Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration with Informational Text

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Working in isolation, without time or meaningful support for their professional development, most teachers will produce ordinary results. But if schools become places of professional learning and practice for teachers, then teachers, collectively, can enable students to thrive.

—Ken Doane (2013)

PLCs establish relationships of trust and comfort, making members feel free to share information across PLCs, to talk honestly about student needs, and to offer critical suggestions for better practice that will support all students.

—Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Amanda Brasfield, and Debbie Dupree (2012)

When a dozen dedicated English, social studies, and science teachers from University Academy Charter High School in Jersey City gave up the last day of their spring break for professional development on the Common Core, PARCC, and informational text, little did they know that they would be forming a teacher-led professional learning community focused on harnessing the power of cross-disciplinary collaboration to prepare for PARCC, enhance their students’ literacy, and support the success of their own teaching.

We were inspired by the varied insights the teachers brought to this lively and productive session.

Since our goal was to promote cross-disciplinary collaboration, we began the workshop with assigned seats: teachers were seated by grade level, and each table had at least one language arts teacher and at least one science or social studies teacher. We rarely find time for these kinds of cross-disciplinary conversations, so it was important to be deliberate in seating the teachers together in this way.

Learning to Work with Students

We began with an ice-breaker activity borrowed and adapted from Jill Jordan and Rebecca Kaplan in English Journal (2014). We gave the teachers an organizer in which to record inferences the teachers brought to this session.

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The Conference on English Leadership (CEL) of the National Council of Teachers of English is an organization dedicated to bringing together English language arts leaders to further their continuing efforts to study and improve the teaching of English language arts. The CEL reaches out to department chairs, teachers, specialists, supervisors, coordinators, and others who are responsible for shaping teachers, specialists, supervisors, coordinators, and others who are responsible for shaping the teaching of English language arts. The CEL strives to respond to the needs and interests germane to effective English instruction from kindergarten through college, within the local school, the central administration, the state, and the national level.

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scientific discussion of DNA and crop variety and a collection of primary (letters) and secondary (a biography) sources about John and Abigail Adams.

With this motivation, we asked the teachers to reflect on the discipline-specific literacy expectations and challenges their students face (Zy-gouris-Coe, 2012). What are the reading challenges in science? What are the writing expectations and conventions in social studies? While we had thought the discussion would help highlight the distinctions between disciplines, the expectations the teachers articulated were largely the same, whether they taught English, social studies, or science. They want their students to be able to comprehend key concepts and vocabulary; to analyze the articulation of main ideas and themes; to identify an author’s purpose, perspective, and audience; and to make connections between key ideas and understand their implications.

At this point, we had created a sense of community in which we recognized our shared goals, expectations, and challenges. We were no longer just a group of teachers from different disciplines. We were a community of grade-level-specific professional learning teams, recognizing common values and goals and eager to think about how we could work together to meet the shared needs of all our students.

Our task, then, was to articulate how our cross-disciplinary groups could capitalize on the prescription for more informational text to meet our students’ needs. While successful integration of informational text into all of our disciplines will support our students’ success on standardized tests, our proposition is that effective work with informational text will also put the reading into conversation. With this motivation, we asked the teachers posing as students to get up and move, work with their peers, and use the new word: tussle. It also prepared them to think about the idea of scientists studying aggression and the possible scientific relationship between aggression and gender.

Next, we used an engaging video clip (available on the Times website along with the original article) to appeal to our visual and auditory learners. If our pre-reading activities had not already caught their interest, the catchy clip picturing and naming the different “fight moves” of the flies surely would. The clip, of course, also reinforced some of the key ideas in the text, so that the students were again primed to succeed at reading what might otherwise be a challenging piece of scientific journalism.

Turning to the article, then, we read together, stopping to note, discuss, and emphasize 1) key textual features—including the place of publication and purpose of the text, 2) key ideas, and 3) key vocabulary (for which the students had been prepared). Even with all the set-up work, we emphasized how important it is to work through these texts slowly with students, identifying reading strategies that will help them decode and make sense of unfamiliar textual forms that might seem intimidating and unwelcoming.

The follow-up to this pre-reading and reading work is assessment. We asked our teacher participants to complete a sample of “check for understanding” questions that could be used to assess students’ success with the piece and to model the PARRC tasks. We also offered some writing activities that, like the PARRC, ask students to synthesize the material but also put the reading into conversation.

The climax of our model lesson was our second writing activity. Here, students were asked to use the informational text on fruit flies and aggression to think about Golding’s Lord of the Flies:

Use what you’ve learned about male aggression in James Gorman’s article to consider the excerpt from William Golding’s Lord of the Flies.

- Does the scene from Lord of the Flies reflect the concerns about aggression in Gorman’s article? Why or why not?
- How would the scientists Gorman discusses analyze the behavior of the boys in the scene? If they could study the boys, what might they be interested in learning more about?

This is the curricular connection that we really care about. For those students who could care less about Golding’s somewhat dated novel (let’s be honest), the issue of male aggression is suddenly made relevant and fresh by the fruit fly study. Meanwhile, all
the students have had the opportunity to practice and refine their cross-disciplinary literacy skills, reading texts that matter about topical, engaging content in a way that connects with and enhances the existing curriculum.

At this point in our workshop, the teachers were hooked on informational text and its possibilities for cross-disciplinary collaboration. The science teacher at one table, for example, spoke about how he was thinking about what kinds of contemporary pieces he could teach in connection with his social studies colleagues’ curriculum and in connection with the topics in his own curriculum. How could a piece like “To Study Aggression” excite his students about the topics in his own curriculum. What educational goal could a piece like “To Study Aggression” help meet?

Informational texts, then, are not one more chore to add to the already heavy workload of teachers and students. They can be, to change the metaphor, the spice and seasoning to the heavy workload of teachers and students. They can be, to change the metaphor, the spice and seasoning to the heavy workload of teachers and students. They can be, to change the metaphor, the spice and seasoning to the heavy workload of teachers and students.

When our teachers ready to break down the disciplinary boundaries in order to make students want to read and think, our final tasks were twofold: we needed to help our colleagues find, prepare, and teach great informational texts, and we needed to set up some kind of structure to facilitate ongoing collaboration across the disciplines.

We reviewed our approach for finding and preparing engaging informational texts, emphasizing several key points:

1) Excerpt—Students don’t need to read every word; use what works and cut what doesn’t.

2) Identify key vocabulary—Highlight words that are essential to understanding the informational text.

3) Prepare your students—Arrange for pre-reading activities that front-load key concepts in the informational text while allowing students to engage in authentic and fun ways with the vocabulary.

4) Encourage conversation—Prepare and use discussion questions that highlight key concepts and textual features.

5) Assess understanding—Follow up with PARCC-style assessments (when desired) and high-level writing activities that ask students to demonstrate their comprehension of key ideas from the informational text using textual evidence. Some of these questions can address just the informational text itself; others should put the informational text in dialogue with another text (a literary text or another informational text).

Learning to Work with Each Other

At this point, we turned to the most rewarding section of our workshop: building a place for ongoing collaboration and mutual support between departments in these fledgling grade-level professional learning communities. We harnessed the potential for networked collaboration through social media (Khan and Sheninger, 2014), entering in her information ahead of time.

Of course, it took a few minutes to get everyone into the system. And of course our workshop ran long (as these things always do), so we had less time than we wanted for this most important final step: the collaborative work. However, the potential of “networking through collaborative technology” like our Google Drive spreadsheet, as Eric Sheninger stresses (2014), means that collaboration doesn’t have to begin and end when all the teachers are sitting in a room together. Our workshop built a will to collaborate, and we could rely, to a certain extent, on technology to allow that will to grow; we were immensely encouraged, meanwhile, by the teachers’ eagerness to enter some texts and topics into the system.

More broadly, it was inspiring to hear—through the comments and ideas from the teachers—the common understanding that this work is shared by all of us. Regardless of the demands of the CCSS and PARCC, there was recognition of the need to support and develop our students’ literacy and engagement across all content areas. This is a responsibility we share, and our efforts in this regard will benefit both our students and each other, and could make a transformative impact in our school. If we collaborate to break down the institutional walls between our classrooms and disciplines, we can support both our common and discipline-specific literacy goals and help our students become individuals who think broadly and deeply and who are ready to engage with the world.
Clearly, one workshop is not sufficient to establish a professional learning community empowered to make real change (Williams, 2013). But we are confident that our workshop made clear the potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration using informational text. And with some nurturing, rewarding collaboration is beginning to take root. With this buy-in, what teachers need, as always, is more working time together.

Whether working together across a spreadsheet shared in the cloud or sitting at one grade-level table, pooling resources and making time for meaningful collaboration are key (Lightle, 2010; Sheninger, 2014). Indeed, as a 2014 survey conducted by the National Center on Literacy Education (Nelson, 2014) shows, successful collaboration in transitioning to the CCSS features several hallmarks:

- a focus on “real instructional tasks”;
- the practice of bringing educators “in all disciplines together” to address student needs and the instructional changes necessary to address “shifting literacy practices”; and
- the creation of “teacher ownership” by “providing space and support for [teachers] to innovate and design the lessons and materials that are right for their students.”

Understanding that, the teachers at University Academy Charter High School have asked the administration for more time together in the form of professional development work during the summer. Their interest in capitalizing on the opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration is a testament to their dedication and professionalism and to the possibilities for meaningful professional learning communities.

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References


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