Teaching to Complexity

A Framework to Evaluate Literary and Content-Area Texts

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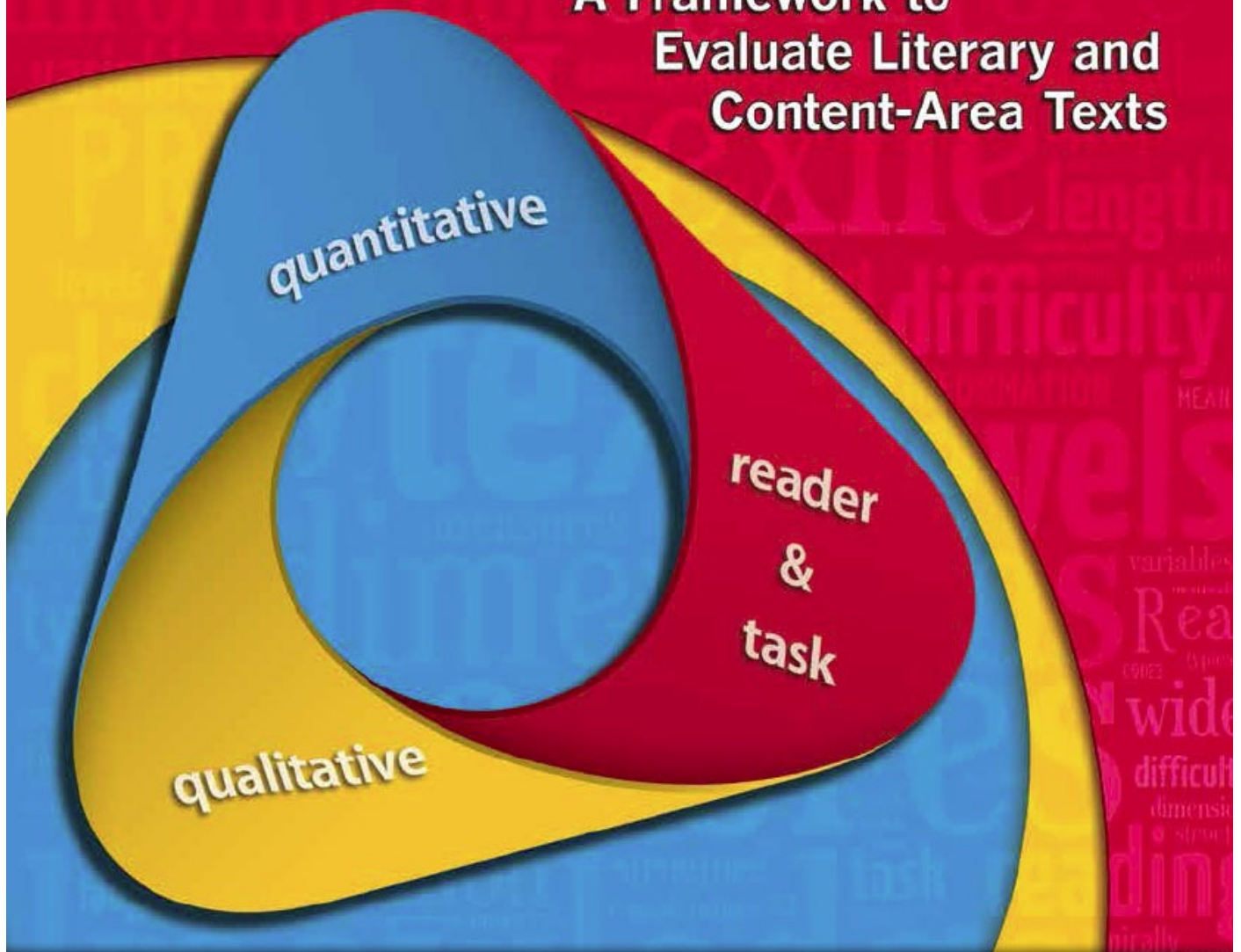
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Chapter 1

The Complexity of Literacy Practices

Another book about text complexity? Well, yes, and no. This book *is* about the complexity of texts, but it is *more* about the endlessly fascinating complexity of teaching. For years, we have followed a process for selecting texts for our classrooms. We want to share this process with you because we think it gives you the tools you need to teach with depth and authenticity in a time of high stress and high stakes. This is a book about making decisions as well as activating and applying your knowledge of students, standards, and strategies for instruction.

With the implementation of the Common Core and other state standards, teachers and administrators across the country have been grappling with the implications of higher expectations for student learning. These expectations involve an integration of the content areas into the standards, specifically focusing on the roles of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (the language arts) in science and social studies. Simultaneously, these standards ask teachers to explicitly consider how they build students' reading abilities— described as the facility to read increasingly complex texts in the interest of college and career readiness. Raising the bar yet higher, teachers are expected to guide students to critically analyze the texts they read and to express new knowledge and opinions in written responses.

Although the standards frame these expectations broadly, two components of the Common Core standards documents have generated much discussion and perhaps undue emphasis—Reading Standard 10: Text Complexity and Appendix A. Suddenly literacy organization discussion boards, reading specialists' and administrators' offices, and university classrooms are abuzz with talk about "text complexity." Although Appendix A makes it clear that evaluation of the complexity of texts is multifaceted, incorporating quantitative and qualitative analysis of text features, as well as a consideration of reader and task (who will read the text and how it will be used), the conversations we have been privy to in the education world tend to heavily emphasize quantitative readability levels. We wrote this book with the goal of extending these discussions because we see this moment as an opportunity to look more explicitly at exactly how teachers go about making text selections that are ideally matched to their curriculum goals, the readers in their classrooms, and their instructional activities.

In chapters two through five of this book, we will model the step-by-step process by which we evaluate and select books for instruction. But first, we think it is important to ground you in the larger conversation about literacy that informs the ongoing national dialogue about text complexity and the use of a wide range of diverse text types in PreK– 12 classrooms. In order to make the best practical, everyday decisions about books for classroom use, you need to be grounded in the theoretical orientation that undergirds the choices we make in text selection and curriculum design.

"Big Picture Thinking": Considering Literacy and

Instructional Goals

Understanding literacy as a socially situated dynamic communicative practice is at the heart of the *Teaching with Text Sets* (Cappiello and Dawes 2012) approach. Our discussion of text complexity is grounded in this broader picture of literacy and literacy practices. In this chapter, we will define literacy, discuss the interdependence of the language arts (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), and begin to look at how diverse readers, texts, and instructional practices interact to create a dynamic, complex instructional environment.

Moving Beyond "Reading": What is Literacy?

Our work as teachers, teacher educators, and professional development specialists centers on the use of multimodal, multigenre text sets for integrated literacy and content-area instruction. In our previous book *Teaching with Text Sets* (Cappiello and Dawes 2012), we describe a process for teaching with carefully curated collections of digital and print resources, including but not limited to children's and young adult literature, periodicals, and web-based texts. *Teaching with Text Sets* presents a process for locating appropriate texts as well as five instructional models that can serve as blueprints for constructing curriculum with text sets. These models grew out of our years of teaching elementary, middle, and high school, and our work as teacher educators. We are committed to supporting teachers to use the 'best of the best' resources to employ these models to meet their curricular goals.

When we talk about selecting texts for classroom use, it is easy to jump right into a conversation about reading. What texts *should* students read? *Who* will be reading *which* texts? In schools, we naturally talk a lot about reading. Are students "reading on grade level"? At what level is a student reading? Has a student achieved mastery of national, state, or district reading standards? Is he or she reading at a "level of complexity" deemed appropriate by the standards? Are students reading the literary canon? These questions are logical ones and they ground us in the nitty-gritty details of daily instruction; however, we always try to consider these questions within a broader framework of goals for student learning.

When we speak about our model for teaching with multimodal, multigenre text sets, we are always sure to emphasize the idea that "you don't teach a text set, you teach *with* a text set." This notion places the content of the text set, whether it be theme-, topic-, or genre-focused, at the heart of instruction. We believe that reading, writing, and speaking are tools for learning and communicating about the world around us. In other words, teaching with text sets involves so much more than teaching *reading*. When we teach with text sets, we develop students' *literacies* in order to improve their abilities to access knowledge, practice inquiry, and to convey what they have learned.

The distinction between *reading* and *literacy* is more than academic. This important distinction helps to remind us that students' ability to decode and comprehend words on a page is only one aspect of their abilities to learn and to effectively communicate. In other words, reading is only one facet of a spectrum of communicative skills and strategies. Equally important to the question, *"Can students read this text?"* is the question, *"What can students do with this text?"*

At a basic level, this conception of literacy comprises and extends reading, incorporating the communicative facilities of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. But beyond this listing, it is important to recognize the interdependence of these activities and the varied ways in which these activities are enacted in daily life. The National Council of Teachers of English (2013) on their website describes literacies as "multiple, dynamic, and malleable… inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities, and social trajectories of individuals and groups."

The continuum of expectations within the Common Core English Language Arts Standards (K–12) also highlights the interconnections of literacy processes:

> "Students who meet the standards… actively seek the wide, deep and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literature and informational text that builds knowledge, enlarges experiences, and broadens worldviews. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a global setting. In short, students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language" (Common Core State Standards 2010).

Literacy is the larger context that describes the meaning-making that happens when students are working in all of the modalities: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. We use the literacies of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in myriad ways to act on our world (Gee 1990; Heath 1982), using these communicative practices as tools for survival, learning, and advocacy. Grounded in this conceptual framework for literacy, we are guided in our daily teaching practice by several important concepts:

- **We are apprenticed into literacy practices by our parents, teachers, friends, and colleagues.** Babies learn to speak by listening. They develop an understanding of language and syntax by apprenticing themselves to the adults and children around them, experiencing exponential growth both in their ability to understand the world around them and to express that understanding. Teachers working with students of all ages can harness the potential of speaking and listening as tools for developing and refining conceptual understandings (Halliday 1975; Vygotsky 1986).

- **Literacy practices are purpose driven.** We read and write to communicate and to learn and express our understandings of the world. Teachers and students consider the purposes and audiences for all tasks they undertake, whenever possible, and communicate with authentic purposes and for real audiences (Lindfors 2008).

- **Literacies are highly contextual—situated within social contexts.** They express beliefs, values, and perspectives. We vary our manner of speaking, reading, and writing depending on who we are with, what we are doing, and what we hope to accomplish. Teachers apprentice students into academic literacies associated with different content areas and disciplines of study. What's more, teachers understand that students bring a set of beliefs, values, and perspectives that may be challenged by the texts they read and harnessed to critique those very texts (Gee 1990; Buehl

2011; Lee and Spratley 2010; Moje 2008; Rainey and Moje 2012).

- **Literacy practices, text types, and genres as we know them are constantly evolving.** The students with whom we spend time in the classroom are exploring ever-evolving forms of social media and communication tools. They tweet each other, build Pinterest boards, and connect with others who have similar interests through online forums and games, etc. These technologies provide the media through which students construct and express their lives and learning. As teachers, we can capitalize on students' interest in popular media, keeping current and using new technologies as learning tools (New London Group 1996; Mishra and Koehler 2006).

Taken as a whole, these foundational concepts suggest a model for practice that is multifaceted, multimodal, multigenre, and dynamic.

Embracing the Complexity of Reading

The aforementioned principles ground our approach to literacy instruction, but since this book is about text selection that supports students' growth as readers, learners, and thinkers, we also want to talk more specifically about reading. So what exactly is reading? While methods for teaching beginning reading continue to generate debate, many of the schools that we work with and in which our students work, currently name their approach to the teaching of reading as a "balanced approach." By this, they mean an approach that attends to the learning of decoding skills (phonics and spelling), the learning of language patterns (grammar), and the development of strategies for making meaning from text (comprehension). These three emphases begin to suggest the complexity of the reading process; however, naming them is just the tip of the iceberg. To understand the full picture, it is helpful to consider how reading processes have been theoretically conceptualized.

Louise Rosenblatt's seminal work, *The Reader, The Text, and the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978) is foundational to the way we understand reading processes and reading comprehension today. She introduced the theory that reading is a dynamic process—a transaction between the reader and the text being read. She proposed that meaning does not reside in the text itself, or in the reader, but in the process of constructing meaning, which happens when a text is read by a reader. The construction of meaning is generated from the author's words on the paper and the reader's interpretation of these words, which is influenced by the life experiences and perspectives of the reader. Furthering her theoretical model, Rosenblatt described how readers' purposes for reading also influence the reading process, noting two stances that readers adopt toward text. Readers adopt an "aesthetic stance" when they read for pleasure, to enjoy a story, and/or to enjoy the language use within a text. When readers read with the explicit purpose of gaining information from text, they adopt an "efferent stance." We know that readers can use both of these stances when reading the same text and it may be helpful to you to think of these two stances as located on a continuum of purpose. Sometimes we read with a very specific informational purpose in mind (efferent stance), for example, to try to figure out how to get your new all-in-one printer to communicate wirelessly on a home network. Sometimes, we read purely for pleasure (aesthetic stance), for example, when we eagerly await the release of a favorite author's new novel. At other times, for example, when reading an essay in the newspaper or in a

magazine, or a cookbook by a chef with a dynamic personality, we may appreciate both the information gained and the writing style employed by the author.

But knowing exactly all that is at play when a reader and a text meet is certainly a challenge, since comprehension is an "in the head" process. In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education charged the RAND Reading Study Group with the task of setting a research agenda for the study of reading comprehension. This group of experts in the field of reading developed a working model of reading comprehension processes and conducted a review of available research on the topic. While this review clearly identified comprehension as an area in need of further study, the model of comprehension processes developed by the group has strongly influenced conversations in the field about the instruction of reading, and most recently, about the readability of texts. Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards frames the issue of text complexity similarly to the RAND study group. This model of reading comprehension and its impact on the consideration of text complexity is multifaceted, and like Rosenblatt's work, highlights the dynamic and interconnected nature of reader, text, and task.

The RAND Reading Study Group, in *Reading For Understanding,* defines reading comprehension as "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written text" (2002, 11). The group's "Heuristic for Thinking About Reading Comprehension" is a model of concentric circles. The centermost circle has been divided into three wedges, labeled "Text," "Activity," and "Reader," suggesting that the interrelationship of these three dimensions comprises the heart of the comprehension process.

The Reader: When engaging with a text, a reader brings to the act of reading certain cognitive capacities, such as his or her ability to sustain attention to reading the text, memory for the text content, and ability to infer, analyze, and critique the text content. The reader also brings a certain level of motivation to the reading activity, dependent on his or her particular purpose for reading, interest in the content of the text, and sense of his or her capabilities to read a particular text. Finally the reader brings a body of knowledge and life experiences to the reading of the text. That body of knowledge includes what the reader knows about the world and the happenings of the world, and it also includes the reader's knowledge of language and how language is used. All these factors influence a reader's ability to construct meaning from a particular text at a particular moment in time.

The Text: When a reader interacts with the text, that reader works to construct an understanding of the text content. Once again emphasizing the dynamic relationships inherent in the process of reading comprehension, the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) states, "Texts can be difficult or easy depending on factors inherent in the text, on the relationship between the text and the knowledge and abilities of the reader, and on the activities in which the reader is engaged" (14). While reading a text, a reader seeks to make meaning from the "surface code," the exact wording of the text, while simultaneously tracking the bigger "idea units" of the text and constructing "mental models" of the perspectives on content embedded in the text as a whole.

The Activity or Task: Finally, we must also consider that the reader is reading a particular text at a particular moment for a particular purpose. The purpose for the reading either drives or is driven by the activity of the reading (or as worded by the Common Core

State Standards Appendix A, the "task"). The reader comes to the activity of reading with a particular purpose in mind, either self-generated or imposed. As you can imagine, motivation and interest (reader characteristics) are at play in these processes. The way that the reader reads is also directly linked to the purpose—depending on what the reader's goal is he or she may read the whole text or part of the text, skim text or engage in close reading, and may or may not make notes while reading. What happens as a result of the reading of the text is also variable. The reader may leave the text with increased knowledge, or with the ability to do something new (if the purpose was to learn how to do something), or with the memory of having engaged with the text (as in the case of reading for pleasure).

Figure 1.1 reprises the many factors at play across the dimensions of the "Heuristic for Thinking About Reading Comprehension" offered by the RAND Reading Study Group (2002). Every time we review this listing, we are more than slightly awed by how complex the reading process is!

But you know this already. All you need to do is to think about the students in your classroom. Regardless of what community you teach in, you work with an incredibly diverse group of students. They vary in their home experiences, language practices, background knowledge, learning styles and aptitudes, and in their personal preferences and interests. This diversity is exactly why one-size-fits-all basal reading programs, or programs that are comprised by a series of pre-determined leveled texts, taken by themselves, cannot meet all of the needs of your readers. In order to effectively engage students in the reading process and to support students' goals as readers, we need to make text selections with our particular readers and our particular curriculum goals in mind.

Figure 1.1 RAND Study Factors at Play in Reading Comprehension

Reader	Text	Activity (Task)
Reader Brings: **Cognitive Capabilities** ■ attention ■ memory ■ critical analytic ability ■ inferencing ■ visualization **Motivation** ■ a purpose for reading ■ interest in the content ■ self-efficacy as a reader **Knowledge** ■ vocabulary and topic ■ linguistic and discourse ■ comprehension strategies **Experiences** ■ individual life experiences	Reader Constructs: **Surface Code** ■ the exact wording of the text **Text Base** ■ an understanding of the ideas, organization, and structure of a text **Mental Models** ■ global meaning-making ■ a synthesis of the whole	Within Specific Contexts and For Varied Purposes, Readers Engage In: **Operations to process the text:** ■ decoding the text ■ higher-level linguistic and semantic processing ■ self-monitoring for comprehension ■ shifts in purpose **Outcomes of performing the activities:** ■ increase in knowledge ■ solution to some real-world problem (application) ■ engagement with the text

(Adapted from Reading for Understanding, RAND Reading Study Group, 2002)

The Importance of Sociocultural Context: When selecting texts for instruction, teachers think carefully about who their readers are and what they hope to accomplish with them in the classroom. The model of reading comprehension offered by the RAND Reading Study Group stresses the importance of the context in which the reading occurs. In the concentric circle model previously described, the outer circle is labeled "Sociocultural Context." The interaction of the reader, text, and the activity (or task) occurs within a particular socially- and culturally-influenced location. This location may be a home, a classroom, or a living room where a neighborhood book group is meeting, a library, or a variety of other locations set within a community of particular socioeconomic and cultural makeup. "The identities and capacities of the readers, the texts that are available and valued, and the activities in which readers are engaged with those texts are all influenced by, and in some cases, determined by, the sociocultural context" (RAND Reading Study Group 2002, 14).

The centrality of the sociocultural context for reading is at the heart of the theories of literacy development framed by James Paul Gee. Gee (1990, 2001) makes an explicit connection between students' experiences with language in social and cultural contexts—including, but not limited to, cultural heritage, languages spoken, socioeconomic status, and political affiliations—and their abilities to read and comprehend written text. His work reminds us that students need to learn to speak, read, and write, not one "language"

but many different social languages. Think for a moment about how you vary your language use depending on your social context. You write an email to a friend or family member with a different level of formality than you use in an email response to a parent of a student in your class. You speak one way in the faculty lunchroom and with a different tone when participating in a district-wide professional development session. Similarly, there are different "discourses" associated with different disciplines and academic content areas. Through school experiences students can begin to be apprenticed in the ways of speaking, reading, and writing used by scientists, mathematicians, and historians. We will expand on this idea later in the chapter, discussing disciplinary literacy. Sociocultural context—the *where, with whom, how,* and *why*—is a key component of the reading processes.

These theories have implications in our daily lives as teachers. We know that the students in our class have unique strengths and needs and we know from years of experience that we need to shape our curriculum goals and instructional activities to align with our students' strengths and needs.

The Complexity of Instructional Contexts

Now that we've reviewed what makes literacy complex—the interdependence of reading, writing, listening, and speaking for meaning-making, the transactions that take place between the reader and the text during the act of reading—we want to discuss the different ways that literacy is at work within PreK–12 classrooms.

We, the authors, consider ourselves teachers of literacy. But we also consider ourselves teachers of many other things as well. When Erika taught first grade, she taught math, art, science, social studies, and more. When Mary Ann taught eighth grade language arts, she taught about literary genres, historical time periods, art history, and more. In all cases, we used literacy as a tool for learning. Literacy was the *means* by which students learned, and part of our job was to help them become better readers, writers, listeners, and speakers. But part of our job was also to help our students become better thinkers—to craft curriculum that gave them the opportunity to think independently and to foster a spirit of inquiry so that students could trust their ability to ask and answer their own questions as well as ours and their classmates'. Yet another part of our job was to teach them facts, theories, and constructs: the concept of subtraction, the political challenges of a particular event in history, the definition of a mammal, the motifs of fantasy fiction. Like literacy itself, each strand of our teaching was interdependent on the others. This interdependency is illustrated in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 The Interdependent Nature of Literacy and Content Area Teaching
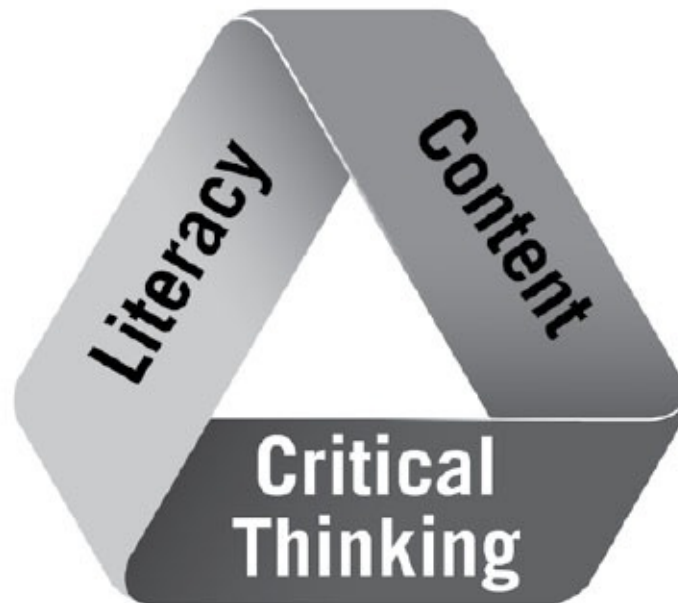
All teachers, at every grade level and content area, share this teaching triangulation of literacy, content, and critical thinking. We *teach* literacy, and we *use* literacy to *teach* content and critical thinking. You might teach middle school language arts, elementary art, or high school social studies. But you, too, teach and foster literacy, critical thinking, and content. This triangulation is also reflected in the Common Core State Standards, which ask students at all grade levels and content areas to pay attention to how texts are written; identify the content (the key ideas and details within those texts); and create new texts to demonstrate what they have learned, through inquiry, critical thinking, and research (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts 2010).

Why is this so important to clarify? Because if we are talking about determining text complexity, and how to select texts appropriate for instructional use, we have to recognize that there are many different purposes for reading texts in the language arts alone, as well as across all of the different content areas. For example, students are asked to read and evaluate texts for different purposes and different outcomes. They *use* texts in different ways. All reading isn't the same.

The growing body of scholarship around disciplinary literacy supports this notion—not the mantra of "every teacher a teacher of reading" from the 1980s and 1990s, but rather, that every teacher apprentices students in disciplinary-specific literacy contexts. This includes behaviors that not only help those students access the facts and theories they need to learn in any discipline, but also the paths of inquiry and communication specific to that discipline, the kinds of questions that are asked and answered, and the types of texts written and produced within that discipline (Buehl 2011; Lee and Spratley 2010; Moje 2008; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008).

We know that as readers progress in their literacy proficiency, they progress to reading more specialized and sophisticated texts. Over the course of PreK–12 education, course materials also get increasingly more complex. For example, students move from an introduction to basic ideas and concepts in elementary school science, to an in-depth, year-long study of physics in high school. As students mature and become more seasoned

learners, they are given more specialized elements of the academic disciplines to study. Any close academic study in the disciplines at the middle and high school level requires a precise and targeted approach to reading texts and writing in a framework recognized by each discipline.

Understanding Disciplinary Literacy

Right now, you are drawing upon your own disciplinary identity. You may be a teacher, teacher educator, literacy coach, reading specialist, or librarian. You draw on your specific knowledge of teaching, and therefore, you read this book as an "insider." A politician, policy maker, or parent would have a different reading of this book, an "outsider" stance. You are drawing on your own disciplinary understanding of education while reading this book; your purpose for reading is rooted in your professional role in a school.

As a teacher, you embody as many disciplinary identities as subjects that you teach. So think about what this kind of disciplinary identity means for your students who embody many disciplinary identities throughout the school day. Beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the middle and high school years, students are presented with increasingly more complex subjects of study and associated texts and tasks. Each subject area grows out of different fields of study with their own internal conversations. Until very recently, there was little attention paid to literacy learning at the middle and high school level. Other than the generic reading comprehension strategies, such as questioning, connecting, visualizing, and synthesizing that were applied to all the content areas, it was uncommon to find specific literacy instruction beyond language arts. Teachers instead focused on the other two strands: critical thinking and content learning.

But when looking at learning in highly specialized contexts, for example, studying global climate change in high school biology, generic strategies commonly taught to foster comprehension are not enough. According to Doug Buehl, secondary teachers of all content areas need to think of their students as apprentices in their disciplines. "As learners, students are expected to fine-tune generic comprehension strategies to accommodate the demands of each of these different subject areas…disciplinary literacy is not one thing but many things" (2011, 13–14). As Shanahan and Shanahan suggest, "[a] high school student who can do a reasonably good job reading a story in an English class may not be able to make much sense of biology or algebra books, or vice versa" (2008, 45). Furthermore, as Elizabeth Birr Moje asserts, "knowledge production in the disciplines needs to be understood to be the result of human interaction" (2008, 100).

Facts aren't simply facts. Theories get constructed. Ideas change. "Knowledge production in the disciplines operates according to particular norms for everyday practice, conventions for communicating and representing knowledge and ideas, and ways of interacting, defending ideas, and challenging the deeply held ideas of others in the discipline" (Moje 2008, 100). Secondary teachers need to make the purpose of reading explicit; model and teach discipline-specific ways of constructing, communicating, and critiquing knowledge; and "invite their students to expand the identities they bring to the classroom to include academic and specific disciplinary identities" (Buehl 2011, 30). So what does this mean for teachers at all levels on the PreK–12 continuum?

Reconsidering Disciplinary Literacy's Place Across the PreK–12 Continuum

Researchers and practitioners alike are focusing on content and disciplinary literacy as important components of the implementation of today's standards, such as the Common Core. Too often in the past, this conversation has focused only on the needs of adolescent students. However, we believe that the recommendations made regarding content literacy and adolescents in the Carnegie Corporations' report "Reading in the Disciplines: Rethinking Adolescent Literacy" are solid recommendations for teachers of any age group (Lee and Spratley 2010, 16–17); particularly the focus on using multiple texts and text types to "build knowledge and dispositions over time" (16). But we think "over time" really means the PreK–12 continuum, and focusing on the demands within adolescent disciplinary literacy provides us with another lens for looking at the ongoing work of literacy throughout the PreK–12 continuum.

Does disciplinary literacy really only start in middle school? We don't think so. For a long time, the adage was that you first "learn to read" and then "read to learn." But we think we're always reading to learn even as we are learning to read. Babies and toddlers show us this all the time as they pore over books, examine illustrations, and call for repeat reads. Furthermore, we believe that a robust and engaging early childhood and elementary learning environment fosters a spirit of inquiry, particularly in science, social studies, and the arts. Hands-on, student-centered, inquiry-oriented curriculum in science, social studies, mathematics, and the arts is essential. But within that environment, a great deal of literacy action is at work. Teachers and students are using literacy as a tool to learn, to ask and answer questions, and record what they find out through words and pictures. Often, texts of all genres are involved both in print and digital forms.

It is in these other areas of the school day—the immersive curricular experiences of science, social studies, mathematics, and the arts—that young children can practice their abilities to decode and encode, and to explore the world through speaking and listening. Literacy, even with our youngest students, can't be learned in the literacy block alone. Ideally, it is reinforced throughout the day. When it is reinforced throughout the day, students gain a sense of agency, an understanding that as learners, they "do" different things with reading in different contexts.

Consider primary grade students reading picture book biographies or life cycle books as part of social studies or science. These reading experiences can be contextualized within the fields of history and science. During read alouds, whole-class conversations, one-on-one conferences, and small-group explorations, teachers can model disciplinary-specific approaches to texts, so that students begin to understand the kinds of questions that scientists, mathematicians, and biographers pose and what constitutes an answer. From the very start of their school career, students can understand that reading is an act of discovery. With students experiencing this level of robust reading in and around the literacy block, there is greater potential to overcome the disconnect that has consistently surfaced when students reach adolescence. When students learn in a disciplinary-rich context from PreK onward, in developmentally appropriate, play- and inquiry-based contexts, the continuum can be seamless.

It is this multi-dimensional notion of reading to learn while learning to read across discipline areas that resonates with us in the Common Core State Standards, in particular the emphasis on reading more nonfiction and informational texts at the elementary level. With the increasing number of excellent nonfiction trade books being published, and the wide array of digital texts being produced, there are rich opportunities for using texts in all sorts of interesting and engaging ways. Finally, the Common Core English Language Arts Anchor Standards provide a continuum of thinking that pays attention to both literacy learning and disciplinary thinking—a promising pathway for opening doors of possibility for all our students.

Putting it All Together: Why Do We Read in School?

In this chapter, we have explored the complexity of literacy, and the interdependent nature of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Reviewing the RAND Reading Study Group's "Heuristic for Thinking About Reading Comprehension," we have explored the multiple factors at play when a reader reads a text. We have stressed the importance of disciplinary literacy instruction in schools. Now, we want to suggest some of the most common purposes for text selection in the classroom. We know that we read for different purposes. Therefore, depending on our purpose, the texts that we choose may be very different. The purpose for student reading will shape how we consider the text, its role in the classroom, and the criteria we apply to determine both its quality and its complexity.

Figure 1.3 lists the most common driving forces behind our selection of texts for instruction. We see fostering a love of reading and healthy reading habits as a component of each of these different purposes.

Figure 1.3 Instructional Purposes for Text Selection

Understanding Content: Informational texts, such as trade books and digital texts are

wonderful vehicles for finding out about the world. Sometimes, texts are selected for the curriculum because they are a good match for learning the information detailed in state or local curriculum standards. Teachers look for a match between the content they must teach and the details of the texts. In science, social studies, and mathematics such texts can be primary source materials, such as documents and artifacts from the past or brand-new research reports, as well as secondary source materials.

Developing Reading Skills: In preschool and the primary grades, texts will be selected for whole-class read alouds, shared reading, and guided reading groups in order to support individual students with the acquisition of literacy skills. When making selections, the match between the reader and the text will be the most important consideration. Books that are at a higher level than the books that students can read independently can be read aloud, in order to model language use, patterns, and fluency. As students develop as readers, teachers continue to select texts in language arts that they feel are a good match for the reader, and provide students the opportunity to continue to develop their comprehension strategies.

Developing Disciplinary Literacies: Across the grade levels, our goal is to introduce students to, and engage them with disciplinary literacies to apprentice them in the ways of reading, writing, speaking, and listening like they are scientists, historians, mathematicians, and artists. Teachers select texts that provide accessible models of disciplinary literacies across the content areas, considering the vocabulary used and how the texts demonstrate inquiry skills and strategies in the discipline.

Teaching Literary Analysis/Genre Study: Early on in the primary grades, students are grappling with emerging understandings of the differences between fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Teachers can make selections for read alouds, whole-class and shared readings, guided reading, literature circles (book discussion groups), and independent reading that help students develop an understanding of the conventions of each genre. Teachers at the intermediate, middle, and high school level select texts that help students further develop their understanding of genre expectations and literary elements.

Analyzing Mentor Text for Student Writing: In language arts and the content areas, texts such as trade books and digital texts can serve as models for student writing. Such writing might be done in a literacy block, during which students are practicing an important aspect of genre or writing conventions. Or, such writing might be done during content-area instruction, and teachers select texts based on a combination of the content of the texts and the models of writing that they offer. In addition to reading and analyzing mentor texts, students use these texts as examples for their own writing, modeling what they write based on the array of examples they have been exposed to within a genre or text type.

Developing Critical Thinking: Teachers often plan curriculum around a theme or an essential question. When planning curriculum with this purpose in mind, teachers select texts that prompt thinking about an abstract understanding of theme or that get at the heart of the essential question. Focusing on critical-thinking skills is often one component of text selection, fused with one or more of the others mentioned on this list. Teachers pay close attention to the content as well as the perspective and point of view.

Engaging in Inquiry and Research: When conducting inquiry-based learning and research with students, teachers consider the source material that students might need as a catalyst for their research, and gather together materials relevant to the content of the research as dictated by state or local curriculum standards, or student interest. When selecting texts for research, teachers might look for "the literature of inquiry" (Zarnowski and Turkel 2011)—texts that model the process of inquiry. Or, they may simply look for books that cover the content at hand.

Fostering Habits and Love of Reading: An important component of teaching is fostering a love of learning. For literacy educators at every level, this includes a love of reading. But what makes one student love reading could be a very different text than what makes another student love reading. Teachers often are making selections for their classroom library or for individual students based on their understanding of the developmental levels of the students they teach, the enduring interests of those students each year, and individual interests and idiosyncrasies. Understanding student interests may also impact the ways in which teachers select texts for curriculum based on content standards.

Conclusion

We like to use the metaphor of the *teacher as juggler* when we describe the decision-making processes that teachers use to select texts for classroom use. When we make book choices, we are juggling the considerations of our curricular goals, the quality of the texts available to use, the complexity of these texts, the needs and interests of our readers, and the instructional purposes and practices that will shape our use of these texts.

As stated in the introduction, this book is about text complexity, but it is also about so much more. It is about how to make choices about instructional materials that will foster the kinds of critical reading, writing, thinking, and listening that we aspire to for our students. Understanding how literacy operates, the complexity of the reading process and reading comprehension, the ways in which literacy instruction has shaped PreK–12 classrooms, and the different roles texts can play in the classroom provides a foundation for understanding the purpose of text selection. In the next chapter, we outline the overall process for text selection, and then focus on determining the quality of a text, considering the questions: *Is it good?* and *How is it good?* (Stevenson 2006).

Questions for Reflection

1. How is literacy defined in your school? How does this definition influence literacy and content-area instruction in your school?

2. Think about your own instruction. What role does reading have in your instruction in relation to writing, listening, and speaking?

3. What else do you need to know about disciplinary literacy? What new questions do you have about it?

4. What are your most frequent purposes for selecting texts for your classroom?