Developing Readers and Writers with a Districtwide Literacy Strategy Set

During the 2016–17 academic year, a collaborative of university faculty and high school teachers piloted an innovative approach to professional development, focusing on secondary level literacy in a diverse suburban district. The approach included innovations in both process and content compared to professional development (PD) and instructional initiatives conducted in recent years, and it capitalized on investments in expertise among English language arts (ELA) teachers to support literacy across the district. This article describes the approach taken, provides summary data on teacher feedback after the first year, and discusses potential directions and lessons for the future.

Context and Background

This districtwide literacy initiative engaged the faculty of the district’s middle school and high school, which included 163 full-time teachers. The district was underperforming in both reading and math. Teachers and administrators believed that a significant instructional change would be needed to interrupt the trend of lower-than-acceptable student performance.

The district also had a partnership with the teacher education program at the local university. As a result, university students and faculty have been involved in the district in various capacities for more than a decade. Over the past four years, faculty members have presented workshops related to literacy in content areas in single departments. However, teachers and administrators consistently expressed the need for more robust, comprehensive professional learning in this area.

Prior to the 2016–17 school year, district leaders charged a small group of school-university partners to engage the faculty of the middle schools and high schools in a comprehensive professional learning experience aimed at supporting student literacy development. To address this broad audience over a sustained period of time, we drew on Deborah Loewenberg Ball and David K. Cohen’s concept of practice-based professional development and effective professional development design (see Appendix A) and considered the growing research base on disciplinary literacy instruction (see Appendix B). Disciplinary literacy research outlines the need and purpose of teaching discipline-specific literacies to support disciplinary learning as well as overall literacy development among adolescents. The goal was to distribute some of the responsibility for fostering literacy development across content areas to support disciplinary literacy and engagement, not only in the content areas but also within ELA where shared strategies could be used to focus on the unique ways of reading and writing in English-related sub-disciplines (e.g., rhetoric or composition) (Smagorinsky 141). Too often, English/ELA classes are cast as service courses for other disciplines—teaching generic forms of reading and writing to support the reading and writing required in other classes. Our focus on discipline-specific literacy instruction across all subjects allowed ELA teachers to focus on their own
discipline-specific purposes and processes, and we invited all other teachers to consider their unique potential in contributing to student literacy development to more equitably distribute responsibility for literacy development.

**Literacy Strategies Set**

**Process**

The approach for this initiative was two-tiered. In spring of 2016, we invited all secondary teachers to volunteer to serve as mentors for the literacy initiative. This volunteer opportunity included a commitment to participate in mentor trainings during each choice PD day the following year to learn, pilot, and refine each strategy before introducing them to the faculty. Mentors included the chair of each department and at least one volunteer from both the middle school and high school. Due to strong interest among teachers in the English department, that group was represented by multiple mentors (eight) and took an outsized role in generating examples of strategies to share with the larger group.

At that time, I introduced mentors to each strategy in a 90-minute workshop. Video demonstrations and introductory Google Slides presentations were used to support piloting in classrooms over a six- to eight-week period. Afterward, mentors reconvened to discuss feedback on, and examples of, the strategy and its supporting materials. In some cases, a strategy was renamed to make its use more transparent. In others, a template or heuristic was redesigned to include more space or less extraneous information. In all cases a small bank of examples from a variety of content areas was collected and shared with the larger group.

In the fall of 2016, we implemented a second tier to the approach with a series of districtwide meetings for secondary teachers, each of which was divided between whole-group presentations led by university faculty and small-group sessions led by mentors. Mentors collaborated with colleagues to create materials for their sessions using a common agenda. They used the introduction slide deck as a shell to which they added their own examples and explanations and saved these in shared Google Drive folders for future access.

Department members who attended regularly included English, social studies, foreign language, alternative education, related arts, career/tech education, ROTC, and library/media specialists. Because initiatives to improve science scores conflicted with this professional development time, science mentors were recruited and trained, but members of the department did not attend most sessions. Conversely, due to competing PD efforts, no math mentors were trained, but some math faculty did attend PD sessions.

In addition to using department-based mentors to introduce, reinforce, and support the implementation of strategies schoolwide, we introduced the Levels of Use framework (Hall et al., 1975) as a model for the process of implementation (see Table 1). This framework is aimed at fostering learning and development rather than just compliance. We invited all educators to consider their place along a continuum of levels of use, worked to honor the learning process for each step in the process, and varied the focus of PD sessions and mentor strategies based on reported levels of use within each department.

**Too often, English/ELA classes are cast as service courses for other disciplines—teaching generic forms of reading and writing to support the reading and writing required in other classes. Our focus on discipline-specific literacy instruction across all subjects allowed ELA teachers to focus on their own discipline-specific purposes and processes.**

### TABLE 1. Levels of Use of the Innovation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0. Nonuse</td>
<td>I am not thinking about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Orientation</td>
<td>I’d like to know more about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Preparation</td>
<td>I’m gathering materials and setting up conditions to try it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mechanical Use</td>
<td>I have tried it out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Routine</td>
<td>I’m beginning to use it regularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Refinement</td>
<td>I’m refining it to fit my environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Integration</td>
<td>I’m interested in how others use it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Renewal</td>
<td>I’m wondering what else I can do.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Content
The innovation in content marked a departure from PD aimed at generic strategies assumed to work equally well across all academic areas, grades, text types, and purposes for reading. Rather than glossing over important disciplinary differences, we invited teachers to examine the texts and reading processes that are unique to their respective discipline, and selected strategies to highlight and reinforce these disciplinary differences by consulting principles from the standards of each academic area’s professional organization (e.g., NGSS, CCSS, MTNA) as well as principles from Universal Design for Learning and practices related to the Core Practice Consortium’s list of high-leverage practices. The initial planning process produced a set of four strategies, which were refined by the mentors and introduced to the faculty: Clear Task Parameters (CTP) in which teachers provide a purpose and process for each text-related task; Networked Words (NW) wherein vocabulary is introduced in relationship with known words and concepts with multimodal connections; Text Sets (TS), which are complementary, multimodal texts presented alongside key texts to offer differentiated levels and formats that provide multiple pathways for engagement and the representations of key ideas; and, finally, Text-Dependent Talk (TDT) where teachers engage students in discussions designed to build meta-discursive knowledge about why and how content-area texts are constructed.

Results
We used surveys to gather reports on the level and frequency of use for each strategy at three points during the year: August, November, and May. Teachers completed online surveys anonymously during the time allocated for PD workshops. However, teachers were asked to list their department, grade level, and subject area to identify trends across those areas.

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, there was generally an upward trend in level and frequency of use as the year progressed, even as new strategies were introduced.

In addition to data on levels of use, the English department conducted voluntary action research on the use of the CTP strategy listed above. Several teachers volunteered to do the same lesson with and without CTPs over several days with different sections of the same classes. They unanimously reported that students began working more quickly, wrote longer texts, and asked fewer questions about what to do in lessons where CTPs were set for each text-related task (instead of for the lesson as a whole). As a result of this discovery, we reserved time for teachers to share anecdotes and examples of the impact of previously introduced strategies in each whole-group PD session. This

FIGURE 1. Number of Teachers Reporting High Levels of Use (Refinement-Renewal) for Each Strategy

FIGURE 2. Reported Levels of Use for Each Strategy in May

1 Responses were evenly balanced across SPMS and WHS (n=46 winter, 56 spring)
14 teachers who were visiting the PD for the first time responded to the spring survey without having been exposed to strategies across the year.
sort of locally generated evidence was rated as helpful and compelling within and across departments.

Discussion

Levels of Use

Though implementation data suggest a high level and high frequency of use, school and district administrators rarely observed these practices during formal or informal observations. There are three possible reasons for this. First, it is likely that the use and frequency of each practice was reported accurately, but that they did not happen to coincide with the informal (shorter in duration) classroom observations. What’s more, though administrators viewed videos of each strategy, they did not attend the workshops, so it is possible that they were not fully aware of the iterations to observe. Second, it is possible that teachers systematically over-reported use. There was no stated incentive to report higher levels of use, and there were some teachers who chose the lowest levels of use on each administration of the survey. Still, professional norms for teachers to claim they always “do the right thing” may support systematic inflation. Finally, it could be argued that the main use and influence of each strategy is not readily observable; that, as some teachers reported, it changed the structure of the lesson rather than being added into the lesson. For example, the principles behind Networked Words might inform how language is included, introduced, and discussed in lessons without necessarily creating a specified lesson segment or routine labelled “Networked Words.” This application of the principle behind the practice is considered a sophisticated level of use—beyond integration of the original strategy and toward renewal as teachers re-conceptualize how else it might apply.

In many ways, the broad influence of principles from the strategy set is a more important, long-term goal than instrumental compliance with its use. Indeed, presenting outward signs of each strategy in use (e.g., a section of the board marked Clear Task Parameters or a reproducible graphic organizer called Networked Words) may be less desirable than teaching in ways that exemplify the underlying principles. However, it is difficult to systematically identify principled practice. Meanwhile, administrators, and in some cases teachers themselves, indicated the need for accountability and evidence. Therefore, we generated a cue card with questions for each strategy that administrators could use during post-observation conversations or at department meetings to facilitate reflection and gather information about when and how each strategy was being used. Though we did not gather data about whether administrators used these cards, teachers reported valuing access to the cards as reminders for themselves and as a statement of shared expectations for discussions with administrators.

Patterns of Use

As we analyzed the data discussed above, we noted two patterns in the use of the four strategies. First, strategies that were initially introduced to mentors (Clear Task Parameters and Networked Words) were implemented more fully than those introduced to the whole group. This may be related to the novelty, salience, and usefulness of the strategies themselves. However, strategies that were supported by mentors in department meetings and through informal conversations were implemented more fully than those that mentors learned alongside their colleagues. Therefore, we concluded that the staggered introduction of strategies, opportunities to refine/reframe the strategy, and the presence
of embedded support makes an important impact on overall use.

Second, we noticed that strategies that can be accomplished by planning a specific teacher action (such as Clear Task Parameters, and Text Sets) were implemented at higher levels than those that require interactions with students (such as Networked Words and Text Dependent Questions). This may be because strategies that involve student interaction require both facilitating and making use of student contributions to definitions and discussions. It may be that allowing strategies to inform planning is simply easier and more predictable than attempting to accomplish an interactive routine during class. Though part of the goal in selecting strategies was that teachers would model valuable instructional interactions, this also assumes teachers have the skills and awareness to carry out these interactions with students.

Finally, though it would be impossible to attribute student test scores to teacher engagement in this professional development initiative, it should be noted that an unexpected but dramatic increase of more than 10 percentage points in the average SAT scores for juniors at the end of the 2016–17 school year supported morale and investment in this process.

Lessons and Goals

Invest in Mentors

Survey data, observations, and teacher feedback reinforced the importance of refining strategies with the multidisciplinary team of mentors before sharing them with the larger faculties of both schools. Aside from the benefit of field-testing the strategies before full dissemination, mentor meetings allowed teachers time to discuss the texts, purposes, and processes for reading and writing within and across disciplines. This heightened their awareness of their own disciplinary literacies and broadened their understanding of their students’ full school days. In addition, mentors consistently used the strategies at a higher level and were more likely to modify and adapt them than teachers who had used them for less time. This investment in a representative group of mentors (two per department) also paid dividends when it came to the level of use for the strategies for which mentors did and did not provide early feedback. Including department chairs as one of the representatives also ensured that there was some administrative leadership for allocating time during department meetings and evaluation routines to discuss the use of strategies.

In addition, teachers expressed interest in tracking the development of a single strategy over time and across departments to find patterns in how they are adapted. This interest in systematic investigation of literacy practices across disciplines demonstrates the spirit of a disciplinary literacy approach and could lead to more intentional adaptation and reflection over the long term.

Highlight Disciplinary Literacies

ELA teachers have a long history of involvement in literacy initiatives. However, they are rarely joined by educators representing the full complement of disciplines active in their school settings. The survey feedback that was most strongly positive came from the Career/Tech Education and Arts departments—departments usually left out of academic initiatives but no less central to students’ literacy development. In general, survey responses indicated that academic area teachers had limited understanding of the texts or the need for reading/writing in subject areas other than ELA. Therefore, the inclusion of specific examples of text types, purposes for reading, and processes for making sense of text in classes such as business, accounting, art, and culinary arts not only validated the literacy work “electives” teachers engage with, it also broadened academic area teachers’ reported conceptions of what counts as a text. After seeing how the analysis of images and artifacts in other areas constitutes literate practice, English teachers reported infusing more multimodal texts with more specific intentions in their lessons.

The broad definition of text—as any set of symbols designed to convey a message or information—met with resistance, especially from content-area teachers who were wary of those
outside of their disciplines expecting or requiring additional practices in their classrooms. Music and physical education teachers reported histories of being told what they had to teach in lieu of their subject-area standards by administrators who were unaware of or disinterested in connections between their specialities and schoolwide initiatives. Thus, the message that these strategies could apply to musical, visual, physical, and virtual texts, vocabulary words, and contexts was not readily accepted outside of ELA—even when it may be embraced within ELA. Through individual conversations and numerous demonstrations, we worked to show that the intention of each strategy is to uncover and highlight the literacy practices inherent in the work of each discipline, not to replace the discipline with literacy strategies. In many cases, the illustration of this intention required partnering with a subject-area expert willing to explore how to translate the principle of each strategy into the practice of career, technical, and related arts.

PD Is a Learning Process, Not a Compliance Event

Linking PD workshops to specific classroom practices (transferred to a walkthrough checklist and measured with each administrative visit) seemed counterintuitive for some teachers and administrators. Teachers were often interested in knowing how they would be held accountable for the content of the workshop and what they would need to say or do to get credit for having “done it.” Likewise, administrators were interested in what a particular practice would “look like” so that they could measure it, and how often, it was occurring. However, our practice of continuously returning to the levels of use, discussing how support would vary for those at each level, and providing positive reinforcement for every level was associated with stronger levels of use than expected based on previous initiatives. Teachers emailed questions and provided examples of each strategy in the weeks and months after a workshop. This demonstrates that some teachers continued to wrestle with each strategy over the long term. Our survey findings suggest that framing PD as a learning process with predictable stages, plateaus, and delays—rather than demanding immediate compliance with specific behaviors—is associated with thoughtful and extended use of the strategies.

In settings where teachers have experienced a steady stream of negative feedback about test scores, observations, and evaluation ratings, it is important to mark each level of use as an indicator of potential implementation. It took several workshops to demonstrate that the early levels of use were important indicators of effort. Though some teachers may have claimed to be considering the practice without any intention of doing so, the march toward higher levels of reported use suggests that, given the time, teachers found ways to try strategies about which they were initially skeptical. This could be the result of peer pressure from ongoing conversations as well as the provision of examples for each strategy. As mentors and department members discussed each strategy, teachers who initially did not see a place for this initiative in their own instruction may have been able to achieve some level of implementation over time.

Conclusion

This year’s experiment in changing the design and focus of PD for a districtwide literacy initiative demonstrated that a small set of literacy strategies can be integrated into middle school and high school classrooms across content areas. In this case the strategies were designed to address the unique needs of adolescent learners in each of the content areas, including English. This enhanced the freedom and focus of English teachers, whose mentorship, feedback, and examples supported strategy use across content areas.

Future research efforts will examine the impact of sustaining and expanding the strategy set related to teachers’ perceptions and application of literacy practices in their disciplines.

Appendix A. References Related to Professional Development Design


Appendix B. References Related to Disciplinary Literacy


Rachael Gabriel is an associate professor of literacy education at the University of Connecticut. She can be reached at rachael.gabriel@uconn.edu.

Works Cited