Three steps to teaching disciplinary literacies

Zuocheng Zhang | zzhang26@une.edu.au | Senior Lecturer in English, Literacies and Language Education

Literacy practices such as comprehending and composing texts differ from subject to subject. What students need to read or write in English is different from what is needed in their Science subject. The way proficient readers or writers read or write is also found to be subject-specific. Teachers therefore have the responsibility of 'see'ing the distinct literacy practices in their subject and teaching them so that their students can achieve the learning outcomes in their subject. In the unit Literacies and Numeracies in Context at the School of Education, the University of New England, we have developed an approach to assisting pre-service and in-service teachers to teach disciplinary literacies or subject-specific literacies.

Subject teachers may feel there is little room for literacy because their curriculum is already crowded. They may also be apprehensive about teaching literacy practices in their subject as they need to find a way of talking about literacy as well as strategies for teaching it. As our teaching students have experienced in the unit, there are three steps to follow to 'see' literacy as being integral to their subject teaching and incorporate literacy teaching into their unit of work. School teachers may find it helpful to follow these steps and hone their skill of identifying and teaching disciplinary literacies accordingly.

Step 1

The first important step to take is helping our teaching students grow a language awareness. Our teaching students are asked to keep a language use diary by recording their language use in the past 24 hours. They need to include the topic of any interactions they may have had, people with whom they have interacted and the medium of their interaction, for example, spoken; written; and/or digital.

They are often surprised by the variation in their language use in different contexts. They are then asked to describe what language features are chosen because of the topic, the role they play in the interaction and the mode of their interaction.

Metalanguage, that is language for describing language, is provided to assist them in their description. This includes the use of Field, Tenor and Mode for describing the context as shown in Table 1.

By using the metalanguage to review their first-hand experience of language use, teaching students heighten their awareness that language use is subject to contextual factors.

They also practice explicitly describing language-context connections. By extension, they come

to see literacy practices in their subject as being subject-specific.

We also introduce them to concepts such as genre, or type of text that is typically used in each subject, for example, narratives in English, word problems in Mathematics and inquiry reports in Science. The text organisation, key sentence structures and word choices in each genre are explained in detail to help them understand and discuss the most noticeable or important features of the genres in their subject.

Table 1: Metalanguage for describing context

Metalanguage Term	Meaning
Field	The metalanguage for the topic of the interaction.
Tenor	The metalanguage for the roles and relationships between people in the interaction.
Mode	The medium or channel through which the interaction undergoes.

Step 2

The second major step involves using the metalanguage to articulate the literacy practices in their subject. Instead of spelling out the literacy practices for them, we invite our students to interrogate their curriculum document.

For example, after they have selected a content description or statement from their subject curriculum, they are prompted to describe the activities their students will be doing to learn the content. They are reminded that the activities are the contexts of language use and then asked to explicitly describe the features of language use.

This step is often not as straightforward as it may first appear. Our teaching students are assisted with the following prompting questions:

- What do your students need to read/view/listen to or write/compose/speak in the activities?
- What genres are the texts they need to comprehend and compose, e.g., narratives, procedure, explanation?
- How do the texts unfold from beginning to end?

- What typical sentence structures are there in the text?
- What technical words are essential to use in the text?
- Are visuals such as images used along with language?

They are also provided the metalanguage for describing literacy knowledge as listed in Table 2.

To give them concrete examples of making connections between content descriptions and learning and assessment task, we direct our teaching students to the work samples provided by ACARA or NESA for work samples by school children from various school subjects across all learning stages. They are guided to use the literacy concepts to analyse the strengths and weaknesses in literacy in the work samples.

Table 2: Metalanguage for describing literacy knowledge

Literacy concepts	Meaning
Genre	Text type.
Text knowledge	How text is organised, text structure, flow of text from sentence to sentence.
Grammar knowledge	Typical sentence structures such as sentence openers, sentences expressing cause and effect.
Word knowledge	Choice of technical vocabulary or everyday words.
Visual knowledge	How linguistic text and visual images are best laid out on the page or screen.

Step 3

The third key step is putting their knowledge of subject-specific literacies to use in their subject teaching. Our teaching students accept that literacy is an integral component of their subject teaching and needs to be taught explicitly where the demand for it arises. In their final assignment which is designing a unit of work, they are provided with a template which includes five columns as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Template for creating a lesson

Content description or achievement standard/ learning outcome that is addressed in the lesson	
Subject teaching activities	e.g., Explore human life styles and impact on the environment
Literacy demands that are placed on students by each subject teaching activity	Explain the consequences of the wide use of plastics
How the literacy demands are handled in the lesson	• Building a word wall for target vocabulary • Using highlighter to help parse complex cause-effect sentences • Sorting out text structure by putting scrambled sentences or paragraphs back to the correct order
Resources they use in teaching the subject and literacy demands	Worksheets

Summary

The above three steps of raising language awareness, identifying literacy demands and explicit teaching of literacy demands, develops in our teaching students the knowledge, skills and disposition essential to attending to literacy practices specific to their subject. These steps should also assist school teachers to 'see' literacy demands in their subject and ease them into integrated literacy and subject teaching. #
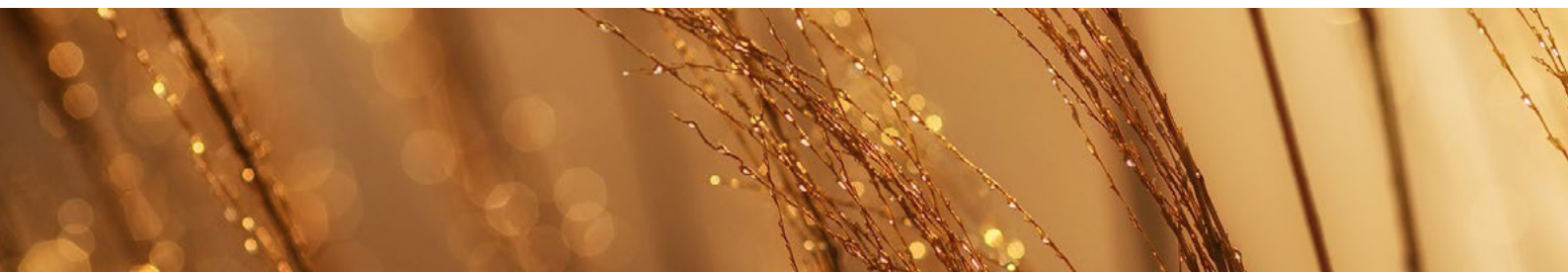
Creating a "Golden Thread" Between Theory and Practice: The Value of Exploring a Comprehensive Conceptual Framework

Associate Professor Anna Elizabeth Du Plessis | adupless@une.edu.au | Director, Office for Professional Learning, SoE

Finding and developing a "golden thread" between theory and practice in education entails strategic planning. It should embrace a full and comprehensive awareness of:

1. contextual factors,
2. associated aims and intentions,
3. pedagogical reasoning, and
4. *noticing*.

Noticing students and their learning will guide educators in identifying what needs to be done in classrooms and how it can be done. In this way, we are supporting a context-conscious approach. A strong "theory–practice" thread in teaching decisions and practices reflects a consciousness of students in their totality, and a responsiveness to their specific needs.

Such an approach is worth gold for classroom and behaviour management, students' development and for quality teaching. Quality teaching needs to be guided by a well-suited conceptual framing of teaching decisions; this supports the action of the invaluable link between theory and practice. In turn, a strong link between theory and practice offers a solid foundation for pedagogical mobility and flexibility.