, what do we expect of our middle school, high school, and college students? What messages do we send students about their academic abilities and promise? If we believe that all students should be able to think and read critically, to write and talk knowledgeably about historical, literary, scientific, or mathematical questions, we need to provide richer learning opportunities than the “red-square question” routine that Rosa describes. We need to better prepare and support students like Kalif.

This book presents an approach to improving students’ ability to read critically and to write about and discuss texts in a range of disciplines—an approach that builds their academic literacy. The framework for this approach, Reading Apprenticeship, starts from the premise that engaging students like Rosa and her peers affectively as well as intellectually is key to developing the dispositions and skills required for becoming confident, critical, and independent readers and thinkers.

Like Kalif, many students feel overwhelmed by the high level of literacy expected of them in college courses. Standards for high-level literacy, such as those embodied in the Common Core State Standards for K–12 students or in

the “gatekeeper” exams that determine college admission and placement, outpace many students’ preparation. Teachers feel similarly overwhelmed by the distance between these ambitious literacy goals and their students’ experience engaging with academic texts. When students are unaccustomed to carrying out rigorous literacy tasks, it is a daunting prospect for teachers to find new ways to engage them in the satisfaction of unlocking texts and the learning it makes possible.

Many educators express the belief that students who struggle with academic texts “just aren’t motivated.” Yet we see ample evidence that by helping students find their own reasons and entry points for reading challenging texts, we can support them in developing both their affective and their intellectual engagement with academic texts. When a teacher at a high-poverty high school with a majority of English learners tells us her students are “suddenly finding that the economics textbook is more interesting,” and they are eager to read and discuss the ideas in it, it seems clear that the students rather than the text have changed. By learning to work through challenging passages and to collaboratively make sense of them, these students have developed a different *affective* relationship with the text and with economics concepts they previously found “unengaging.”

Our work over the years with thousands of middle school, high school, college, and pre-service teachers has been the subject of multiple research studies demonstrating that teachers can successfully apprentice their students into becoming readers of academic texts. When teachers listen closely to students’ thinking, probe their thinking respectfully, and help students listen to and probe each other’s thinking about texts, classrooms can become lively centers of discussion about *how*, as well as what, students are reading. In such classrooms, students begin to see themselves differently and to feel more empowered as readers and thinkers. Time and again, this change in students’ sense of themselves as readers and learners—their academic and reader identity—results in striking changes in how they engage and comprehend a wide range of academic texts.

What we have learned from teachers and students is consonant with a deep reservoir of knowledge developed by scholars in the areas of cognitive science and sociocultural learning theory; psychological research on motivation, engagement, achievement, and identity; and educational research on pedagogy and disciplinary literacy in core subject areas.

The Reading Apprenticeship instructional framework presented in this book combines this scholarly research with practitioner experience. This framework, described in Chapter Two, is not a program or a curriculum that teachers or schools “adopt.” It is an organizing paradigm for subject area teaching, one

that enables students to approach challenging academic texts more strategically, confidently, and successfully.

The Context for Change

Reading, and its role in promoting achievement, is fundamentally an equity issue.

—William Loyd, district literacy coordinator,
addressing superintendents of the
Washtenaw, Michigan, intermediate school district

Secondary and post-secondary education in the United States reflects a society that does not equitably educate people living in poverty, members of racial and ethnic minorities, those whose first language is not English, and those whose learning differences call for special education services. Problems of inequitable opportunity and outcomes do not originate in schools and cannot be addressed through schooling alone. However, strong evidence suggests that schools can either reinforce these inequities or, like the schools in the Washtenaw district and others, push against them.² The following look at the state of literacy in secondary school, college, and beyond makes clear the extent of the problem.

Literacy in Middle and High School

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), two-thirds of U.S. high school students are unable to read and comprehend complex academic materials, think critically about texts, synthesize information from multiple sources, or communicate clearly what they have learned. Only a small minority of eighth and twelfth graders read at an advanced level. Many high-needs students have been demoralized by years of academic failure and do not see themselves as readers or as capable learners. Achievement gaps are stubbornly persistent along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. By some estimates, half of the incoming ninth graders in a typical high-poverty urban high school read two or three years below grade level.³

The traditional response to low literacy achievement has been to take a remedial approach to addressing skill deficits. At the middle and high school levels, low-achieving students are often required to take several remedial classes a day. Yet research has shown that isolated, skills-based instruction in reading may perpetuate low literacy achievement rather than accelerate literacy growth.⁴ At the same time, a renewed policy focus on “college and career readiness” driven by concerns about global competitiveness has highlighted the importance of increasing the number of students who can read critically and make sense of complex texts.

As awareness of literacy needs in secondary school and college has grown, an increasing number of research and policy documents are highlighting the importance of a more integrated and student-centered approach to building literacy—one that addresses both academic rigor and academic engagement. Recent literacy research has identified the instructional characteristics necessary to meet the unique needs of low-achieving adolescents: treat all students as capable learners, create a collaborative climate of inquiry, build on students' interests and curiosity, tap into students' knowledge and experience, and harness their preference for social interaction to serve academic goals.⁵

However, policies instituted in accordance with the No Child Left Behind act run counter to these research findings. Narrow compliance measures typical of No Child Left Behind continue to push schools to use remedial curricula, pacing guides, and test preparation to produce "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) on state standardized tests. Schools serving the least-well-prepared students are the most constrained by test-score pressures, but high-stakes tests push teachers everywhere to promote the rote learning practices—Rosa's "red-square questions"—that have long characterized teaching in U.S. secondary schools.⁶

Low academic literacy is by no means an issue only for underperforming students. Even among students who do relatively well in class and score reasonably well on standardized tests, teachers can point to those who have difficulty comprehending and interpreting class texts, who fail to complete reading assignments, and who seem unlikely to become independent, lifelong readers. "You can't rely on the students to read," explains one high school teacher. "They will engage in projects, but they don't seem to read or understand the source materials or texts."

The momentum behind the Common Core State Standards and the accompanying development of more sophisticated literacy assessments offer hope that richer literacy learning across subject areas may become a goal against which students, schools, and teachers measure themselves and are measured by others. These new standards and assessments can also provide direction for teachers' professional learning, if they are accompanied by sustained support for teachers to develop knowledge and skills for embedding advanced literacy practices into their subject area teaching. Otherwise, the inequalities these standards and assessments have the potential to address may merely be replicated.

Literacy in College and the Workplace

Without substantial improvement in advanced literacy proficiencies such as those identified by NAEP, students will be unable to handle the quantity and complexity of assigned reading in college.⁷ They are likely to struggle in the

workforce as well; even for entry-level jobs, the ability to read, write, and think critically is increasingly a minimum requirement. At issue are the competencies that allow or limit full participation in our increasingly complex and diverse society.

Students enroll in college with the expectation that this continued education will help prepare them for more satisfying futures. In the United States, 44 percent enroll in a community college, either as a gateway to further education or with the goal of earning an associate degree or technical license. However, between 70 and 90 percent of these entering students are placed in remedial, or developmental, English language arts or mathematics classes, or both.⁸ Success rates in these classes vary, but campuses that have tracked the progress of students who enroll in lower-level developmental courses find that only a small number of them (usually around 10 percent) ever make it to credit-bearing or transfer-level courses. Many, if not all, of these students are weak in the essential academic skills related to high-level literacy.⁹

In community college classes more generally, faculty report that students in credit-bearing classes ranging from geology to anesthesia technology also struggle with literacy. Many students seem unable to read and understand the course texts independently and rely instead on lecture notes. These same students are likely to become the future employees who have difficulty working either in teams or independently with complex instructions, open-ended problems, and multiple texts.

Community colleges are not alone in facing this challenge. Recent reports point to a dismaying literacy problem in four-year colleges as well: close to 50 percent of entering students are not prepared for the literacy tasks expected of them.¹⁰

The Literacy Ceiling

When students have difficulty reading and understanding subject area texts, they hit a “literacy ceiling” that limits what they can achieve both in the classroom and in their lives outside of school. Naturally, the literacy ceiling also limits what teachers can achieve in their classrooms. To the degree that students cannot independently access the knowledge and information embedded in their books and other curriculum materials, teachers try to find alternative ways to help them “get the content.”

Middle school, high school, and college teachers often express frustration with students’ limited academic literacy preparation, sometimes asking, “Why didn’t somebody do a better job earlier of preparing these students to read what they need to read to succeed at this grade level?” Others express a sense of inadequacy and bewilderment: “What am I supposed to do when they can barely

get through a page in the textbook on their own? I'm a subject area teacher, not a reading teacher!" Perhaps most disconcerting is the resignation of teachers who conclude, "It's too late for these students to catch up."

Teachers are not the only ones worried about the literacy ceiling. Students have an even more immediate and personal cause for concern. Many find reading mystifying. Faced daily with the difficulty of making sense of unfamiliar texts and literacy tasks, they have come to believe that they are "just not cut out" to be readers. With a mounting sense of exasperation, they "read" the words but cannot begin to make sense of sentences, paragraphs, and longer texts.

Students respond to their reading difficulties in a variety of ways, often avoiding a reading task entirely and waiting instead for a teacher to *tell* them what they need to know. Some students attempt invisibility, silently sliding lower in their seats in hopes they will not be called on. Others act out in class, creating distractions when they fear their errors or inadequacies might otherwise be exposed. Still others adopt a stance that clearly says, "I don't care about any of this school stuff at all." The most dedicated among them—or, perhaps, simply those with the most stamina—struggle through each new text in a painful, word-by-word attempt to string meaning together. None of these responses, of course, provides a way to break through the ceiling restricting them from higher-level learning.

"Solutions" That Don't Solve the Problem

I knew that just telling them to reread the essay or to summarize the main points wasn't enough.

—Walter Masuda, community college English 1A professor

When students are unprepared for the academic literacy demands in their courses, many teachers, like Walter Masuda, feel frustrated by their own unsatisfying "solutions" for helping them, or find themselves turning to a handful of defaults that serve only to postpone or compound students' problems. For the lowest-testing students, remediation interventions that reteach at the most basic level or packaged programs that drill students in discrete skills may be called upon. More generally, teachers may try to teach "around" the text altogether with lectures and PowerPoint presentations, or they may try to "protect" students from dry or difficult texts with alternatives that never challenge them or help them grow as readers and learners.

Instead, as Walter came to understand, effective academic literacy instruction for all levels of students must involve them in practicing higher-level thinking with complex texts precisely so that they can further develop those abilities: