

Reading and Writing across the Curriculum

A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English

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The Standards insist that instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language be a shared responsibility within the school. The K–5 standards include expectations for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language applicable to a range of subjects, including but not limited to ELA. The grades 6–12 standards are divided into two sections, one for ELA and the other for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. This division reflects the unique, time-honored place of ELA teachers in developing students’ literacy skills while at the same time recognizing that teachers in other areas must have a role in this development as well.

Introduction, Common Core State Standards¹

One Implication of CCSS

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), an initiative of the National Governor’s Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, have refocused attention on reading and writing across the curriculum. Launched in June of 2010, the CCSS have already been adopted by 40 states. These standards, which focus on mathematics and the English language arts, will replace existing standards in states that have agreed to adopt the CCSS. Accordingly, this is a moment when many teachers and instructional leaders across the country are redesigning curriculum to align with the CCSS. It is also a moment when teachers, instructional leaders, and policymakers can reconceptualize reading and writing across the disciplines.

Reception of the CCSS has been mixed, with praise for higher expectations and more uniformity of curriculum alongside concerns about an even greater focus on high-stakes tests and a narrowing of the curriculum. Regardless of what one thinks of them, the CCSS take a clear stand on behalf of reading and writing across the curriculum. The insistence on making reading and writing instruction “a shared responsibility” within schools signals that teachers in multiple disciplines will be expected to help foster literacy development, and the CCSS benchmarks specify the expectations. This mandate could provide the foundation for creating a robust program of reading and writing across the curriculum (RAWAC) in K–12 education. And in schools where ELA teachers have worked with colleagues to establish these programs, the CCSS may provide further support for their early efforts to build a school-wide culture in support of literacy.



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The Status Quo

Building a RAWAC program will require significant transformation in most schools because it has not been a priority. Attention to RAWAC has been limited, and it has declined in recent years. A 2002 study showed that eighth graders reported weekly writing assignments in 46% of social studies, 32% of science, and 13% of mathematics classes. By 2007, these numbers had slipped to 44% and 30% for social studies and science respectively, with mathematics remaining constant. For twelfth graders the numbers were similar, with writing assignments reported for 40% in social studies, 20% in science, and 8% in math in 2002, and in 2007 these numbers were 42%, 21% and 8% respectively.²

Furthermore, research shows that most secondary teachers outside ELA struggle to see their subject as inherently linked to conversations about what it means to be a reader or writer who makes sense of science or math. Accordingly, these teachers express little interest in incorporating instruction in reading and writing into their courses. One reason teachers of subjects like science, math, or social studies don't see the importance of teaching reading and writing is that they have not had opportunities to consider what it would mean.³ Clearly, if RAWAC is going to be incorporated into classes beyond ELA, teachers' views of RAWAC need to change, and schools will need to undertake significant programs of professional development.

The Benefits of RAWAC

The research is clear: discipline-based instruction in reading and writing enhances student achievement in all subjects. Studies show that reading and writing across the curriculum are essential to learning. Without strategies for reading course material and opportunities to write thoughtfully about it, students have difficulty mastering concepts.⁴ These literacy practices are firmly linked with both thinking and learning. Students who can read with clear comprehension and write effectively about a given subject matter will learn the material much more thoroughly than those who do not. Yet, as research shows, reading and writing cannot be learned once and for all; these skills represent complex arrays of capacities that vary from one discipline to another. Reading and writing in science is not the same as reading and writing in social studies or a technical subject like drafting.⁵ This means that student achievement can be enhanced by teachers who focus on helping their students develop strategies for reading and writing within their respective content areas.

Brockton High School in Massachusetts offers a compelling example of the powerfully positive effects of RAWAC. The largest high school in the state, in 1999 its test scores were very near the bottom in Massachusetts, and three out of four students dropped out. After the 1999 test scores were reported, a group of teachers persuaded the administration to let them develop a program that integrated "reading and writing lessons into every class in all subjects, even gym."⁶ By 2001 student retention and test scores had improved dramatically, and in 2009 and 2010 Brockton outscored 90% of Massachusetts schools. Researchers have studied the Brockton turn-around, and it is clear that RAWAC played a key role.⁷

Research-Based Recommendations for Fostering RAWAC

Reframing RAWAC

Research on the benefits of RAWAC is not new, but implementation of programs that incorporate reading and writing instruction into all subjects has been slow and/or unsuccessful. Preliminary studies show that reframing the teacher's role in RAWAC can be effective in leading teachers to focus more attention on reading and writing. Specifically, a few strategies for approaching RAWAC can make it more appealing to teachers who resist incorporating reading and writing into their instruction.

Use low-stakes writing assignments.

Much teacher resistance to introducing writing in multiple content areas is based on the assumption that it means assigning and grading complicated essays. While such writing has many benefits, learning can also be enhanced with shorter assignments that ask students to explain key concepts, summarize arguments on a given topic, or outline a procedure. Research shows that writing regularly in this way fosters learning because it strengthens connections with course reading.⁸

Provide multiple forms of feedback.

Another source of teacher resistance to incorporating writing into instruction is concern about the need to grade stacks of student papers. Certainly some teacher response is necessary, but student learning can be enhanced by peer responses to writing, whole class discussion of student

writing samples, students' reflection on their own writing, and brief one-on-one conferences. Such strategies, combined with traditional teacher feedback, can help students develop metacognitive capacities that will enhance their learning.⁹

Employ variety in texts and their presentation.

Textbooks are often assumed to be the primary reading material in all subjects, but research shows that effective teachers use many different kinds of texts—essays, primary sources, fiction, scientific reports, inventories and so on—to help students learn in all subjects. By using these different genres, student learn multiple ways to approach reading. In addition to moving away from total reliance on textbooks, teachers can help students improve as readers by giving assignments of varying length or reading difficult texts aloud and pausing to explain their own meaning-making process.¹⁰

Employ a variety of levels of reading difficulty.

Because not all students are able to read at grade level, content-area teachers need to provide accessible materials for those who can't, and this means making available texts with varying degrees of difficulty. All students need to be readers and writers in a variety of subjects, but teachers need to scaffold their learning.¹¹

The Role of Professional Development

Research also suggests ways to help teachers who feel unprepared to take up RAWAC in their classes. Even when K–12 teachers accept the idea that RAWAC will foster deeper learning in a given subject matter, they often take the position that they lack the professional expertise necessary for helping students to develop their literacy capacities. Findings from research on professional development can help address this issue.

Sustained and intensive professional development fosters student achievement.

Research shows that not all professional development is equally effective. To change instructional practice in ways that yield real gains in student achievement, professional development needs to: extend across 50 hours; connect to a school initiative; foster collaboration among teachers; and focus on the teaching and learning of specific academic content.¹² Few teachers in subjects outside ELA

have been trained to provide effective instruction in reading and writing across the curriculum, so any serious effort to establish this kind of teaching will require significant investment in the professional development of teachers.

The benefits of collaboration in professional development extend across multiple classrooms.

If the goal is to help teachers in several disciplines become effective in incorporating reading and writing instruction into their teaching, the most effective way to accomplish this will be through collaborative models of professional development. In particular, teacher learning communities or communities of practice—interdisciplinary groups that share study and reflection on their own practices—can be effective in transforming teaching.¹³

Professional development in reading and writing across disciplines can be especially attractive to teachers.

Learning to incorporate reading and writing into multiple disciplines encourages teacher inquiry, and most teachers find this kind of learning very appealing. Literacy programs that extend across several subjects foster a “rhetoric of inquiry” that connects with K–12 teachers' predispositions toward learning. This approach can support the development of learning to combine content knowledge with strategies for conveying it—a capacity often called pedagogical content knowledge.¹⁴

Endnotes

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For information on this publication, contact Stacey M. Novelli, NCTE Legislative Associate, at snovelli@ncte.org (email), 202-380-3132 (phone), or 202-223-0334 (fax). ©2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the copyright holder. Additional copies of this publication may be purchased from the National Council of Teachers of English at 1-877-369-6283. A full-text PDF of this document may be downloaded free for personal, non-commercial use through the NCTE website: <http://www.ncte.org> (requires Adobe Acrobat Reader).