

Write Like a _____:
Apprenticing Content Area Teachers into
Disciplinary Writing Instruction

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to entering Peabody College's Learning and Design, M.Ed. program, I spent seven years teaching high school English Language Arts (ELA). During my last two years of that work, I experienced a new phenomenon: teachers from other content areas began asking for my advice on teaching writing in their classes. These requests may have reflected, in part, my position as an increasingly experienced teacher and teacher of writing within the school; however, my colleagues' stated reasons for seeking my help reflected a growing sense of the importance of writing instruction. They were driven by increased attention to content area literacy standards, district professional development, and school-level conversations about students' areas of greatest academic need, but, consistently, these teachers were telling me that they did not feel they had the expertise to teach writing.

Much has been made of the need to develop students' reading and academic language skills across the secondary curriculum, but much less has been done to encourage "writing across the curriculum." In fact, this phrase remains tied to writing-to-learn practices from the 1990s and early 2000s (for examples, see Mitchell, 1996; Knipper & Duggan, 2006) that do not adequately align with today's literacy standards and which do not explore what it means to produce authentic writing in different academic disciplines, what I will call disciplinary writing. By examining the needs of the teachers who came to me asking for help and by designing a response to those needs, I hope to contribute to a new approach to writing in and across the disciplines.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The teachers who sought my support for their writing instruction demonstrated a common problem: these high school content area teachers¹ increasingly needed to incorporate writing

¹ I will use the term "content area teachers" for teachers of subjects other than English Language Arts (ELA).

practices and instruction into their classrooms but often did not feel they had sufficient knowledge or expertise to do so. To better understand this problem, I reached out to some of those former colleagues. Because of the demands of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of our conversations or email exchanges were brief; however, one science teacher, who I will call Calvin (a pseudonym), spoke and wrote to me at length about writing in his Earth Sciences courses. I use his experience as a case study and supplement it with details from interviews with a district literacy coach.

Calvin still teaches at my former place of employment, a large urban public high school of about 2,800 students with over 120 teachers across 14 curricular departments. Located in a mid-size city in the Mountain West, the school serves a racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse population of students. In 2018, Calvin attended a district professional development session that introduced secondary science teachers to the CER writing framework and encouraged them to incorporate this type of writing into their curriculum. CER stands for Claim, Evidence, and Reasoning, and the framework mirrors the core structure of writing across many of the sciences. Calvin knew that the soon-to-be-adopted Next Generation Science Standards emphasized communication, and he wanted to help his 9th grade students develop the strong writing skills required for success in high school, so he and a fellow Earth Sciences teacher followed the district's imperative: they collaboratively planned to incorporate CER writing into their upcoming units of study. However, at the end of the first unit, students produced writing that demonstrated a wide range of proficiency, and these two teachers did not know how to identify or respond to students' writing needs. That was when Calvin initially sought my help.

RESEARCH

As I reflected on Calvin's experience, I identified two interrelated needs, which he confirmed in subsequent communications: he and his Earth Sciences colleague needed help translating their professional learning around CER into sustained practice, and, in order to do so, they needed to grow their own toolkit of writing instruction. These needs inspired my research question: How can a literacy specialist (a coach or teacher²) support content area teachers in developing and sustaining disciplinary literacy instruction and practices? This question shaped and was shaped by initial investigations into disciplinary writing and teacher learning, and it fed more targeted inquiry into three bodies of research: disciplinary literacy, instructional coaching, and writing instruction.

Because little scholarship focuses exclusively on disciplinary writing, I relied on more general literature about disciplinary literacy to shed light on what it means to practice and teach writing skills in content areas other than ELA. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) define disciplinary literacy as the most advanced and specialized level of literacy development because it requires learners to develop literacy skills specific to the ways in which each discipline generates and communicates knowledge. Moje (2015) extends this theory to conceive of disciplinary literacy learning as a sociocultural endeavor: she advocates for viewing academic disciplines as distinct "cultures", each with their own discourse practices that include the affective, social, and creative aspects of knowing and communicating.

Moje advances a "4 Es heuristic" for apprenticing students into these disciplinary discourses. The heuristic involves *engaging* in "the practices of the disciplinary", *eliciting*

² Kane et al. (2018) "include teacher leaders in [their] definition of *instructional coach*" (p. 113, italics in original). I use the term "literacy specialist" to recognize the specialized knowledge that a literacy coach or ELA teacher leader brings to the endeavor at hand and to reflect my position as an informal or de facto literacy coach in the context of the work I describe.

students' existing knowledge and *engineering* their further engagement, *examining* closely disciplinary “words and ways with words”, and *evaluating* “when, why, and how disciplinary language is and is not useful” (p. 260). To teach students in this way, Moje asserts that educators must have opportunities to collaborate, reflect, and engage in the literate practices of their discipline. Her theory and examples of its use in practice (Rainey et al., 2018), helped me to begin envisioning the type of writing instruction that content area teachers might use and the experiences that I might provide to support them in developing that instruction.

Moje's assertions about teacher learning align with the findings of research on instructional coaching practices. I used this body of literature to help me understand how a specialist, particularly a literacy specialist, could work with teachers to help them develop and sustain new practices. According to Gibbons and Cobb (2017) and their subsequent collaboration with Kane (Kane et al., 2018) the most productive coaching activities follow five characteristics of “high-quality professional learning”: these activities are “intensive and ongoing”; focus on problems of daily practice; focus on “student thinking”; build community among teachers; and allow teachers to learn about and use new pedagogical practices (Gibbons & Cobb, 2017, pp. 413-414). Activities that meet these criteria include practicing the discipline, analyzing student work, and engaging in the lesson study cycle. Many of these practices also appear in the work of Elish-Piper et al. (2016), who focus on the role of literacy coaches and note that these coaches can help content area teachers “bridge the content that undergirds their curriculum and the often tacit” literate practices of their discipline (p. 9). This work might be done with an individual teacher or in small or large groups and might involve strategies that range from guiding teachers' identification of “disciplinary literacy outcomes” (p. 86) to providing help “adopting, adapting, and creating strategies” for disciplinary literacy instruction (p. 158).

Research on instructional coaching sits within the larger literature on teacher collaboration. In fact, Horn et al. (2018) assert that collaboration functions best when facilitated by a coach or teacher leader - someone with expert pedagogical knowledge and an understanding of teacher development. They state that through such facilitation, “collaborative time can provide teachers with opportunities to contend with school-level problems of practice and adapt the big ideas from pull-out professional development to the complex daily realities of particular classrooms” (p. 96). This is precisely what the teachers in my case study needed. Combined with the literature on instructional coaching, Horn et al.’s (2018) work on teacher collaboration pointed me toward designing a small group coaching framework that would facilitate collaboration among a curricular team of teachers, like Calvin and his colleague, and in which I would act as a facilitator and an expert in writing pedagogy.

Finally, I sought practices of effective writing instruction that could be transferred from teaching ELA to teaching writing in other disciplines. Specifically, I searched for approaches that would, in the vein of Moje (2015), apprentice students into disciplinary writing practices, and I selected two: the use of mentor texts, which allow students to learn from expert writers (exemplified by Marchetti & O’Dell, 2018) and approaching writing as a process in which writers are perpetually honing their product and craft (exemplified by Lane, 2016). To address the remaining need for content area teachers to gain foundational knowledge about writing features and instruction, I turned to Spandel (2013), who named six traits of writing that transfer across many different genres and styles. This knowledge and the aforementioned practices would inform the activities within a coaching framework focused on disciplinary writing.

DESIGN

When applied to the context of my case study, the research on disciplinary literacy, instructional coaching, and writing instruction pointed me toward developing a structure of small group coaching to apprentice a team of content area teachers (Moje, 2015) into the practices of teaching writing in their discipline. I believed that this would help bridge teachers' professional learning and classroom practices (Horn et al., 2018) while also fostering community and collaboration. With these goals in mind, I designed a framework with three broad phases and specific, research-informed activities within each phase (see Appendix). A literacy specialist such as myself would facilitate these activities and contribute expertise in writing pedagogy to complement the teachers' disciplinary knowledge (Elish-Piper, 2016). The framework could be used within a school's existing structures for teacher collaboration. In my context, I could implement the framework with the Earth Sciences teachers in a monthly one-hour meeting during time allotted for department collaboration.

The framework's first phase focuses on investigating the relevant discipline's writing practices to identify student learning goals. The design of this phase draws on the literature of instructional coaching, particularly on the need for teachers to engage in their discipline (Gibbons & Cobb, 2017; Kane et al., 2018) and on the recognition that literacy coaches can help teachers to make their "often tacit" disciplinary literacy practices explicit (Elish-Piper et al., 2016, p. 9). The first activity in this phase asks teachers to collect examples of writing in their discipline that exhibit qualities that they would like to see in students' writing, in other words, to collect mentor texts. The literacy specialist would then lead the teachers through the process of reading the texts, noticing shared characteristics of the texts, and identifying one or more goals for student learning based on the shared characteristics. The second activity, inspired by Shanahan and Shanahan's work with teachers on disciplinary reading (2008), asks teachers to

practice writing in their discipline by responding to a task that they might assign their students. The literacy specialist would then facilitate a collaborative reflection on teachers' thinking, processes, and practices as they wrote. From these reflections, teachers would generate a list of discipline-specific ways of thinking and writing to guide their instruction. Each of these activities might take one one-hour session and should help teachers to identify the disciplinary "words and ways with words" into which they need to apprentice students (Moje, 2105).

The second phase draws from the lesson study cycle cited by Gibbons and Cobb (2017) and Kane et al. (2018) as a potentially productive group coaching activity. In this phase, teachers collaboratively plan how to apprentice students into the disciplinary writing practices they identified in Phase 1. The literacy specialist introduces the teachers to Moje's (2015) 4 Es heuristic for teaching disciplinary literacy, providing examples as necessary. Then, the specialist guides the teachers through using the heuristic to collaboratively plan lessons and activities embedded within a unit of study to instruct and engage students with the disciplinary ways of thinking and writing identified in Phase 1. In the process, the specialist uses their literacy knowledge to help the teachers identify, adapt, or create (Elish-Piper et al., 2016) writing instruction strategies, materials, and activities that will help them meet their goals. Depending on the amount and complexity of the planning, this phase might stretch over multiple meetings, and teachers might return to this phase in the future if they discover a need for more planning.

The framework's third and final phase completes the lesson study cycle by having the teachers reflect on their instruction, revise their plans from Phase 2, and plan future work based on their students' needs. The length of this phase will depend on the frequency of the meetings and on the needs of the teachers and students. In this phase's two activities, the literacy specialist facilitates as teachers share videotapes or peer observations of the lessons they planned in Phase

2 and, later, as they share the writing that their students produced over the course of the relevant unit. Respectively, these activities complete the lesson study cycle and engage teachers in analyzing student work, both of which are potentially productive coaching activities (Gibbons & Cobb, 2017). In both, the literacy specialist focuses the teachers' discussion on student thinking in relation to the goals identified in Phase 1 and helps the teachers revise existing lessons and plan new ones. This work might lead the group back to the planning phase or, if the instruction has been particularly successful, back to Phase 1 to identify new writing goals and practices.

IMPLICATIONS

While this framework focuses on teacher learning and development, ultimately, its goal is to foster instruction that helps students build the writing skills that are so necessary for acting in today's work but that are so hard to develop if they are only taught in ELA classes. Moje (2015) defines the impact of this work even more broadly, arguing that developing students' disciplinary literacy practices is "a form of socially just teaching" because it "gives youth access to these highly specialized discourse communities" and, in doing so, helps them to navigate across in-school and out-of-school cultural resources and to use their knowledge to change the practices of these communities (p. 259). While Moje's claim might run afoul of the myriad definitions of social justice, her approach does use elements of culturally responsive pedagogies, such as developing students' cultural competence in discourse communities with institutional power (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and teaching students' whole selves in a way that empowers them to "be better human beings and more successful learners" (Gay, 2018, p. 40). In short, students learn to write like a scientist, historian, or artist and, in the process, develop the tools to shape the discipline in their image.

My hope is when using this framework, the same happens with teachers: that they are apprenticed into the teaching of writing so that they can continue this work together and on their own. I would expect that as they grow as teachers of writing, they will also change the practices of writing instruction, which will benefit all teachers, myself included.

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APPENDIX

Framework for Small Group Coaching of a Secondary Content-area Teaching Team to Support Their Disciplinary Writing Instruction

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Explanatory Notes

The framework described below is meant to be used by a literacy specialist (a literacy coach or teacher leader) when coaching a small group of content area teachers to help them improve their disciplinary writing instruction. It describes a flexible, iterative process; however, the framework's design rests on the existence of three conditions that are common across most secondary schools. First, the literacy specialist should possess strong facilitation skills and expert knowledge of writing pedagogy. Second, the small group consists of teachers in the same content area (ex. social studies or visual arts); preferably, these teachers would teach the same course or discipline within that content area (ex. Earth Sciences or Psychology). Finally, teachers' schedules include regular, dedicated time to collaborate as a curricular department or in PLCs; the framework could be used on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis depending on the time allotted for teacher collaboration.

PHASE 1	
Investigate the discipline's writing practices to identify one or more foci for student learning.	
Group Activities	Role of Literacy Specialist
The teachers collect examples of writing in their discipline that demonstrate the style, structure, and/or other qualities that they want students to develop. As a group, the teachers explain why they brought each text. Then, they read the examples, discuss them to identify the shared characteristics of this type of writing, and decide to focus their instruction on one or more of these characteristics.	Draw teachers' attention to different elements of writing (e.g. Spandel's [2013] "6 traits") and provide vocabulary to identify and describe those elements.
The teachers write in response to a task they might assign to their students. During or after their writing, the teachers narrate their thinking, process, and practices. The teachers then discuss these narrations and generate a list of discipline-specific ways of thinking and writing to guide their writing instruction.	Draw teachers' attention to and provide vocabulary to identify and describe different writing practices and processes.

PHASE 2 Collaboratively plan instruction.	
Group Activity	Role of Literacy Specialist
The teachers learn about the 4 Es heuristic for disciplinary literacy instruction (Moje, 2015). Then, they use the heuristic to collaboratively plan lessons and/or activities embedded within a unit of study to instruct and engage students with the disciplinary ways of thinking and writing identified in Phase 1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduce teachers to 4 Es heuristic (Moje, 2015). ● Facilitate collaboration to maintain a focus on identified writing goals and students' learning. ● Help to identify, adapt, and/or create writing instruction strategies, materials, and activities.

PHASE 3 Reflect on and iterate instruction.	
Group Activities	Literacy Specialist Moves/Actions
Between meetings, the teachers implement a lesson planned in Phase 2 and gather artifacts from the lesson to share (ex. peer observations, video recording, student work). In their next meeting, the teachers share their artifacts and use them to analyze the effectiveness of the lesson in relation to the goals established in Phase 1. Based on this analysis, they revise the lesson as needed.	Facilitate discussion to focus teachers' observations, analysis, and revisions on students' progress toward writing goals and participation in disciplinary writing practices.
At the end of the series of activities/lessons planned in Phase 2, the teachers collect student writing. Together, in their next meeting, they examine the collected writing to evaluate students' progress towards the relevant characteristics and ways of writing identified in Phase 1. The teachers identify common areas of strength and support; then, they plan follow-up instruction based on the identified areas for support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Draw teachers' attention to elements of students' writing and ways of writing. ● Help to identify, adapt, and/or create writing instruction strategies, materials, and activities in response to identified areas for support.