For decades, professors of literacy have been suggesting that every teacher is a teacher of reading. Unfortunately, this premise has often been interpreted by discipline specialists to mean they are being required to teach students to read and write. They have been perplexed by this possible job description because they do not know how to teach reading, and they worry that within the time constrains of their instructional day, they cannot take minutes away from teaching their disciplines to teach literacy skills.

Many of these content specialists expect that by the time students enter middle school they have developed the literacy skills needed to be able to succeed in reading, writing, and orally communicating across the disciplines. For students who have acquired these skills—those who have learned the reading strategies of making connections, asking questions, inferring, summarizing, and monitoring their own understanding when reading primary and secondary documents in social studies, literary texts in English, and data graphs in science—school life continues without insurmountable hurdles. Students who have not developed these basic literacy skills are much less successful in middle and high school when they are asked to read increasingly complex and varied types of texts and share and create topic-related ideas both orally and in writing.

Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) have developed a model that illustrates the development of reading from basic early literacy practices that involve readers gaining proficiency with decoding, automaticity, and comprehension and then using these skills to acquire an intermediate level of literacy that involves decoding multisyllable words and comprehending both informational and narrative texts. By the time students reach middle school they are steeped in learning that involves using their basic and specialized strategies to comprehend and respond to increasingly complex texts across the disciplines. What is needed at all grades is for students to be supported to move beyond general reading strategies as they develop specialized literacy practices to enable their thinking about texts in the same way that historians, scientists, rhetoricians, and mathematicians read texts and use their language and literacy practices to gain and convey information and ideas.

We believe no one is better able than discipline specialists to approximate these behaviors. Doesn’t it seem like common sense that the experts should be the ones to model how to investigate texts and present written or oral statements in their discipline? Learning the literacies of a discipline from the discipline expert is exactly what is being called for by the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (2010). The title implies the intent that these standards reflect, “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” (NGA, 2010, p.4)
Students need extensive background knowledge and topically related language to succeed in the many topics that are addressed across the disciplines. It is not reasonable to expect that middle school students have developed this extensive topical language or knowledge. It is, however, reasonable to expect that such knowledge and language can be developed as students work in apprenticeship with teachers who are specialists in these areas. Together with their history teachers they can learn to read and discuss secondary sources, to analyze photos or other historical artifacts such as stories, diaries, and paintings to make claims about the people and events of the past as they create a timeline to chronicle a particular period. Students will see the written text as only one repository of information shared by someone to inform, persuade, entertain, illustrate, or document. As they view it in its place in time, they can hopefully be coached by their teachers to see knowledge as infinite and that they can expand information.

Learning from the expert also applies to the science teacher who can so easily model how scientists make observations, investigate phenomena, identify and describe specimens, create a graphic organizer of their data, develop alternate ways to sort and code information in order to make an argument related to their findings, or create new knowledge and correct or extend previous knowledge, all the while asking new, insightful questions.

Together with their English teacher, students can listen and critique a lecture or read and analyze a poem or speech and engage in a literary analysis of a play. While working together with experts in each discipline, students will learn the content and also the literacy practices of each discipline. They will also be supported in realizing the practices of creating both written and oral discipline-based texts.

We believe the articles in this issue of Voices will support the beginning of this collaboration between students and their teachers, who are all disciplinary experts. To begin, Tim and Cynthia Shanahan help us to truly understand the differences between content area reading and disciplinary literacy by offering specific examples of each. They also offer suggestions of materials that support apprenticing your students in the discipline. Kristine Pytash and Lisa Ciecierski also provide a thorough description of disciplinary literacy by again contrasting it with content area reading. To support discipline experts in understanding the role they must play in literacy development, Pytash and Ciecierski offer many implementable instructional examples. These two articles should erase any misconceptions held by discipline experts that they are being asked to be reading teachers.

If you’ve ever wondered how to motivate students to read science texts, you’ll want to read the article by William Brozo. He and an eighth-grade science teacher shared the graphic novel Genome as a read-aloud. They integrated the practices they shared with middle schoolers into a context-focused writing strategy titled SPAWN that promotes problem solving and investigating and sharing alternative viewpoints. The students were so engaged with the topic and the text that after the project ended, they sought out topically related books to read independently.

How might disciplinary literacy look in a social studies classroom? Corrine Wickens, Michael Manderino, and Elsa Glover answer this question as they share how they invited students to communicate about social studies by blogging with their peers. As students shared their thinking about the historical topics being studied, their conversations became more deeply insightful as their questions required more than a literal response.

Christopher Jett takes us into the world of the mathematics classroom, where he illustrates for future teachers how to infuse a combination of literacy practices into algebraic thinking. His creative ways to approach the study of mathematics instruction and mathematics learning by adolescents seems attainable.

Can written discourse be a component of mathematics study? If so why? Questions like these are addressed by Angela Thomas and Jona-
than Bostic, who share a very interesting project illustrating how a group of seventh-grade students wrote to a group of college students to explain how they solved some perplexing math problems. Through their written exchange, their understanding of the math processes deepened. This experience could be replicated by students in two periods of math or within one classroom. The key seemed to be that as the students shared the details of their calculations their personal understandings grew.

Using a Student Community Outreach Program Experience (SCOPE) with a group of eighth graders, Elizabeth Leer makes obvious for classroom teachers the importance of incorporating projects related to community involvement into the curriculum that provide students authentic real-world reading and writing engagement.

After reading these articles, we encourage you to talk with your colleagues about the literacy practices specific to each discipline. Identify those that are unique and also similar, and then together determine how they can be shared with students so that they become literate communicators across the disciplines.

References