

# Bringing New Literacies into the Content Area Literacy Methods Course

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## The Content Area Reading and Writing Course

Multiple states set coursework in content area literacy as a requirement for secondary teacher licensure (Romine, McKenna, & Robinson, 1996; Sheridan-Thomas, 2007). This paper discusses my Content Area Reading and Writing course designed for secondary preservice teachers who are in a range of disciplines: secondary English, science, mathematics, foreign language, social studies, art, music, and physical education.

Students enrolled in this required methods course are typically in their fourth or fifth year of study within a five year MAT program or, as in the case of the summer sections, are students who have completed 1 of 2 years in an alternative certification program. All are studying to become secondary teachers in either science, mathematics, social studies, foreign language, English, or art. Up until this point in their studies, they have not completed a methods course modeling integration of technology that demonstrates possibilities for their own classroom teaching. Unless they are working with methods faculty members who have a research interest or a scholarly interest in technology, it is highly unlikely that this modeling will occur in any other course offered at the university.

The course is designed around multiple objectives, all countering the notion that content area reading is a general task that lacks specific, integral ties to the specific subject taught. My beliefs about literacy—that literacies are varied, situated, and socially constructed (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996)—invariably shape the course design. Further, my experiences as a classroom teacher are imprinted deeply onto my current instructional practice, leading me to design the course around the idea that content area teachers, as experts in their fields, are best positioned to lead students to unpack and unlock the unique demands that content area texts present readers.

Though students are all provided with multiple opportunities to define what literacy will mean in their own practice, the course begins by presenting the claim that “the changes of a new world in new times require that we not only teach reading and writing of print, but that we teach youth how to use reading and writing in conjunction with many other forms of representation to construct a socially just and democratic society” (Moje & Sutherland, 2003). Our field placements are largely in urban, diverse settings, presenting preservice teachers with the opportunity to engage pupils who bring a rich range of practices, values, and means of communicating meaning to the classroom.

Though our course texts emphasize that “content literacy has the potential to maximize content acquisition” (McKenna & Robinson, 2006, p. 12) and that “the disciplines are constituted by discourses” (Luke, 2001, p. xii), the reality is that many of the students enter the course with a different set of values, both in terms of their pedagogy and in terms of their schema of what it means to teach in their content area.

Most feel pressure to teach content and believe that language instruction is the domain of the English/language arts teacher. This course is designed to create some dissonance around those beliefs, challenging students to espouse and teach from a more expanded understanding of content literacy and content learning. To that end, as much as we explore ways in which the content areas differ and how knowledge is constructed (and communicated) within those disciplines, we also consider ways of using digital tools to talk across communities and represent knowledge in a range of ways.

### **Multiliteracies Approach**

School is largely built around the literacy practices of the 20th century. Here, literacy was print-based, and literacy learning was centered on understanding and producing written texts. However, 21st-century literacy has expanded beyond learning to read a print text format (Rafferty, 1990) and moved to encompass multiple literacies in multiple modes (New London Group, 1996). These multimodal practices are “blurring the distinction between writer and reader, producer and consumer, and require a complex range of skills, knowledge, and understanding” (Carrington & Marsh, 2005).

When we “multimediate,” we use media, produce media, and engage in literate practices as a way of engaging in the world (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). New digital tools require and make possible new ways of constructing and communicating meaning, leading multiple forms of media (not just print text) to have authority for representation. Teaching through a multiliteracy or multimodal approach is a very different kind of teaching, one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic, opening up what counts as valued communication within the classroom and inviting new voices into the classroom interpretive community.

It is critical to understand that multimodal does not simply mean that more than one mode of representation is used within a text. Instead, a multimodal text uses multiple ways of signing (i.e., image, voice, motion, song, print) to animate social life and social action (Enciso, Katz, Kiefer, Price-Dennis, & Wilson, 2006). As Hull & Nelson (2005) explained,

A multimodal text can create a different system of signification, one that transcends the collective contribution of its constituent parts. More simply put, multimodality can afford, not just a new way to make meaning, but a different kind of meaning. (p. 225)

It is no longer enough for students graduating high school to read and write at a 12th-grade level (Kajder, 2003; Sturtevant, et. al., 2007). As argued by the National Center on Education and the Economy (2006), content preparation is critical:

This is a world in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking mathematics, science, literature, history and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce. (p. xii).

However, students will also need to be able work across multiple tools, multiple forms of text, and multiple literacies (New London Group, 1996; Sturtevant et al., 2007), skills which may be key to bridging pupils' rich, out-of-school literacy practices to academic content (Kajder, 2006; Sheridan-Thomas, 2007). The content literacy course addresses both the role of motivation in engaging adolescent learners and the understanding that literacy is about becoming fluent in the practice of a discipline (Bain, 2000) rather than merely knowing how to use a set of strategies or tools.

### **Instructional Methods Integrating Digital Technologies**

Just as content literacy instruction is woven into the traditional curriculum, technology (both tools and texts) is woven throughout this course. In terms of the particular uses of technology in the course, the learning experiences and activities are designed to run counter to the reductive, packaged, "drill and skill" literacy programs that fill many of the urban, low-performing classrooms in which these students might be placed for student teaching. Instead, the goal is to model relevant learning, deep inquiry, knowledge production, and the use of the most powerful cultural tools available for communicating those ideas. As the course instructor, I want students to think about integrating technology into their teaching in the same ways I want them to think about breathing – automatically and without either effort or pause.

Technology is modeled through instructor use during class (as with the use of tools like wikis or Skype, which are used to amplify instruction around class discussion) and through the expectations embedded in assignments conducted within and outside of class. The expectation is that students work through activities as learners and, subsequently, taking a critical stance in which they question the instructional value added to the task through the use of technology and work to design their own instructional models utilizing similar tasks and tools.

The technology is woven transparently into the curriculum, as the point of the class is to focus around multiple strategies and learning experiences that will allow them to be more effective in teaching their particular content to a wide range of student readers and writers. As integral as these emergent technologies are becoming to the field of literacy, it is still new to think about using new tools for new purposes. The purpose is not to do familiar things in the same familiar ways, like moving an essay to PowerPoint. Instead, it is about doing new things with new tools alongside our students – and valuing the multimodal knowledge they already are bringing into our classroom.

Four activities throughout the 14-session course demonstrate the ways in which technologies are used to amplify not only students' work in lesson planning and curriculum development but their reflection and identity development as secondary teachers.

### **Digital Storytelling Through the Construction of a Literacy Narrative**

At the beginning of the course, students create a digital story in which they offer either a personal literacy narrative or address those key ideas they find intriguing about using literacy to support the learning of content material and what deep and real concerns students have about doing so. From some extensive prewriting, students script, storyboard, and develop a 3-5 minute digital story bringing together narration, image, print text, motion, and color in a richly layered multimodal composition. The goal here is

to expand the definition of what counts as valued communication while also challenging students to work with multiple modes and media to communicate intended meaning.

Moje (1996) emphasized that content literacy courses must provide preservice teachers with authentic opportunities for reflection, holding that coursework should ask students to “examine their beliefs and evaluate whether their commitment is one based in subject matter or in students” (p. 192). Recognizing that students were entering the course with specific values and beliefs, this assignment was designed to begin to challenge those ideas (Lasley, 1980) in an attempt to begin the process of change and growth. (For examples, see [Video 1](#) and [Video 2](#).)



### Podcasted Literature Circle Discussions

Throughout the term students participate in multiple literature circles/book clubs in which they discuss assigned and self-selected texts supporting course objectives in content-area literacy and adolescent literature. This work is as much about dialogue as it is expanding who has voice and ownership in the classroom, as Alvermann (2006) explained,

Teachers who invite students to take an active role in content area reading and learning base their instruction on students’ needs and interests as much as possible. This is done through choosing relevant reading material, making students aware of their progress toward short and long term goals, or simply providing an open forum for discussion. In effect, these are the elements of participatory classroom instruction. (p. 9)

Each of these discussions is digitally recorded and posted to student blogs as a podcast. (For example, see [Audio 1](#).)

After students learn the base skills related to recording and uploading audio files through two in-class minilessons of approximately 8 minutes/lesson, each group uses Audacity or GarageBand software to mix synthesis podcasts, pulling the “essential” 5 minutes from an hour-long discussion. (**Editor’s Note:** See the [Resources](#) section at the end of this paper for Web site URLs.) The goal here is to teach skills in working through a mass of audio “footage” but also to model for students a way of making these audio files manageable in the urban classrooms of 35+ students in which they are placed for fieldwork throughout their programs.

In a recent semester, some students worked to focus on the areas of the discussion that were the most rich. Others focused on the questions the discussion left unanswered or where the conversation fell apart. Editing was as much a part of the group process as the initial discussion. It was an attempt to model that “effective teachers encourage students

to work together to develop a deep conceptual understanding of content and to make real-world connections between old and new knowledge across the curriculum” (Alvermann, 2006, 9). The podcasts became artifacts to which the students returned for further reference, analysis, and reciprocal teaching.

### **Weblogs as Reflective Journaling Tools**

Over the course of the semester students are required to maintain a reflective weblog (or “blog”), which brings together both their own learning and thinking about course content (and their eventual teaching) and their responses to the thoughts and questions posed by peers within the class interpretive community. (For examples, see [Appendix A](#), [Appendix B](#), and [Appendix C](#).) Where the course formerly required this same kind of writing in a pen/paper journal, weblogs provide multiple affordances, including textual connections with others on and offline, the facility to comment on others’ blog posts and the possibility of replying to comments on ones’ own, hyperlinks to information sources, site meters which monitor “visits” from others, the facility to embed other texts within one’s own, and the possibility of including a range of modalities, from audio podcasts to video streams (Davies & Merchant, 2007, p. 168)

The syllabus requires that students use the blog to make comprehension of the course material visible and learning and thinking about the material accountable. Each posting should prove that students have read and have deeply considered the material.

These are not discrete entries. They are meant to build from one another as students make their way throughout the course. Further, these journals, as public spaces, open the opportunity for dialogue and collaboration. It is expected that students respond to the thoughts of others throughout each week in an attempt to extend the class community and develop affinity groups (Gee, 2004). Postings are regularly multimodal, incorporating images and even audio clips in which students post oral responses or relevant content (i.e., clips from speeches, audio of original musical compositions). A rubric for assessment is provided at the start of the term and is negotiated at multiple points throughout the course as community around the blogs develops.

Students’ self-efficacy and sense of accomplishment increased when they were encouraged to make connections between what they knew already and what they were expected to learn in their content area (Alvermann, 2006, p. 11).

### **Online Discussion**

During the class, students participate in an online discussion with some of the authors they have read throughout the term and other classes of students (both preservice and practicing teachers, as well as content area majors) studying the same or similar texts. Students facilitate the discussion and are responsible for making contact with participants outside of the class in order to provide any needed technical assistance in working with Skype or iChat. In some cases, students opt to use Tapped In to run a synchronous chat as opposed to an oral discussion that often involves video. During reciprocal teaching exercises and those incorporating jigsaw strategies, students also run discussions using Gabbly and YackPack as tools that open up the discourse and modes through which participants contribute to discussion. The technologies provide instructional value-added by providing students with amplified opportunities to explore authentic assessment and the development of interpretive communities. In smaller yet no less significant ways, students are also challenged to consider the roles that questioning, discussion strategies, text selection, text structure, and textual analysis play in the work.

As writing online provides an opportunity to “author the self” (Holland, Lachinotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), this work provides preservice teachers with an opportunity to develop voice and identity as disciplinary experts, as teachers within a specific content area, and as literacy teachers. Students do so through their responses to others as well as their own “substance posts,” which present new ideas. Audience expanded the class community well beyond the physical walls of our meeting space and the “boundaries” of our meeting time. The instructor used this not only as an opportunity to discuss content and work within an authentic community but to discuss the role of social interaction to motivate adolescent learners and increase self-efficacy and motivation.

### Next Steps

Where these activities illustrate a sample of the activities that the course presents students, the multiliteracies approach requires that the course continually develop. Adolescent learners’ literacies outside of school will continue to respond to emerging technologies, challenging teachers across all content areas to push against traditional ideas of reading/writing/communicating meaning while also providing students with authentic, meaningful opportunities to engage actively in meaningful work that extends and elaborates on academic literacy.

The challenge amidst this kind of dynamic curriculum is to provide for space to ensure that ideas and practices from the course move into students’ practice in the field. Future work will explore the impact of the current course design on students’ understandings about multiple literacies and how those are applied to content area teaching in urban, high need classrooms. Where it is apparent that there is value in modeling these strategies for students as learners, there remains a need for additional critical evaluation of the challenges and affordances of bringing a new literacy perspective to bear on the content area literacy course.

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**Resources**

Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>)

Gabbly (<http://gabbly.com>)

GarageBand (<http://www.apple.com/ilife/garageband/>)

iChat (<http://www.apple.com/macosx/features/ichat/>)

Skype (<http://skype.com/>)

Tapped In (<http://tappedin.org/tappedin/>)

YackPack (<http://www.yackpack.com>)

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