Collaboration is powerful. Most teachers believe in the power of collaboration. Becca and I (Jill) believe in collaboration. Neither of us realized how powerful collaboration could truly be until we began to show a group of teachers from all content areas in our school how to understand, practice, and teach collaboration. Our own collaboration began when we were sitting in a dull, monotonous, PowerPoint-driven professional development training. I (Jill) was new to the field of teaching and I (Becca) was new to Alaska and the school district. We (Becca and Jill) work together in an urban high school teaching students from all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. We have spent the last two years finding time to collaborate on various curricula to help students master English and earn a diploma. It was through our collaboration that this project was born.

Over the summer we each signed up for a WestEd Reading Apprenticeship Leadership Institute class. Through that class we were introduced to the concept that, and ways in which, reading can be taught successfully across the disciplines. We began to see the incredible potential that working with colleagues across content areas contains.

After completing WestEd’s Reading Apprenticeship Leadership Institute, we were asked to present schoolwide professional development sessions on incorporating literacy instruction in every classroom. After our first session we received feedback from many teachers that they were interested in learning more, and they desired support as they tried to teach content-specific literacy in their classrooms. With this in mind, we set up an evening class where we would meet regularly to introduce and discuss literacy strategies, and then reflect on our attempts to use the strategies in our classrooms during the following session. There are several different perspectives on how to define content literacy—and these perspectives primarily differ on whether content literacy should be considered a “tool” or a “goal” (Draper 62). Those who consider content literacy a tool believe that improving students’ ability to read the text will improve their ability to understand the content they are teaching. If students can read the science textbook, they’ll be able to grasp the concept of gravity. On the other hand, those who consider content literacy a goal believe that teaching students how to engage with texts as experts in the discipline supersedes the content of the specific units being taught. Regardless of which perspective our colleagues took, we welcomed everyone to question and examine the ways they were approaching reading in their classroom, and to look for new ways to help their students access information through texts. We used Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms by Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, and Lynn Murphy as an ongoing support text. We ended up with a fascinating group of cross-content colleagues, including representation from math, science, marketing, affective needs, deaf education, special education, English, health, and history. Though we all worked in the same building, we had never interacted beyond

This article illustrates the importance of taking the time to practice authentic collaboration for teachers to better their craft and help their students become independent and critical learners.
engaging in pleasantries as we passed in the hall. Meeting regularly to talk about best practices in literacy instruction, we grew as teachers, collaborators, and learners.

Though the teachers who enrolled in our cross-content literacy class did so voluntarily, everyone had to deal with his or her own preconceived notions about working with staff members from different content areas. During our first session the science teachers questioned how working with social studies teachers could improve their practice, and vice versa. Participants sat next to the people within their own content area. We set up a system where participants had to choose six different partners with whom they would be working throughout the semester. During each activity, we would assign them a different one of their six partners. Initially, we were met with resistance and often had to say to the teachers the words we frequently said to our own students: “You really do have to get up and move.” This resistance seemed to originate from the fact that the majority of us (teachers) were taught in classrooms that used what Paulo Friere describes as the “banking model” of education (72). We learned in classrooms where there was an expert (the teacher) who held all the knowledge we needed and he or she spent the semester imparting this knowledge to us. This is the model our colleagues were expecting.

It’s not that teachers didn’t know how to work within a group. Teachers do know how to work together on a project. They can break up tasks to create a product, and they know how to get students to work on a project in this same way. When completing a group project, a team does not necessarily need to work together. Each member of the team can create his or her respective piece and then put all the pieces together at the end. We’ve all used this method at some point, whether in college courses or professional development. Teachers resist group work and collaboration because, all too often, one teacher takes on the burden of the whole project.

When I (Jill) recently asked a history teacher if he wanted to collaborate on an English/history assignment for a struggling student that we both shared, he was more than willing. When I handed the draft of an assignment to Mr. Boston, he said “That looks great” and handed it back to me. The following week when I spoke to Mr. Boston about Jerry’s progress, he said, “I’ve just been giving him packets. He doesn’t do any work on the assignment.”

What hadn’t worked? In my experience collaboration always resulted in good assignments, quality student products, and frequently deeper learning from students and teachers. I realized quite simply the failure of this collaborative project lay in the fact that it was not a collaborative project. Mr. Boston did not collaborate with me. He allowed me to float the idea, create the assignment, and keep Jerry moving. Mr. Boston did not ask Jerry about the project or offer any suggestions, strategies, or support for completing the history side of the collaborative project. Mr. Boston and I never planned together or conferred once the assignment was written. When Mr. Boston failed to be part of the team—to collaborate—he sent a clear message to Jerry that he did not need to be part of the team (collaborate) either. When students don’t feel like they need to be part of the team, they don’t play. This assignment became just another team project where the burden was carried by one person.

My experience with Mr. Boston illustrates what many of us know: doing projects with other teachers can easily fail. We might posit that sharing a project between two disciplines is not collaboration. Authentic collaboration requires what far too few of us are actually comfortable with: working with others outside of our discipline to co-construct knowledge.

Clearly, collaboration is not one person pulling the weight on a team project. We still wanted to know what we or others mean when we talk about collaboration before we taught a class that hinged on cross-content collaboration. There were several common responses I (Becca) heard when I suggested cross-content professional learning groups to secondary public school teachers: We don’t get enough time with our own content-area colleagues. We need to be working more with the people who teach the same classes as ourselves. We just don’t have time—with grading, testing, and planning; it simply adds another thing to our list. To a certain extent, I agree with these sentiments. It feels as though there is never enough time to work with other adults when working as a teacher. The planning time we are allotted is limited, and only a few others have the same time
Intending to Meet: The Truth about Collaboration

槽 for planning. Often we find ourselves stuck in our classrooms, day in and day out, interacting only with our students. Pam Grossman, Sam Wineburg, and Stephen Woolworth assert, “within the occupational structure of schools, there are virtually no long-standing venues for continued learning about subject matter instruction” (72). We see our colleagues at faculty meetings where we are spoken to in a large group by the administration. At times we may meet with our content groups, but even then the intent of the meeting is to relay information to us, not to collaborate and communicate with the intention of learning and growing our practice.

Collaboration often doesn’t happen in team projects, is absent in faculty meetings, happens sporadically in staff lounges or in hallways, and is infrequent during professional development. This is because collaboration is the act of coconstructing knowledge, coming together with a clear understanding of how and why we are working together. When we sit down with the intention of discussing our work and our ideas, our questions and our challenges, when we talk about best practices in the context of what we are actually doing in our classroom, when we agree to try new strategies and follow up with each other to reflect on what worked and what we will try differently, we are truly developing professionally.

Unfortunately, collaboration is not happening in classrooms, either. Nor are teachers always comfortable with teaching students how to authentically collaborate, to coconstruct knowledge and to thereby become independent learners. We often don’t believe that students can teach each other. We assume the smart kid will show the struggling kid how to do something. Rarely do we let them all share what they know to create something new—construct knowledge.

When we began to think about and plan this cross-content literacy class we knew that the value in the Reading Apprenticeship approach lay in the collaboration that underpins the Reading Apprenticeship framework. We set the expectation that we would facilitate collaboration, rather than teach (lecture) the group. We wanted our colleagues to discover that “when teachers can collaborate with other teachers, they can better serve their students” (Collier and Darling-Hammond 12). Every teacher participant brought his or her own experiences, expertise, and questions to the table, as both a teacher and an expert reader of a content area. To show teachers that they had some common ground, we began with the question: How can we talk about teaching reading until we talk about the processes we use every day to make sense of the texts we encounter ourselves? Teachers shared their own reading histories, including the highs and lows throughout their childhood. One teacher spoke about how she had never pictured anything as she read until she heard about visualizing in college. To this day, it is an effort for her to use this strategy, rather than a natural part of her process. Another teacher spoke about having grown up with “the fear that one day the words would stop making sense,” that she would simply “forget how to read.” Teachers talked about weekly trips to the library as kids, filling up backpacks and wagons with exciting new books. Others brought up their most hated textbooks from college that made them feel like they “couldn’t read at all.” As teachers began to open up about their processes, strengths, and struggles with reading, they began to expand the way they thought about their students and what skills were most important to master. They began to coconstruct knowledge about what reading entails.

When we talk about teaching reading skills, we talk a lot about metacognition. This can be one of those jargony horror words. What does metacognition really mean? The common response from teachers is “thinking about our thinking,” but that definition doesn’t seem to really encapsulate metacognition. The follow-up questions were often: “Why does understanding metacognition matter?” “How can we/why should we help our students understand the concept to begin understanding their own reading processes?” We like to use Linda Schofield’s definition of metacognition as “the self-awareness teachers and students use to think, to evaluate their teaching and learning needs, to generate strategies to meet their needs, and to implement those strategies as agents of their own thinking” (57). We decided to give these teachers a simple activity to demonstrate the concept of metacognition and why it is im-
important for students. We handed everyone a comic with a large, blank thought bubble representing a woman’s thoughts. In the picture, she is looking at another woman, who has a dialogue bubble filled with “blah blah blah” on and on. We asked our colleagues, “What is the woman thinking? What do you think when you are stuck with someone who just won’t stop talking?” This sparked one of many incredibly interesting conversations with our group. It turns out, not everyone is thinking the same thing when they are trying to get out of a conversation. In fact, not everybody is thinking about their thinking during this scenario in the same way. The affective needs teacher thought about how when working with students on the autism spectrum, identifying your thoughts is less important than choosing your actions and words according to what is appropriate for the situation. The deaf education teacher thought about the thought process of a deaf student when a hearing person is blabbing on and on without stopping to see if he or she is being understood. One science teacher thought about what process to use to escape the situation. One English teacher used her imagination to form the perfect speech to make the escape that she would never actually say. Just by sharing their own metacognition when doing this exercise, it was clear that this group had a lot to learn from one another. The diverse perspectives in the room helped us expand our understanding of how diverse our own and our students’ thought processes can be. Again the group collaboration led to coconstructed knowledge about perceptions and processes.

At this point in the class, people started to think that it was interesting to hear what people think, how they think, and how they approach an obstacle. Additionally, they were beginning to glimpse the power of collaboration as a means of constructing knowledge, but they still weren’t sure how the process worked or how to bring it to their classrooms. We continued to work with metacognitive logs and asked teachers to practice using the logs with various types of texts to get comfortable with metacognitive logs.

A turning point in our class was when we showed the class the Pixar silent video short of “Carl and Ellie’s Love Story” from the Disney motion picture Up and gave them a general two-column metacognitive log asking that they write down examples of Evidence (sights, sounds, actions) in one column and Interpretation (what they thought, felt, or connected to) in another column with no other directions. After viewing the video and sharing our notes, people began to see that we each saw something different in the video. We asked each teacher to think about their content area—something we had not encouraged until this point—because up until now, we were having teachers focus on their own metacognitive process and their own reading strategies. We wanted them to become comfortable with how they read and how they can talk about reading with their own students. We then asked them to put their “teacher hats” back on and create a metacognitive log directing students to find specific information that was relevant to their content area, using the same text (the video from Up). Rather than using the headings Evidence and Interpretation, a health teacher asked students to find evidence of relationships and to interpret these relationships (positive or negative, healthy or harmful, etc.). The marketing teacher asked students to examine decisions about money and how they felt about those decisions. The English teacher asked students to notice the images that marked the passage of time, and the science teacher focused on Newton’s laws.
We had each teacher give his or her metacognitive log assignment to a teacher outside of his or her own content area and we watched the video again. When we shared our notes this time, teachers were amazed at their ability to see the video through another discipline’s lens and began to respect the other teachers’ expertise. We all inherently know that science teachers have to be able to teach complex concepts. We willingly recognize other content teachers as our professional peers. What we rarely envision is the skill and expertise of the special education teacher. Everyone gained a greater insight into just what a special education teacher can do when Marty applied this exercise to highlighting good interpersonal interaction for her autistic students. Everyone gained a greater understanding of Maria’s challenges and experience when she used this exercise to help her deaf students recognize conventional plot structure and transitions in narratives. In short, our collective jaws dropped when they shared their metacognitive assignments. In allowing the students to collaborate, they developed a critical understanding of the text that a lecture could never have achieved.

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Without direct instruction, the students intuitively and naturally practiced the reading strategies that every teacher wants their students to learn.

By the time we got to the Up video late in the semester, teachers began to embrace the idea that the skills mattered more than the text, that they all could teach reading to their own and their students’ benefit, and that collaboration between teachers and between students resulted in greater and deeper learning for both. What we want to emphasize more than the value the teachers learned about teaching reading skills was the value teachers learned about collaboration. The teachers learned that they could learn from each other, learn valuable teaching strategies, and learn valuable new perspectives about content—their own and their peers’.

Teachers began working with each other outside our class as they continued the process of trying new skills in their own classrooms. While collaboration within our class time was always focused and productive, the teachers found that when they collaborated outside of the evening class they also stayed focused. The teachers themselves learned that finding time to collaborate was not a waste of time or planning time lost. Finding time to collaborate resulted in better lessons and feeling more supported and validated. They found what Thomas M. McCann’s study found, that “collaborative teams tend to plan strategically, keeping specific target outcomes in mind and planning together a course of instruction that offers the strongest potential for students to attain goals” (111). We could spend the final paragraphs of this article making a list of what our colleagues learned, but their own words are far more revealing and interesting.

Cate: At first, as a new social studies teacher, I found myself wanting to be grouped with other social studies teachers so I could pick their brains for lesson plans and suggestions that would be more “applicable” to my own classes. One English teacher voiced her doubts that there was anything to learn from a group of non-experts talking about literacy, when clearly the topic fell within her own content and area of expertise. By the time a few classes went by, it was very clear that our different backgrounds didn’t matter during collaboration, in fact it seemed the more disparate our backgrounds—the richer our collaborations became.

Tammy: For years I knew I was the only one in the school teaching reading. It’s been a revelation to hear science teachers discuss complicated reading strategies and special education teachers talk about techniques that are effective with autistic students. It’s great to have all faculty members help me teach a subject I thought I was teaching alone.

Marty: When teachers holistically collaborate across subjects, the result is that students make better connections with the content. After all, as adults, we don’t departmentalize our knowledge; it permeates our thoughts, actions, responses; at work, home, and sleep.
Maria: It’s amazing that I can literally take the suggestions from the other content area teachers and apply them to my deaf students without lots of modification. I want everyone to know the power of collaboration!

Kathie: Being a part of this class, of this community made me realize how little I get to talk with teachers about teaching.

Andy: I’m not sure if I have the answers yet, but I’m committed to the journey.

Works Cited


Jill Jordan and Rebecca Kaplan

Jill Jordan has been teaching reading and writing to struggling, at-risk, and ELL students for more than 20 years for the University of Alaska and more recently at the secondary level for Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska. Rebecca Kaplan is a secondary English teacher who has worked with English Language Learner students in Anchorage, Alaska, and Denver, Colorado. She is currently a doctoral student in the Educational Psychology program at the University of Colorado (CU) at Boulder and an instructor for the INVST Community Leadership Program at CU.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION
Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The teachers in the article, representing all disciplines, met to collaborate. The National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE) provides support to and compiles evidence about how educators working in cross-disciplinary teams design and implement plans to support literacy learners in every classroom. By sharing stories from these educator teams, NCLE not only makes visible teaching and learning practices, it highlights the organizational conditions and community support that make real progress possible.

NCLE provides the Literacy in Learning Exchange as a free resource to all educator teams. All educators are invited to use the free site to build or further develop a team in their school, district, or across schools/districts, or in their out-of-school setting. http://www.ncte.org/ncle

Call for the Secondary Section High School Teacher of Excellence Award

Each NCTE affiliate is at liberty to select a person for this honor in the manner of its choice. An affiliate’s governing board might acknowledge someone who has previously won an award within the affiliate, thus moving that person’s recognition to a national level, or the affiliate might advertise for applications for nominations before choosing a winner.

Deadline: Documentation should be sent to the Secondary Section Steering Committee administrator, Felisa Jones (fjones@ncte.org) by May 1 of each year. More information and the nomination form are available at http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/hste. Once completed, the nomination form should be sent to the address on the form. A complete list of the 2013 High School Teachers of Excellence Award recipients is available at http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/hste/winners.